

The background of the cover is a photograph of a rustic wooden bookshelf. The shelf is filled with several books of different sizes and colors. A black bicycle seat is leaning against the shelf in the lower half of the image. The overall aesthetic is warm and intellectual.

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CONTENTS

Editorial

Towards an Affective Cultural Studies

Akshaya Kumar

v-ix

Interviews

“Queer is the canon”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Akhil Katyal

1-28

“Language is...a space you inhabit”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Maaz bin Bilal

29-50

“Spirituality can go in any direction”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Sarabjeet Garcha

51-73

Research Papers

“Red is visceral, red is amniotic”: Reading Sudeep Sen’s *Red*

Jhilum Chattaraj

74-91

Teaching How to Write a Poem: Notes Towards a Practice Pedagogy from a Public University

Akhil Katyal

92-108

***Palliprakti* and Girlhood in the Anthropocene: Studying *Samapti* from Tagore to Ray**

Shyam Sundar Pal

109-124

Forest as a Space of Liminality and Liminal Experiences: A Reading of Avinuo Kire's <i>Where the Cobbled Path Leads</i>	
Medha Devi	125-136
DiffRACTed Reality in <i>Waterland</i>: Variations of Space and Time in Matter, of Matter and by Matter	
Sanyogita Singh	137-150
Unframing the Sacredpolis: Mapping Countervisuality in Kashinath Singh's <i>Kashi ka Assi</i>	
Vanya Jaiswal	151-164
Re-envisioning the Spatial Praxis of Bombay: A Critique of Rajinder Singh Bedi's <i>Dastak</i>	
Chetna Karnani	165-174
Makings of a Cosmopolitan Culture of 'Preet': A Case Study of the Punjabi Little Magazine <i>Preetlari</i>	
Simrat Khurana	175-190
Institutionalizing Silence: A Study of Censorship, Power, and Violence in Surendra Verma's <i>Aathva Sarg</i>	
Uday Khanna	191-204
Spike-lying: From an Ascetic Practice to a Showman's Stunt	
Ayusman Chakraborty	205-221
Capturing the Conflict: A Study of Bourke-White's Coverage of Calcutta Killings, 1946	
Rishraj Sen and Shweta Jha	222-237

Fear and Anxiety: Representation of Women's Suffering Emotions in Select Texts Jaydweep Rabha	238-253
Spooking the Real and Patriarchal: Reading <i>Bulbbul</i> and <i>Qala</i> as Female Fantastic Cinema Riya Mukherjee and Suraj Gunwant	254-272
A Plaything in its Plurality: Toys at the Borders of the Real and Unreal, the Temporal and Spatial Samayita Dasgupta	273-282
On the Possible Outcomes of 'Coming Out': Exploring the Troubling Narratives of Homophobia in Football's Spectator-Culture Srutayu Bhattacharya	283-297
Postfashion and Diasporic Designs: A Study of Select Texts Gurpreet Kaur	298-311
Production Strategies and Marketing Expertise: Tracing the Paradigm Shift of Indian Popular Campus Fiction Harpreet Kaur	312-325
Redefining Ancient Aesthetics: An Exploration of Percy Jackson Fan Art and Digital Aesthetics Devika Kakkat and Chitra Sivasubramaniam	326-338
Translations	
March of Hindi Poetry, Post-Independence Anup Singh Beniwal	339-347

Poems

Amlanjyoti Goswami 348-352

Sudeep Sen 353-359

Book Reviews

Somdev Chatterjee. *Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative*. Notion Press, India, 2023

Jagdish Rai 360-362

Contributors



Editorial

Towards an Affective Cultural Studies

Akshaya Kumar^{*}

Cultural Studies as a project of interdisciplinary research continues to thrive. But its journey in the last half a century has been a saga of strategic shifts and remarkable critical revisions. What started as a project on the side-lines of ‘humanist’ literature departments, turned out to be a compulsive pedagogical and research need of the new scholars. And right from the 1960s to the 1990s, a wide array of critical theories – from postcolonialism to feminism – were taken onboard within the capacious scope of the project to foreground primarily the politics of representation in all kinds of cultural texts – low or high. The universalist claims of knowledge and literature were challenged, and it led to what, at times, is dramatically described as ‘epistemic violence’. When the decibel level of identarian warfare reached levels of lunacy, Cultural Studies as a project re-discovered itself as it began to question the sovereign instrumentality of human reason. The post-humanist turn, post-90s sought to usher in a cooperative framework of cognition in which the human and the non-human participate through affective tentacular networks. The issues of caste, race, gender, and nation remain important, but the impending concern about the very survival of human beings as a species in the age of the Anthropocene necessitates a planetary expansion of horizons that takes into sweep the entire earth with all its species in a non-hierarchical framework of cosmopolitan co-existence. The papers included in this issue of the *dialog*, in a way, form an enabling epistemic, ethical and lately ontological coordinates of this ongoing journey of Cultural Studies.

In the opening paper of the issue, Jhilaam Chattaraj through a close textual reading of Sudeep Sen’s latest poetry collection *Red*

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hints towards the emergence of what she terms as ‘geo-humanities’ – an offshoot of new cultural materialism. The rock fossils, the grasslands, the wildlife sanctuaries hitherto perceived as docile, passive wild backdrops participate in the act of meaning-making as affective eco-scapes of intra-action. Sen emerges as a poet of ‘creative geography’ and its palimpsest textualities. The colour ‘red’, irrespective of its religious, ideological or civilizational connotations, emerges as a primal instinct of affect that overwhelms the poet into a rhapsody of oneness with the visceral surroundings. Akhil Katyal through his part-autobiographical, part-academic write-up, tries to map out the possible pedagogy of creative writing both inside and outside the scope of the classroom. As the students are exposed to a diverse range of prescribed literary texts, dealing with a plethora of emotions, the potentially creative students harness these resources to their advantage. Akhil postulates the concept of a ‘bibliography of affect’ to suggest the possible role of creative pedagogy. Instead of building a sharp polarity between academics and creative writing, he draws upon the happy and productive complementarity of the two faculties, sites and practices.

In a co-authored paper Shyam Sundar Pal and Ananya Ghoshal explore the relationship of the human with the non-human through a close reading of Tagore’s story *Samapti* (1893) and its adaption into a movie by Satyajit Ray through a critical framework provided by Tagore himself in his collection of essays *Palliprakiti* (rural nature). Mrinmoyee, the young girl in the story, is portrayed in terms of intimate non-human attributes, and Ray picturizes her in the company of a rodent chipmunk whom she befriends and protects like an adopted baby. Invoking the concept of ecological grief, the authors reveal the pangs of hiatus between nature and human beings. In another paper, drawing on the concepts of liminality, and its inter-structural/ anti-structural dynamics as propounded by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage*, Medha Devi through a reading of Avinuo Kire’s folk fantasy novel *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* (2022), set in Nagaland, brings into focus the role of the space of forest as a catalytic affective presence in transforming the protagonist and people who inhabit it. Liminality is seen as a web of

transition, a state of profound indeterminacy in which an individual navigates across human and non-human actors to undergo transformations.

Sanyogita Singh studies Graham Swift's *Waterland* as a text which, in significant ways, anticipates the concept of spacetime-mattering as posited by Karen Barad in her seminal work *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. The approach to understanding the dynamics of space in terms of intra-active entanglements of space and time brings philosophical rigour to the paper. Toys are not just playthings; they provide an affective joy of companionship. As Cultural Studies takes a spatial turn, it takes into its critical stride the study of places and territories as affective sites of experiences and emotions. Vanya Jaiswal employs the framework of countervisuality, as theorized by Mirzoeff, to decode the making of a sacred cosmopolis called Varanasi or Banaras through a reading of Kashinath Singh's controversial novel *Kashi ka Assi*. Chetna Karnani's paper zeroes in on Bombay as a third-space located between dystopia and utopia. Her chosen text of analysis is Rajinder Singh Bedi's film *Dastak*. Simrat Khurana in her paper, makes an attempt to offer the cultural history of Punjabi literary magazine *Preetlari*. Enunciating the conceptual contours of the magazine, she explains how the editor of the magazine Gurbaksh Singh goes on to build a township Preetnagar based on the principle of cosmopolitanism and love. The magazine and the corresponding township generate a unique affective synergy of cohabitation.

Some of the papers included in the present issue continue to engage with the pressing issues of the Foucauldian power-knowledge relationship. Using the theories of Pierre Bourdieu of social capital and ideas of Roland Barthes on contra-censorship, Uday Khanna reads Surendra Verma's play *Aathva Sarg* as a text implicated in the eternal questions of censorship and hegemony, and violence. The paper demonstrates how Kalidasa as a writer survives the propaganda against him through his writerly prowess and perseverance. Within the scope of Cultural Studies, the politics of Orientalism remains an abiding area of active research. Ayusman Chakraborty's paper demonstrates how the Hindu ascetic practice of spike-lying (*śankuśī*)

was reduced or desacralized into a stunt of showmanship of religious mendicants in the Western accounts. The author offers a comprehensive moral and metaphysical account of the practices of self-mortification within Hinduism. Rishiraj Sen and Shweta Jha in their reading of journalist Margaret Bourke-White's photos of the Calcutta killings of 1946 on a call given for Direct Action Day, invest more in the politics of the photographer, than in an ekphrastic explanation of the visual images.

Wars leave behind a trail of emotional trauma, and those who suffer then struggle to find ways to cope with it. Jaydweep Rabha's paper focuses on the emotions of fear and anxiety suffered by women in particular during and after the wars. Through a reading of fictional texts, the author suggests the possibility of building 'emotional communities' in war-hit societies. In a paper co-authored by Riya Mukherjee, Suraj Gunwant, 'female fantastic cinema' is approached as a cinema of desire in which the patriarchal gaze is subverted. Horror as a (monstrous) emotion is employed to challenge the so-called rational symbolic male order. The authors argue that Kristeva's idea of the abject is inadequate to explain the cultural role of the female fantastic cinema in the Indian context. Samayita Dasgupta in her critical essay on toys opens a vast range of emotions that are attached to the toys. As toys travel across generations, they provide material memories of time and space. Banking largely on the insights of Baudelaire, the essay delineates a running conceptual history of toys as playing for pleasure and education.

Popular sports, popular fiction, fashion, fandom, and films are some of the other areas that now scholars are approaching with renewed interest. Instead of taking positions along the settled trajectories of the Frankfurt or Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, the scholars are geared more towards intersectional studies. Popular sports, for instance, has been approached as a discursive site of gender-centric identity assertions. Through a reading of life-narratives of two footballers – one of male footballer Robbie Rogers's *Coming Out to Play* and the other of a female footballer Megan Rapinoe's *One Life*, Srutayu Bhattacharya draws our attention to the prevalence of a pronounced homophobic culture in male

football. In female football, however, there is a greater inclusivity, and acceptance of non-heterosexual culture. Fashion is a dynamic field of critical inquiry. Gurpreet Kaur undertakes a study of diasporic designs and fashionscapes within the critical framework of what she terms as 'postfashion'. Partition casts a long shadow on the history and future of the subcontinent. Harpreet Kaur's paper analyses the market dynamics of Indian popular fiction. Devika Kakkar's paper undertakes a survey of changing frames of aesthetics, with special focus on emergence of new media aesthetics particularly in the context of re-writing classical myths according to the demands of fans.

Besides the research papers, the present issue also carries three interviews with contemporary poets of Indian English, namely Akhil Katyal, Maaz Bin Bilal and Sarabjeet Garcha. These interviews are the transcribed versions of extended conversations that were conducted before a live audience in the Department. The three interviews, put together, hint towards the possible comeback of the literary and the poetical in academics and research. The poems by Amlanjyoti Goswami and Sudeep Sen add rare depth to an otherwise expansive compass of the current issue. Amlanjyoti's poems offer homage to famous Chandigarh-based art-historian Prof. B.N. Goswami who passed away recently. Anup Beniwal's translated poems of Hindi poets across generations, present in a way the march of Hindi imagination as it evolves in post-Independent India. Overall, the issue has papers, poems, interviews and translations that will have archival value for a long time. The entire editorial team, reviewers of papers, members of Advisory Board, various contributors, the office staff of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, and Manager Press Mr Jatinder Moudgil – all have played their part in the making of the present issue.



“Queer is the canon”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Akhil Katyal

(This is an edited transcript of an on-stage conversation between Professor Akshaya Kumar and the poet Akhil Katyal that took place in the Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 20 October, 2023.)

Akshaya Kumar: This is presumably an event of an interaction with a poet-translator, translator-poet. But the hyphenated identity of poet-translator that we have proposed is rather too inadequate, because there are many interstitial spaces that Akhil traverses as a poet, and we will have to invent more hyphens to accommodate his multifaceted profile. We have chosen the rubric of ‘poet-translator, translator-poet’, just as a point of entry into the conversation to cover, later on, other aspects of his creative or critical diversions. There is a common accusation against English poets that they are poets of a different orbit and that they only know their English, and that these poets have no organic relationship with their native cultures. The moment we enter into the zone of hyphens, we must realize one thing that, practically every English Indian poet, not just informally but also formally has been a translator of Indian poets in other languages, almost without exception. Some of these poet-translators, started as translators and then graduated into poets; some started as poets and then graduated into translators. Difficult to say what precedes what. To slot a poet like Akhil into any monolingual bracket is not fair. When you read Akhil’s poetry which is predominantly written in English, Hindi poems enter into the collection, Hindi and Punjabi phrases enter into the poems and sometimes even Urdu script makes its way into the poetic argument. Out of around 90 poems in his poetic collection *Like Blood on the Bitten Tongue*, there are as many as 28 poems of Hindi printed in Devanagari script. This is bold and unconventional. The poets of Akhil’s generation are first and foremost poets only, their choice of language should not lead to their ghettoization into exclusive linguistic denominations.

So, Akhil, now let me begin the conversation with some remarks on your poetic practice. I can begin with your translational practice as well. We can begin from anywhere. It is not a very structural conversation. Let us see where we go. Akhil, in the beginning of your poetic journey the Partition casts its proverbial long shadow. I am not jumping into putting you into readymade category of 'a partition poet'. What I am saying is that there is this deep concern for the history of the subcontinent and also that the post-memory of Partition informs you at the level of the unconscious. Of course, you were not a direct witness to Partition but since your parents and grandparents suffered it, it must have been a matter of daily domestic conversation. So, what I see in your earlier collections of poetry is this engagement with a disturbed, turbulent cultural past. But as we move forward, in later collections, you begin to strike associations with your immediate present. Both past and present co-appear in your poetry, and that is perhaps the predicament of all those who have suffered Partition or survived Partition. How do you look at this historical baggage. Is there a journey towards a more synchronic spatial engagement. What is your take on that?

Akhil Katyal: Thank you so much for the remarkably detailed outline of the trajectory that has happened since *How Many Countries Does Indus Cross* to poetry such as in *Like Blood on the Bitten Tongue* which is largely on Delhi. You are absolutely right, I mean in one sense, I am sure several people here in the room belong to the third generation, people who migrated from what is now Pakistan Punjab. So, in one sense those are the stories one grew up on and we grew up not so much on systematic assessment on what our past is like but some truth-bombs were dropped around, imperceptibly, in ordinary conversation — what they thought about the other community, what our pre-Partition home was like, almost a kind of paranoid nostalgia of what we have lost when we had to come. Also, the family had gone through violence which had led to the loss of two of our family members on my father's side during the Partition. So as people growing up, whether in early teenages or in my early twenties, those are the stories one grew on and those are the stories that informed what one turned to, as a third-generation Partition refugee family, to think about that past. In poems such as 'My

Grandfather', one frontally dealt with the legacy of the Partition, especially in terms of language:

My Grandfather

would ask us to read him
the shop-signs in Devanagari:

मिंटू आइसक्रीम
जगत हार्डवेयर
चित्र सिनेमा

All his life, he
only knew Urdu,
leaving Lahore at 18,
a young railway-clerk
new at the desk then.

In the early months
he struggled,
tried opening a cigarette-shop
at Panchkuiyan Road in Delhi,
before being given the same job
in the Indian Railways
in Lucknow.

In all this commotion,
he never bothered
learning another script,
dependent still, at 73, on his grandchildren
to read him ice-cream signs
when he treated them to
an orange-bar.

Years later,
when I ache to read Faiz's letters
in his own hand-writing, I had to
write to a Facebook-friend in Lahore,
or ask an old Jangpura neighbour,

or worse, use a translation app
which is like rubbing stones on silk.

As grandfather and I stumble
through these years,
Urdu, Hindi
still look on at each other
in an old mirror convexed by history,
reaching around its opaque silver.

*

This year,
after my second Urdu class
I get straight on the Blue Line
– nuqtas arraying in my head –
for the Ramakrishna Ashram station.

Here, in this first city of his coming,
Panchkuiyan Road, where he tried
but failed at a living, पंचकुइयाँ रोड,
that of the five old Mughal wells,
پنج کونیاں روڈ, where grandfather and I

after the opacity of years
find homework in a Delhi road-sign
caress old shapes
into meaning, curve old losses
draw water with
a new tongue.

(from Indian Literature, Vol. 59, No. 2 (286),
Sahitya Akademi: March/April 2015)

But lately, you are absolutely right. Lahore is like a talisman, of
some sort. The strange parallels because if I live in Delhi there is for
an instance, Shahadra – *Shah ka Dar* or *Shah ka Darwaza* in Delhi as
there is in Lahore and once I started noticing the similarities, I could
count to about nine to ten geographical similarities, nomenclature

wise and in terms of historical inheritances, similarities between Lahore and Delhi, and those were exhilarating finds for me. This was also a documentation of our presents rather than reconstructions of pasts alone. But subsequently, I think you put it remarkably that one finds the most synchronic filiation and that's a wonderful phrase because that told me as well, is that actually some of the stories that I have been hearing were only part of the stories, they were only half the stories. Incomplete, because they carried assumptions, half-knowledges and looking askance at others. And the fact that I came from particular caste privilege, *khatri* family, they told me some Partition stories and they did not tell me other stories. That is evident. So, for instance one of the things, I realized in fact I have noticed this Ravinder Kaur's work for instance on partition refugees in the Rehgar Pura, Karol Bagh area in Delhi, which is largely subaltern caste partition refugees. She says that whenever you speak to dominant caste partition refugee families, they systematically do not talk about the role of the state in resettlement and allotments of newer plots and jobs, whereas whenever you talk to the subaltern caste partition refugees, they speak a language which acknowledges the state, speak very evidently about how the state played a significant role in their lives. I wasn't aware of or was not attuned to that fault-line if I only believed the stories my parents or grandparents told me. For my grandparents obviously at some point, the very historical, complex, layered, messy, difficult, violent event of the Partition was also turned into a simple occasion, almost a legitimation for hatred for another religious community. Thankfully, that skipped my parents' generation and is continuing the skipping so far. So, I think my initial, considering the kind of trajectory you are building sir, I think there was a recognition of one's own layered past and then there was recognition that the stories I have been told about this layered past are nowhere as layered because they carry the assumptions and the blind spots of an evidently and discernibly caste-proud khatri family, and all the blind spots of that caste have been carried into the stories I heard. So, then the nostalgia got punctured a bit and other kinds of stories started emerging. I am reckoning that, it seems to be the trajectory and that is where I am at currently, in terms of thinking about what the shared past can look like.

Akshaya: See, the moment one thinks of Partition, one gets very serious and it is a very intimidating kind of a haunting past. But the way you live it in your poems at times is remarkable. Maybe this is because you belong to a third generation so you are away from the heat of it. So, it appears to me that as you grow out of it or there is this playfulness that creeps into your work. Is this playfulness a strategy of negotiating with that traumatic past? Because this playfulness is exceptional within the range of Indian English poetry. Poets have their pedestals, so to say, and they are very serious in holding on to them. You have referred to Agha Shahid Ali, and his Kashmir, and both are a constant presence in your poetry. In fact, you use Shahid's phrases as titles and sub-titles of your collections. In *How Many Countries does the Indus Cross*, you play on the intonational possibilities of Shahid's line 'to will the distant mountains to glass,' and the title of another latter collection – *Like Blood on the Bitten Tongue* – is a line from his poem "Chandni Chowk, Delhi". Shahid Ali is very serious. There is this sense of requiem, melancholy and some elegiac note, but in your poems, on the other hand, you deal with all those intensities of emotions, but there is this playfulness and there is this unmistakable political embeddedness. What I am asking to you is that for this kind of poetic register, what is your poetic genealogy? I mean who you look up to for some kind poetic guidance or motivation.

Akhil: That's actually a great question because you have laid it out as an invitation to consider. Usually, the question of humour comes as where the other person is asked to defend it whereas this is not what you have asked. That is remarkable. You are absolutely right that, I mean several of us in this room who might have read Agha Shahid Ali's work, there is largely a tone that is elegiac in nature and he seems to be mourning, either a person or a place or what was happening in his homeland or towards the end of his short life, the loss of his mother. In the 1970s, you see that he has lost Begum Akhtar in the mid-70s and he is writing very evocatively about that loss, in the 90s what is transpiring in the region of Kashmir and arguably continues to transpire and occupies his imagination, and in late 90s when he loses his mother to brain tumor, a disease to which he succumbed himself about four years later after his mother's passing. He is thinking very evocatively, attempting to come to terms

with that loss. But even in Shahid, there is a Shahid who is queeny, who is campy, who is humorous, who is satirical, and it comes in flashes in his collection, portions of yellow pages collection and portions of *The Half Inch Himalayas*. So earlier on in his career those are moments where also one felt like there was fellow-feeling, there was hand holding, there was a persona who was trying to make sense of himself among the big wigs as he was a student and a teacher in Delhi university as I was as well, and subsequently his early Ph.D. years in the U.S. So, the people who I constantly go to and I think who do remarkable work while dealing with, as you said, question of intensities, are three poets: Agha Shahid Ali's earlier oeuvre; Dorothy Parker who wrote in New York in the mid-20th century; and Wendy Cope, a British poet. All of these three poets, they are speaking of subjects as serious as the gravitas of betrayal in interpersonal relationships, thinking about subject matters which can be deeply triggering like self-harm, thinking about, in those same years, also of what it felt like to be in mid-late 80s and early 90s in the America losing your own friends to the HIV-AIDS crisis. These are the subject matters, but there is a way in which they have arrived at a vocabulary which some people choose to call "Dark Humour" or "gallows humour" and dealing with let's say, a subject like self-harm in *abab* quatrains and when I saw that that vocabulary did not trivialize the subject matter but instead found another entry point into it, another portal into it. I think that seed then was germinated into oneself. Maybe I could read an example. I think I have carried and maybe some of you might have read Dorothy Parker's work and there is poem of hers, and I apologize for the triggering subject matter- it is a poem about self-harm. It's called "Resume":

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

So, the poem which is a contemplation of self-harm, contemplation of suicide, is literally going through a laundry list of all the ways you can use to end yourself and at the end of it, it is not some exhilarating epiphany about “Oh! One should continue living because this is a route one should not take as there is some moral principle against it,” but no, at the end of it instead is quasi resignation that these seem to be very inconvenient ways of going, so I might as well live. So, in that sense when one of my students was translating it “*Khudkhushi*”:

*Razor mein tees hai
Nadiyan hain silli
Tezab main daag hai
Tablets dardili
Bandook avaidh hai
Fande hain dheele
Gas main baas hai
Chal yar jeele!*

I was just wondering, “you might as well live” and how to get a sense of that resignation which you only share with your buddies. A kind of comradely decision to continue to live and despite the seriousness of the theme, I think that buddy-ness, that comradeship of that gesture, of that line, this, only gallows humor could manage. And Parker does it for various other poems and various kinds of literary occasions. That rhythm is infectious. Parker’s is, in this instance, ababcbcd. It continues with more or less the same rhyme, more or less the same syllable count, but towards the end I had the occasion, and that was great subcontinental privilege to introduce the various and fondest of words “yaar,” and what we do with that word, which is to create a space of intimacy and casualness, an informality in a poem about suicide, but Parker, in a sense, allowed you to do that. So, I think these are the antecedents and this is the genealogy of that humor.

Akshaya: Is there anyone from within the Indian tradition of poetry who you would like to identify as your poetic ancestor? I noticed that particularly in your Delhi poems, every small thing is a cause exciting enough for poetry to happen. I would think of relating your playfulness with that of Kolatkar’s laconic black humour. Who

among the Indian poets would you count as your 'poetic ancestor' or just simply a 'poetic master'? Or would you like to place yourself as the poet of new generation of post-Kolatkár, post-Ramanujan?

Akhil: My engagement with Kolatkár actually came way after my engagement with poets like Eunice De Souza or Hoshang Merchant. So, I tell myself that I was always finding my way towards Kolatkár. But when I did read *Jejuri*, it hit me like a stone, like a train. And what is interesting about it is that it is a very sardonic, ironic voice that actually briefly inhabits a place of pilgrimage. And the fact that he has this quasi-ironic eye, he is able to see that which no other pilgrim will be able to see. I think that voice grew on me, and the other thing which grew on me is that collection which is mid-seventies, that collection was simultaneously being written, conceptualized, thought of both in Marathi and in English. And that as you said right in the beginning of this conversation, and as one of your students also said that there is no way you can find which came before. You know, there are some poems which start off in Marathi. One image of it, and it's not that the whole poem is turned into an English poem. One image of it in one language would make many more poems in the other language, for instance. So, this necessarily not knowing the starting point was almost a methodology for him working with both his Marathi and English dimensions. So, Kolatkár is beginning to claim me more and more, now that I read his work and along with his dog persona poems, *Kala Ghoda* poems. But I think that just might be the quirk of what you one reads before and what one reads later. The other English poet who does remarkably precise, pungent and playfully 'nasty' things with her own community is Eunice De Souza. Her collected poems called the *A Necklace of Skulls* immediately comes to my mind. And she is one of those rare poets whose collected works over last years was progressively becoming thinner because she was editing so extensively. She was deselecting poems out of her oeuvre and what remains is as sharp as a razor blade. And she thinks of this small, incestuous, eating into itself community of Goan Catholics that she grew up in. That small community in Pune. And the way she is able to caricaturize, the way she is able to satirize, the way she is able to take down the pedestalized figures, whether they are the ones who are the Brahmin De Souza's, who going back several generations

purposely found that the first person who converted to Christianity among their ancestors had indeed a Brahmin worm inside him. She exposes the upper caste pretensions among those in a religion which does not scripturally legitimize caste. Instead of extolling this allegedly great ancestry, she is able to pull them down. So, I believe that De Souza was quicker to claim me, but Kolatkar is very sturdily and I think less with humor and more with irony beginning to make that claim. When De Souza passed away, I found myself turning to her, again, such as in this poem:

Listening to an evening of Eunice De Souza tributes

In her last years,
Gieve says, Eunice learnt first-aid
from a vet and would treat the wounds
of the local strays.

After a while, dogs
she didn't know, from all over
Vakola, would come find her
on her street, turn around,
show her their wounds.

Once her compound regular
brought a stranger to her door
for urgent treatment.

I imagine the poet
— those speaking of her
call her 'grande dame', 'formidable',
even 'charring' — surrounded
by dogs and parrots in the end.

Opening her apartment door
to find those who need healing.

I go to my bookshelf,
start looking up and down the spines
like the dogs of Vakola.

(thanks to Gieve Patel)

Akshaya: Coming back to your Delhi poems. You have mentioned how in the narratives of Partition, the subaltern communities, their resettlement processes and their displacement were not chronicled enough. But when I look at your Delhi poems, you also seem to ignore the claims of the subaltern to their possible space in the national capital. You have translated Ravish also, and he talks about this juxtaposition between South Delhi and Karawal Nagar. Don't you think that your Delhi is also partly lopsided in the sense that it does not include in its sweep the subalterns of the metropolis to that extent?

Akhil: You know the thing is when one writes unconsciously one tends to replicate one's own assumptions and projects them out into the world. And I am sure for instance the limitations of my constraints, the limitations of my worldview have made its way, crept into the collection which otherwise seeks to celebrate Delhi. You know, Delhi is a strange place. It has its set of love tales, what Ravish Kumar calls as *laghu prem katha*, in his collection of city-snippets called *Ishq Mein Sheher Hona*, which I have translated as *A City Happens in Love*. It starts off with these two young heterosexual lovers speaking to each other and it starts off by saying- "*Mein aaj small town sa feel kar raha hun. And mein metro si.*" And it continues from there and at some point, he says, referring to two neighborhoods in Delhi and for several of you who are familiar with Delhi's geography, he says: "*Jab bhi tum South Ex se guzarti ho, mein Karawal Nagar sa mehsoos krta hun.*" And considering the laughter in the room I am assuming that one knows these neighborhoods. And in my class, I am very fond of asking my students that okay "how many of you know where South Ex is" and about ninety percent of the people raise their hands, and when I say "how many of you know where Karawal Nagar is?" the number reduces to about five, four, three, two, and sometimes there has been a class where not even a single person raised their hands, except the one person who was from Karawal Nagar.

So, in that sense Ravish Kumar is both hugely celebrated and hugely condemned and by an extensive and ferocious lobby as it happens. His journalism was also the kind which was very attuned to

the different qualities that Delhi as a space was capable of, and his stories always emerged from not just Lutyen's Delhi or what our current dispensation is fond of calling "Khan Market gang," but emerged from places such as Karawal Nagar, which might or might not be geographically the margins of the city, that's not relevant, what is relevant is that they are imaginatively the margins of the city. That's as far as the conscious narrative of these poems is concerned, but you're right. After all this young man who comes from Lucknow has studied in a remarkably self-aware, elite institution called La Martiniere College in Lucknow where *jahan aap angrezi mein batt na krein toh appko baint padti thi haath pe, aur vahan se Hindu college aur St. Stephen's college se hote hue woh London se Ph.D. kar ke aaya hai. Toh uske nazariye ki ek limit hai, ek boundary hai, aur woh boundary kavitaon mein bhi replicate hui hogi.* The effort is that one keeps on pushing against it, the effort is that one keeps on being alert to what lies beyond one's ken. For instance, the Partition narrative. For me to exercise the affective, this great emotional claim that my own parents and grandparents' narrative had about the pre-partition reality and to disabuse myself of the fact that this was not as hunky-dory as they led me to believe, and that there were various fault lines among these two families who were always fond of remembering *ki humare ghar mein toh 17 kamre the, ek taraf koi cricket khelta tha toh dusri taraf awaz nahin aati thi.* And this story when I started listening to many other Partition stories, several people were replicating this story. It is almost as if the size of their house was increasing in their imagination. And what I noticed is that in order to make my own grandparents real, give them the gift of being ordinary rather than standing for a historic time period as such was a long process. But you are absolutely right. One's own caste and class and linguistic location initially must have replicated in these joyous or serious and unselfconscious poems.

Akshaya: I made a comment in the beginning that your poetry is embedded in the political. Protest comes naturally to you. Your queer orientation in a way makes you a poet of protest, against the dominant heteronormative ways of culture. How does your queer orientation impact your political outlook, and poetic output?

Akhil: You know that's a question...It's one of those questions which sort of sends you hurtling back into your own past and try to

excavate some kind of order from it. I was telling the other day that when I was taking the train from Delhi to Chandigarh, I finished it very late in my life, but I finished reading Morrison's *Beloved* only yesterday, and you know at one point there is a character who says...he is describing somebody who is beloved to him, and he says — I am only paraphrasing — “They were a friend of mine. It's almost as if I gave them the cluster of my own life. It's almost as if I gave him all the disordered chaos of my life and he returned it to me in the right order.” I *am* paraphrasing. So, your question makes me think of what the right order might be in terms of politicization of one's vocabulary. But you are absolutely right. In my sort of mid-twenties, late twenties, early thirties work there is a kind of stridency. There is not just a kind of consideration of meditation, but the ferocity of a slogan, which predominates over certain kinds of poetic registers. There are two ways. When I came from Lucknow to Delhi, obviously one of the things which was really exhilarating was that there were so many new groups. That were self-consciously calling themselves queer groups and they were using a vocabulary which was manna to my ears. Because they were using words which otherwise, I thought taboo, whether it was lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etcetera. And just having heard those words with a tone of ordinariness seemed in 2003, 2004, 2005, before the Delhi High Court judgment, before the recriminalization and re-decriminalization which carried on till 2018. But then, these were exhilarating words and I think that sense of exhilaration entered one's vocabulary. For instance, in a poem such as:

Girl, when you
blow your boy,
or boy, when
you go down
on her, or when
both of you use
a toy, and all the
world's a blur,
I know it feels
like heaven, you
too violate 377.

But one other thing which was happening in parallel which I think claims me more where there is not a kind of quickness of easy liberal queer vocabulary but an assessment of the fact that after all in various kinds of Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi traditions, there are various idioms of same sex desires which indeed were part and parcel of the way eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century literature imagined these figures, imagined the transaction of this desire and imagined the possibility of quasi-contempt, quasi-fulfilling life in terms of how we now think of what queer people can lead. When I was reading Ismat Chughtai, or Pandey Bechan Sharma 'Ugra', or Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, you obviously don't find nomenclature calling someone one thing or the other. Not this easy binary between something called homosexual and then once you call someone homosexual you have to find it's opposite and then lo and behold there is the gift of the 'heterosexuals'. Heterosexuals are an afterthought. Only when you have to invent something in order for something to stand as an opposite. I found instead of this easy liberal lingo, what one found was, there were various idioms which were making claims on the desire, whether they were that of habit, *lat*, *aadat*, *inko toh nawabi shauk hai*, or I found the language of playfulness, *masti* which predates marriage, but there is a limberness to it, allowed till a certain point in your life, or you found the language of *baazi*, *ki logon ko alag alag tareeke ke shauk hote hain, jaise aap exam se phle rattabaazi karte hain*, if you have bad habits *aap darubaazi krte hain*. And within that same framework there was a framework of *laundebaazi*, and so it was not so much that there were two kinds of people in the world, but, but according to this earlier Hindi-Urdu vocabulary of idioms, we were all on the sliding scale of ideal masculinity and ideal femininity and the more certain kind of habits you had, you were closer to one part of the spectrum than the other. And the idea was that no one was ideal. Everyone was a cluster of one kind of *shauk* or habit or the other. *Aur jismein koi aib nahin hai woh toh sirf khuda hai. Har insaan mein koi na koi aib hota hai*. So, there was a way in which the language was condemning what we now think of as queerness but it was also making room for it. It was also accommodating. And I think lately, especially after my doctoral work at SOAS, one is more attentive to that sort of accommodation, that sort of slowness of languages, its counterintuitive capacities, ability to mine many kinds of resonances rather than hanker only for

the sloganeering gesture, i.e. rather than transacting only in the easy vocabulary of straightness and gayness which is more contemporary.

Akshaya: How is queerness pitched vis-à-vis the rise of the right? What future do you see for the queer as a movement in the face of the rise of the right? Do you think that queer can take on the assertion of the conservative right? Or can the right overwhelm and subsume the queer too?

Akhil: You know not in any unmediated way because queerness is also something which can be very easily appropriated. I mean, today you can see the way the Israeli establishment uses the language of what is now being known and I think some people in the room surely know this — “pinkwashing” — where you use queer idiom, queer vocabulary, queer support, queer acceptance, in order to unleash and in order to legitimize your far greater onslaught on the rights and lives of other people. So, you know Israel is very fond of saying — “Look at the Palestinian Arab Muslims. Look at the way they mistreat their queers. Look at the way we treat our queers so well.” Right? So just as long as you make room for the one quarter inch of one kind of queers, you are able to use that vocabulary in order to legitimize a wider onslaught on others. When for instance, article 370 was abrogated, more than one BJP leader made the case that it is good news for queers in Kashmir. And I was just wondering how easy this vocabulary of queerness, and support of *some* kind of queerness, can be wielded by the right. So, I do believe that a larger umbrella term of queerness which is able to make room for various kinds of rights bearing bodies, they might be bodies of children whose rights need to be protected, they might be bodies of religious minorities whose rights need to be protected, they might be bodies of heterosexual single women who have chosen to remain outside the institution of marriage, and they might be bodies of queer people themselves. And I think what I had as one of my inheritances when I came to Delhi in the early 2000s was this kind of catholic grouping under the term ‘queer’. There was one group in the early 90s called ABVA- AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan. And they were not just people who identified themselves as gay. They were people who engaged with and identified with all sorts of groupings, some of which I have just mentioned. And the fact that they come together implies that queerness is not simply something which resides in a body and is

about the desire that you have, but queerness could be alternatively be understood as being against the social grain of things, and I think that I inherited that vocabulary with my immediate queer elders. So, in that sense, that kind of queerness was leading you to be skeptical, deeply skeptical of the rise of the Hindu right and also because the latter was constraining the vocabularies, we can use to regain our own past. Because one of the greatest obsessions of the Hindu right is a delimited and a narrow construction of the past. Whereas what my queer elders and other people in my university were telling me how you can play with it, how you can enter it, how you can live in it and acquire kind of limberness of your own inheritance. The frame of your own inheritance only widens rather than narrows whereas at the same time the rise of the Hindu right was telling me another story. So, in that sense I think, perhaps to address the latter part of your question, I do think queerness did give a vocabulary which was wider than just body-based desire. You know because this idea that who you desire determines who you are. Let's say I like men so I am gay, or you like women, you are straight. What does this sort of division mean? This is barely 120/130 years old. What makes one kind of desire into determining of self-identity. I mean I also love cabbages, does that make me a certain kind of a person (Audience laughing). So why is one kind of desire not making me who I am, a claim on my interiority, whereas others can. It is because there was violence meted out to some people, and when this violence will fade, will be eradicated, at some point the deep claim of this identity will also fade, will also be eradicated. So that we will just become different kinds of messy, chaotic, intermeshed people rather than these two species called heterosexual and homosexual.

Akshaya: Looking at your Delhi poems, I find the mythical Delhi is conspicuously missing. It is largely the historical Delhi which you talk about, and you largely engage with. There is a poem on Bangla Sahib, a poem on Nizamuddin West, a poem on Connaught Place, on Nigambodh Ghat and even on Akshardham Temple. You also dig out old maps of Delhi to suggest its colonial coordinates and their awful inadequacies to capture the pulse of modern Delhi. Your critical take on the 1807 map of Delhi, for instance, gives us an idea about the temporal limits within which you place Delhi:

1. The British Surveyor's surname

is 'White'.

2. He is still using light blue
for the 'Jumna'
3. The map's scale is emotionally accurate.
Every inch is one and a quarter miles.
4. The walled city is light red. In fifty years
the colour will be 'bayoneted on the spot'.
5. Where you and I met last night
is not on the map.

There is a mediaeval Delhi, there is a modern Delhi too, but there is not a hint on ancient Delhi. There is no reference to Indraprastha, no reference to Hastinapur. You think that this is a deliberate kind of erasure? Because you are now in a way adopting a city as your home. So, you are not interested in going back to the pre-historical past of the city?

Akhil: Okay, so that's interesting. You know, for the longest time...and I have been in Delhi now for twenty years...there is a way in which there is that hurtling migrant's desire to belong and you belong by name, claim, on everything which is ordinary, on the everyday around you. So, in one sense, the material, the bread and butter of my belonging was laying claim on things that are seeable, concrete material, right beside me. Anyway, I think the kind of construction of the past which has happened as also considered in our previous question, the past where anyway so many dubious and so many harmful claims were being made, being held to it, that the fabled was a category which, in one sense, I avoided. And since then claim on Delhi now seems to be sturdy enough, I have been thinking that one of the next collections that I have been putting together are all poems on Lahore. And this is a city one has not been to, not physically, this is a city in one sense a city of my imagination. The effort again has to be to step out of the excesses of mythology, the immaterialities of fables and the cloudiness of nostalgia. For instance, one of the poems that I imagined. This will me take me two minutes to read. It's a slightly long poem. It is called "Twenty-Seven Things I noticed on my first day in Lahore when my friend and I walked from Gulberg-II to Shadman"

1. It is early summer. The sky is a hot tongs+ blue

2. On college road as soon as we start, I see 'ilove pak armi' graffiti and ask him "yeh kya mera welcome sign hai?" He rolls his eyes and says "Shut up. It will only take us half an hour."
3. I see kites make gentle circles above us.
4. A dry khar spreads its arteries above the traffic
6. We quickly wade under a flyover. Qaid-e-Azam's painted bust is chilling in the shade
7. We pass by a man in a black beret. Behind him, an almost pun is hung on a tower called 'High-Q'.
8. We pass by another man who is standing in that cool aloof way men stand when they're looking but have too much tact — their hands behind their back — to be seen looking
9. Street CCTV's hand like dimpled chin in the sky
10. The Eucalypti draw groundwater from under us
11. A yellow Toyota blisters in the sun
12. I show off my knowledge of Urdu by reading 'نو پارکنگ' signs. No one is impressed
13. Three crows dash against our hairlines
14. An LWMC bin asks me to keep Lahore clean. My friend says "Mind it".
15. A red bike grazes past our chatter. The pillion boy balances a 27-inch TV in his small arms
16. We hit a canal. A blue board tells me the direction to a neighborhood called 'Thokar Niaz Baig'. I think of all the synonyms of the first word. And of the second.
17. In the canal all the acacia reflections meet at infinity
18. We continue down the Jail Road. In Lucknow, absent-mindedly I tell him, I grew up next to a Jail Road. We passed it each day to school
19. We keep walking. There is a foot bridge above us that resembles attics in Shimla
20. But I don't want to think about this city through resemblances. Or why I have come here? 400 kms from Delhi (give or take an iron curtain) I am still using an old pair of eyes. This is a *different* city. I have *not* seen it before. The summer air dries around us
21. My friend consoles me — it's only your first day, you're still a tourist; don't overburden yourself with epiphanies. But

what if I return a tourist, I warn him. “So what? You’d have seen Lahore.”

22. Sach, I think, skirting Coca-cola crates on the road.
23. A couple passes us by. The guy is wearing Lande da Gucci
24. Suddenly the road is full of clinics and hospitals and pharmacies. A booboo asks his mother to take him in her godi.
25. Then this guy with L’oreal hair and a Gillette moustache — walking, sipping a cup of chai — does not even deign to look at us. We giggle like two queens
26. “The shady man of Shadman” I make a bad pun, reading the road signs. Friend ignores it
27. Another board shows me the direction to ‘Race Course Park’. I tell him the story of *Race Course* to *Lok Kalyan*. He asks me the meaning of ‘kalyan’.
28. We enter a subway. I am hungry. So we get a samosa.

The thing is that this is a city I have never been in. Right? I am very careful about not folding back all the capacities and contemporaneities of Lahore into a narrative of this third-generation refugee family which looks at Lahore only through rose-tinted sort of lenses of nostalgia. So, the exit from that nostalgia, the exit from that kind of fabled nostalgia, is actually the exit into concreteness, the exit into materiality, the exit into dust, the exit into a contemporary references whether they are crates of Coca-cola, or whether there is a Toyota blistering under the sun, or the eucalypti which the British were very fond of planting despite them being water sucking trees on roads, whether in Lahore or in Delhi. So, I think the larger drift from the fable into the grittiness is a drift which is coming of great use to me when I am writing about Lahore. And I think Delhi was the training ground to do that. That’s what I reckon. And one of my quirks and of the strangest habits that I have, I spend far too much time on Google Maps, and if you use the pedestrian view you can walk the roads, it *as close as you get* to being there without being there. And one of the things that several Pakistani friends who are also readers said that there was a way in which it was not immune to and it led the contemporariness of Lahore claim the texture of the poem. So, I think I aim for that kind of a relationship rather than a relationship which is a relationship which my parents or grandparents

would have drawn from these cities, or those interested in fables or mythologies would draw

Akshaya: You are talking about the immateriality of the myths and you want to avoid what you call the fabled past. But how material the platform of the GPS or Instagram is? Because that is your place where you seem to be very comfortably ensconced in. I know that this is a new generation and you have to be visible on that platform as well. But if fabled past is something which is not so tangible, then this too is ephemeral?

Akhil: That is remarkable, no? Thank you for catching that. One of the things I have always worked with as a poet, and I am thinking on my feet right now because this is a kind of question which I have not thought about at all. Is a sense, that as long as there is some formal or writerly constraint that you have, in struggling against that constraint, constantly, you find expressive possibilities. So, most of the time when we are writing formal poetry, that happens with us, that's the bread and butter of a formal poem. For instance, in some formal poems, there is a fact that you have to arrive at some refrain and there is a fact that right before that refrain, in that penultimate location before it will be arriving the qafiya. We are, of course, speaking of the ghazal. And the fact that you have to reach these words which need to sound like something or repeat themselves in one order or the other makes you think of occasions, takes you to places which you otherwise wouldn't have gone in only through your instinct, only through your gut. So, you know there is a poem by Agha Shahid Ali which is an English ghazal called "Tonight." For instance, the matla is "Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight? Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?" And at some point, when Shahid was describing the process of writing this ghazal he said, for years I kept on creating a laundry list of all the words which rhyme with the -el sound and at some point, when he chanced upon the story of Jezebel and was taken in by the story, in a sense, he said — Oh! another couplet ready to be made — And he then writes "I'll bless Jezebel tonight." So, now, he would not have arrived at that couplet if the formal constraint wasn't there. If he wasn't looking for the possibilities and permutations of the -el sound. His interiority wouldn't have taken him there. But that constraint did take him to that place. In one sense it was a generative closure. So, I

am telling myself now that you are making me think of the ephemerality of the virtual, the Google maps, I am telling myself what will this constraint of writing about a place one has never been to, of writing about a place whose single Visa stamp can jeopardize your movement to several other countries, of writing about a place which is the place of my ancestors but does not have my physical footprints. Maybe this constraint will also create its own expressive possibility. When the Sutlej crosses from the Indian side of the border to the Pakistani side of the border, the map shows Gurmukhi transitioning into Urdu script. In one of the poems where one was thinking about that transition, one used both the Urdu and Gurmukhi script. That is not a point of expression which material walking or flaneuring in the city of Lahore, or in any physical site, would have been given me. The virtual will create its own expressive possibilities, one hopes. That poem was called 'Five things that happened tonight on Google Earth':

**Five things that happened tonight
*on Google Earth***

1. Thinking wealth, thinking French Riviera,
I type Monte Carlo. It takes me to
a factory outlet in Gurgaon.
2. From up in the sky, Chandigarh
is so many bourbon biscuits.
3. If you type 'Aurangzeb Road'
it still takes you to the right spot in Delhi.
4. Near Kasur district in Punjab, the ਸਤਲੁਜ
suddenly flows into ستلج.
5. Everytime you zoom, the screen reloads.
The Indo-Pak border disappears
then reappears.

Akshaya: So not fair to call you as an Instagram poet?

Akhil: You call me what you like, I don't mind. There is so much gatekeeping which happens around poetry and I teach in a Masters in Creative Writing Programme. Often people who enter the programme are so timorous about what kind should they write, what subject matter they should engage with, and what form should they practice to be counted as a poet. I guess first we have to disabuse ourselves of a kind of a hallowed pedestalized figure of the poet. When you transition from one mode of expression to another, historically we have seen this, from one medium or platform to another, there is always going to be anxiety. You know when they went from oral literature to written literature. If you look at early Greek writing, there is some commentary about that transition from oral to written as necessarily a loss of aesthetic possibilities. When you went from silent to sound cinema, you will find early Film Studies criticism saying that expressive possibilities have been reduced by the occurrence of sound in cinema. Similarly, the Gutenberg Press, where its coming, was also seen to stifle and solidify the word as against the limberness which otherwise roving manuscripts had. So, we are in a moment of digital transition and at some point, some examples are going to be cast as bad examples and they are going to mention some names and some examples are going to be cast as good old examples. But this anxiety I have no trouble with because fifty years from now some other medium would come and a different kind of anxiety would take over.

Akshaya: And in any case Instagram also needs to be redeemed?

Akhil: I mean if I compare the nastiness of Twitter with the quasi-alooofness of Instagram, then maybe one prefers one to the other.

Akshaya: I have read this collection *The World That Belongs to Us*. It is a remarkable anthology and you talk about the tentativeness of the term 'queer'. You refer to multiple possibilities of the term 'queer' and how the contributors have extended and expanded the term. Is there a different measure to measure the quality of a queer poem?

Akhil: You know this is remarkable that you asked that because when Aditi who is my co-editor for this collection and a remarkable

poet, when we first went to the Harper Collins India Office – they are the publishers in Noida near Delhi – this idea of who we are going to include, almost like a talismanic word, this word ‘quality’ was mentioned. And it was supposed to be assumed that what the publisher was saying, what the editors were saying, and what the potential contributors would think of this word ‘quality’ would be self-evident. And we had told ourselves that 30-35 poets are what we will include, good ‘quality’ and everyone agreed, and we all nodded along, puppet-like. But when we got into the process of actually receiving and reading the material, the question of what counts as a good poem, I think, diversified. Briefly we engaged with that in the “Introduction”. But what is a good poem if I may ask this room to consider? You know, is it a poem which has made us think of something ordinary and every day in a startlingly new manner or is it something which has allowed within the ken of our observation and consideration something we had never considered before? Is it that which creates a great sense of community around a particular subject matter where we find ourselves together with people or ideas or places that otherwise we never thought we could find togetherness with? We were at pains to establish any one marker of what constitutes a good poem especially in a subcontinent where that which makes a good poem, let’s say, capacity of linguistic play and dexterity with words, is so dependent on the mode through which you reach that capacity. And we know how differential the access of people to education and learning is in this country. So, when we say taste, we don’t actually think about very specific class and caste access to that thing called taste. Then who are we, two Delhi-based Savarna English speaking editors to decide what a good poem is? Considering that we were still editors of this collection who had to choose between poems coming from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and India, we then chose to be more catholic in our selections than narrower. And I think it has made room for the kind of expression which otherwise would have not made into a collection if we held a high horse of something called a ‘good’ queer poem. When we say someone is a woman writer, queer or black writer, we assume that behind all of this there is someone called a writer, and as if that is not usually a white male heterosexual writer. Why should some people be allowed universal claims and others keep hovering under a sign or a mark alone? Right? And the fact that everyone has

some kind of mediated access to this capacity and the role of being writer, we assume that is the case. So, in that case we allowed different kinds of poems, and in each poem, on one count or the other, on one of these many criterias, the poems were persuasive. So that's the nature of what we call a 'good' queer poem. That would be the long answer to that short question.

Akshaya: Another short question. If it is queer, what form would it take? Any specific form? Because all these forms that we now memorise as standard are ultimately forms of the so-called mainstream heteronormative poetry.

Akhil: You know you are right. But because queerness is such a recent vocabulary and as I said has only a century and half of an active kind of self-conscious or adopted queerness as kind of an identity. If you boil down queerness to presence of something called same-sex desire or presence of some kind of play of gendered inhabitation. If that's what queerness is, then several people across history of Literature can be recruited to this category of queerness. The kind of Greek or Shakespearian narratives can also be as easily recruited as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to this kind of wider formal experimentations within queerness. There was a moment in my twenties and thirties when one was keen on a register of queerness because one was encountering it for the first time and I think it is a rite of passage for many queer people to experience it as a kind of joyful expanse of one's own life's possibilities. But I have also noticed many queer people outliving that joy into a kind of seeming adaptation in a world in which that queerness does not become a primary marker of differentiation. So, in that sense I would not say at all that there is a specific form that queerness projects or immediately transacts with. Because what is this thing called queerness? It is a phantom thing. We seem to be finding some countable references to it but within a hundred or two hundred years we won't. If a certain kind of progressive granting of rights remains the trend, although, of this progressive arc, one can never be fully certain in all places and all times. In 2003 when I came to Delhi the very mentioning of these words was a taboo in the universities, but in 2023 none of it is a taboo. Even the Supreme Court judges who have refused to grant marriage rights and have transferred it back to the legislature saying that let the parliamentarians decide, but even in that room there is a great

consensus that queer people are ordinary people, their rights should be respected, the State should help them in a variety of manners, if there is active discrimination it should be avoided, there is a need of anti-discrimination bill, the *Garima Grah* should be popularized across different states. So even in a room which is not granting marriage rights, the consensus seems to be that there is wide acceptance. What queers make of this acceptance while other communities rights are shrinking is for the queers to decide. But what I reckon is that this term won't last for very long if the progressive trend continues. By very long, as in, within our lifetimes it will last but after fifty years, hundred years, the term might evaporate as quickly as it came, because hopefully it won't be needed.

Akshaya: The way we are expanding the list of the queer poets, it might happen that one day the queer becomes the canon.

Akhil: The queer is the canon. The thing is, for instance, the usual formatting of an English Literature syllabi was that first we encountered something called Chaucer to Eliot, and then in some papers by the time the Bachelors students got into the third year, there was something called American Literature, African-American writing, Women's writing, Queer writing, as if it is distinct from this canon. But there are now several universities attempting to experiment with even the way they organise the syllabus and in what sequence do the students encounter these entities. And I think there is a claim to be made to stitch together another way of encountering the canon itself so that you don't think of women's writing or queer writing, or racialized writing as necessarily distinct, from something called the canon has to be kept somehow immune, but rather navigating it and interspersing it and informing it, even becoming the canon, in different historical moments, rather than only finding hoary white or savarna dead 'heterosexual' men in order to constitute something called the canon.

Akshaya: So, how do you justify the inclusion of this poem "*Laga Jockey mein Daag*" in the anthology? Are there any queer aesthetic standards?

Akhil: This is a poem by Shakti Milan Sharma called “*Laga Jockey mein Daag*” and I’ll tell you why one has included this poem. Because of a sense of play in it. How many of you have been on some kind of dating app? Like Tinder, Hinge, Bumble. Not Bharat Matrimony, not marriage apps. I see about twenty hands. I am sure there are far more than are ready to raise their hands. So now there is a very peculiar experience which happens on these apps. It is a cluster of highs and lows, crests and troughs, and there are people with - their profile images are tigers, or their profile images are for some reason Harry Potter. People are making all kinds of self-fashioning in this space. And there is a way that for young queer folks who have just migrated to cities not of their parents or family, who for the first time in their lives are outside the structures of surveillance. There is also peculiar joy, whimsy, and the thrill of pleasure which is sometimes close to danger as well that animates these apps and the possibilities it opens up. And Shakti Milan Sharma’s bilingual poem captured that sense for us. I am not interested in the question that is it, for instance, does this poem have the literary grandeur or detailing of an Atwood or a Szymborska or a Kolatkar poem? That’s not the concern, or the point. Does it capture the sense of playfulness and delirious possibility that a dating app makes possible for someone queer, in his early twenties, yes it does. Do you want me to read the poem?

Akshaya: Yeah. Please go ahead.

Akhil: लगा jockey में दाग

लगा jockey में दाग, छुपाऊं कैसे?
cab is unavailable, घर जाऊं कैसे?
jockey का दाग धुलाऊं कैसे?
घर जाऊं कैसे?
भूल गया सब वचन पिता के
खो गया मैं PR/Grindr पे आके
जाके भाई को quickie का मतलब समझाऊं कैसे?
घर जाऊं कैसे?
कोरी jockey soul मोरी
Douche है माया जाल

ये दुनिया मेरी fetishes का घर
वो दुनिया boredom का hall
जाके मम्मी से नज़रें मिलाऊं कैसे?
घर जाऊं कैसे?
लागा jockey में दाग, छुपाऊं कैसे ?
cab is still unavailable, घर जाऊं कैसे?

This poem is in response to the song 'Laaga Chunari Mein Daag, sung by Manna Dey.

It is a wonderful poem. Now this is a demonstration of what we were thinking of what constitutes a good poem. A good poem will have the capacity to create community of affect around it, right? I heard at least fifty people in the room laughing along with this poem. Which means in one sense it has already made a claim to your heartbeats. In one sense it has already made a claim to a representation of a certain reality which is that of desire, delirium, and euphoria which this poem is attempting to catch. And it is not written in the meditative register. It is also the first published poem of the poet Shakti Milan Sharma. Wouldn't as queer editors who in early twenty first century have been asked to edit a collection, want to stencil the delirium of the community to which the book belongs. *The world that belongs to us* is the name that we have very pompously given ourselves. Shouldn't it be open to all the coordinates of that world? And Milan Sharma's is one of the coordinates, as indeed there are several other poems which perhaps do not merit scrutiny as to their inclusion which may make claims even by conventional criteria. Perhaps the criteria for this poem are slightly unconventional. And also, you know, there are some poems which speak to us at a certain age in our lives and they are rite of passage of poems that at some point stop speaking to us because our life circumstances alter. Maybe this poem makes the younger people laugh, but maybe some folks who are in their forties or fifties will be like "What exactly is happening in this poem?" And perhaps there is not even a sense of resemblance to anything that can be thought of as part of their lives and that's fine. There are other poems which will speak to them. I think a kind of Catholicism in thinking about what enters any world, for instance, if you look at editions of women writing by Susie Tharu and K Lalitha or other

collections of black, queer, Dalit or women writers, then you will notice that there is allowance of a greater frame of reference, an erring on the side of a greater frame of reference than narrowness of taste, and which is why this poem, sort of, enters.

Akshaya: There is no end to questions. Each poem that you write invites a question. But we stop here. Thanks for a very candid conversation.



“Language is...a space you inhabit”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Maaz Bin Bilal

(This is an edited version of an on-stage conversation that took place between Maaz Bin Bilal, and Professor Akshaya Kumar in the Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 20 October, 2023 in the presence of the students, researchers, teachers and poetry-lovers of the tri-city)

Akshaya Kumar: This is a very refulgent time for Indian English poetry, because if you look at the proliferation of the anthologies now, the number of poets is multiplying. In the earlier anthologies, it was Bombay or Mumbai that dominated, now the spatial spread is much more pan-Indian, and inclusive. Delhi, the seat of political power, is now firmly on the poetic map. Among the emerging Delhi poets, Maaz Bin Bilal is a now a regular presence in the anthologies which have come, of late. Other than the place, what dominates in his poetry is the lived composite culture of the sub-continent, which suffered unfortunate reversal in the form of Partition. Maaz restores the shades of that composite past which reverberated the region through two ways. One, he translates Urdu and Persian verses of the sub-continent into English retaining the formal sound schemes of the original verses with uncompromising fastidiousness; two, more significantly he Urdu-izes English as writes his own poetry – pre-eminently in the form of English ghazals. So, in many ways he reminds us of Agha Shahid Ali, who shall feature in our conversation more than once. From Shahid Ali to Maaz, there is now a robust tradition of English ghazal. Even poets from south and the diaspora – from Jeet Thayil to Vijay Seshadri – have attempted English ghazals. I have a feeling that very soon ghazal is going to overtake the sonnet. So, Maaz let us begin the conversation. What does Urdu mean to you? Because you say in the subtitle of your *Ghazalnama* – “Poems from Delhi, Belfast, and Urdu.” Is Urdu for you a space, a native space? A cultural idiom of the sub-continent? What is it?

Maaz Bin Bilal: Thank you, Prof. Kumar. I wish to express my gratitude to you for inviting me to Panjab University. My father was born in Ludhiana, yet, I have never lived in Punjab, and this is my first formal engagement in the state. Please accept my thanks, also, for a wonderful poetic introduction.

So, Urdu for me is not just a language, perhaps it is not even a distinct language. I am of the opinion as many others are that Urdu and Hindi are but one. Historically, they were both considered the same language by poets well into the nineteenth century. Ghalib did not like the word Urdu used for his language which he called Rekhta or Hindvi. Hindi and Urdu may even now be understood as just different registers in literature. The poetry and literature of Urdu might be dissimilar to what the different Hindi speaking people might speak amongst themselves, but that difference also exists across the regions of North India and its many dialects such as Awadhi, Braj, Maithili, Khari Boli, Bhojpuri, Marwari etc. and their respective literatures. Urdu, I believe, is one such register or dialect of Hindi, much closer to High Hindi than many of the Western, Eastern or Southern dialects. Why they are officially two languages and what has happened to them in differentiating them is more a matter of politics.

But within that register Urdu also stands for other things for me and others. It has stood for a while as the metonym of a culture. It has been understood as a cosmopolitan culture of *adab*. And *adab* has many meanings: hospitality, respect, manners, culture, and literature. The political attempts to exorcise Urdu have resulted in the separation of this culture from other registers of Hindi, and consequently High Hindi becoming a very specific and exclusionary language. I feel there is cultural violence involved, and the practice of Urdu in the form that I try to undertake becomes automatically an attempt to address that kind of violence. It is an approach to strive for a greater inclusivity. So, in that sense perhaps it is a cultural necessity.

It is a language I have heard since childhood; its music is what I heard. The first poem I ever remember writing was an Urdu *sher* when I was five or six years old. I never ended up studying Urdu formally, but Urdu has always been there in the background. It bolsters my writing in English, especially in the ghazal form. It is the

place where my culture, way of thinking, my languages and their rhythms originate. Thus, it is as much a place in *Ghazalnama* as are my geographical coordinates of Belfast and Delhi. Shamsur Rehman Faruqi has argued that Urdu got its name as the shortened form of the language of Shahjehanabad: *zuban-e-urdu-e-mualla-e-shahjehanabad*. And so, a final couplet or maqta from one of my ghazals in *Ghazalnama* to end this long opening response:

Maaz thought he'd live happily in Europe,
Did he know he'd Delhi's map in his heart?

Akshaya: So, when you express yourself, does the ghazal come to you organically, as your spontaneous form of poetry? Or are you writing English ghazals at an experimental level? Choosing to write a ghazal, that too, in English, is a serious challenge. Writing under the shadow of Ghalib, we know, is a huge task. I think that there is not a single contemporary Indian English poet who has not invoked Ghalib in his poetry. Pick up any poet, and Ghalib begins to emerge as a pressing presence. Ghalib's verses surreptitiously enter into their verses. The usual poetic masters – Eliot, Yeats, or Shakespeare – are not as much challenged, but, yes, they are culturally contested. Is it time that we acknowledge the poet-masters from other Indian languages as ancestors of Indian English poetry too? Is now Ghalib safely a part of the pantheon of the ancestors of Indian English poetry?

Maaz: I would definitely put Ghalib in that pantheon. I think he is nineteenth century's best poet globally. The twentieth-century American poet Adrienne Rich wrote,

“How is it, Ghalib, that your grief, resurrected in pieces,
has found its way to this room from your dark house in
Delhi?”

But I think there was an earlier question of attempting the ghazal itself that I should try to address. So, yes, I started writing the ghazal in English after Agha Shahid Ali of course, but after reading Shahid's ghazals I realized that in many of his ghazal, many of his themes and concerns are almost entirely American, while he retains the form of

the ghazal. Those are also good ghazals in a way, but I feel that the ghazal is more than just formalist concerns. Like you said almost everyone at least from India is writing ghazals in South Asia. Not everyone technically, but quite a few. A lot of these poets are following formal concerns and they are writing whatever they feel like in the form. But my investment is also in the themes and the universe of the ghazal because of my location—the place I grew up in, and the tradition that I wish to situate myself in. Ghalib was moving around a lot, but he lived in Ballimaran most of his life, and many of his houses were a few hundred meters away from the house I grew up in and lived for twenty-five years. So Ghalib was around in a sense in the soil, in the streets around me. An opening poem of *Ghazalnama* derives all its connotations from a *sher* by Ghalib:

Said Ghalib
'twas not his destiny
To be one with his beloved,

My lover too
Lives across his house
Is it something in the air?

But even orally, I was attuned to the ghazal as there would be ghazals played on the record or cassette players in the house. So, that already seeped into my skin. These creative responses are almost bodily, I think. But because I was educated primarily in English through a private school in South Delhi, and later studied English literature at university, I ended up writing poetry in English. Yet, more than in Shahid's ghazals, I found that the universe of ghazal there in Urdu poetry comes from the Persian tradition but also involves various figures or characters from the subcontinent. The Brahmin is an important figure; the kafir is often interpreted to be an infidel and enemy by not careful readers, but the kafir is often the beloved. The beloved is the one who tempts you, s/he is the idol also – *sanam*. There are things that are uniquely Indian about the ghazal universe. There is an older cosmopolitanism which exists within this Persian ghazal. It is very international. And there is an entire universe there. So, for me that universe is also important. I have also written ghazals where I am not dealing with this universe per se, but

increasingly in my efforts I strive for that abstraction, using characters, symbols, and codes from that universe. So, I feel that it hasn't been done in English as much, and within English it is not as daunting, perhaps for me to try to advance on the ghazal poetics. I couldn't do it in Urdu, because again, I am not trained in Urdu as much as I would like to be. And to create Urdu newness would require even more effort in one way. So, while ghazals come naturally, they come in English, yet they are faithful to not just the form but also to the ghazal universe. By being written in English they further the pre-existing multilingual tradition and create newness for the ghazal as a form and in English poetry.

Akshaya: Let me go back to your choice of ghazal as a form. It is a form that requires lot of inner restraint and fastidious craftsmanship. The protocols of maintaining a *kafia*, *radif*, and other properties specific to the form, in a way, tie down the poet's freedom. True it is that in a ghazal, each couplet can claim autonomy, and in this way ghazal does concede some kind of freedom also. Don't you think the modern experience is very splintered and that it is very complex, and that within the compositional obligations of ghazal such experiences cannot be articulated, without the risk of aesthetic compromise. I can understand if there is a sense of grief or mourning, or a subtle eye to eye communication, ghazal as a form has no aesthetic parallel. But how to bring ghazal to the articulation of modern-day complex experiences? Is ghazal capable enough to take onboard the new specters of climate change, Anthropocene, the apocalyptic arrival of AI, post-truth etc?

Maaz: Actually, some new ghazals of mine which are still unpublished reflect on these newer technological realities as they interact with the fundamental concerns of humanity, which have always been embedded in the ghazal universe. There is a ghazal engaging with time, which refers to AI which I am still revising, so I will quote a few *shers* here from it:

Father left us a bit early
Did coding miss a kink in time

Man took over from dinosaur

Would AI make us sink in time

When we move across dimensions
Will we create a chink in time

Let me read the ghazal, “The L-word,” which articulates different possibilities of age-old yet modern love:

There’s such epistemic murk around the L word
Don’t we always try to work around the L word?

No Shireen for me, no Heer, please, I am no Qais
Other desires also lurk around the L word

Jehangir's City—with its bold Anarkali
I left my heart there to bark around the L word

Tigresses may take all in Sundarban mangroves
A male, what use is my quirk around the L word?

You should come seek the Arabic 'refuge' in Maaz
It is no use playing Turk around the L word?

It’s quite an elusive, connotative kind of poem. The L-Word used to be a TV series. There are all kinds of L-Words here. I leave those to your imagination. And there are certain modern connotations here too. Yet, at the same time queerness and homo-eroticism has been a part of the ghazal tradition very strongly, albeit it did not use that vocabulary. Even the way pronouns are used in Urdu poetry, a lot of poetry can easily be interpreted as homoerotic. At another level this tradition is sometime blamed for being just about the lover, beloved and rival, and almost held to be conventional and orthodox. But the lover is a radical figure. As I hinted upon earlier, in the *sanam* or *kafir*, there is transgressive love always happening here. Wine drinking is valorized which is otherwise taboo in the Islamic tradition. So, there has always been some radical potential and in fact the radical tone is almost conventional. So, all of that is there for us to capitalize upon. Faiz even in his *nazms* continued to utilize the ghazal idiom, characters, and universe. *Nazms* are free verse poems. So, this has

been happening within the ghazal form. Within my own poetry, the newer poems that I am writing, maybe I could find something here... There is a conscious move away from technology also, which I think is a mortal concern now, so perhaps this ghazal may reveal well what I suggest:

Be convivial, pleasantly greet in letters
I would prefer if we meet in letters

There is surfeit of the screen and e-texts
Eschew e-mail, let's retreat in letters

They will be perfumed, elegant, with sleights of hand
I'll hand write in ink my heartbeat in letters

'Should I write another for when the postman comes?
Since I know of your thoughts, your conceit in letters'

Would you let go your fears, and put pen to paper,
Just trust my love, and be indiscreet in letters

I will plant a forest, don't worry about trees
We're the minority who're replete in letters

'The world is full of paper, *still*, please, write to me'
How else, my desk, Maaz, would be complete in letters?

Akshaya: This reminds me of "The Country without a Post Office." There are a lot of letters in Shahid Ali as well, which never reach or if at all they reach, they reach when the receiver is no longer alive. You say that Shahid is Americanized, so which is the greater challenge – Americanizing ghazal or retaining ghazal's innate Indianness?

Maaz: I am not sure if one should compete. That also comes consciously. You have your pen name in the last couplet, so what are you to do with it? You are referring to yourself almost like an alter ego. So, you praise yourself, use the meaning of your name in terms of its semantic value, even ridicule your insignificance and so on.

There are different ways to write the maqta, the final couplet, so it is also part of form in the way it is executed. But at the same time, I wouldn't say what is tougher, but the language which is English is coming from the West. Americans are considered native speakers and so there is more easily an American English than there is recognition for an Indian English, internationally. Of course, there are many varieties of Indian English. But just for the simple fact that it hasn't been done well enough with primarily a South Asian focus. Shahid moved away completely and that was his choice. That he used the form to express precisely what he felt like expressing as a member of the diaspora. For me, while living in the contemporary times in India, it is important to write English ghazals a certain way. For if I was in Pakistan or elsewhere, I might not be writing English ghazals actually. So, a lot of concerns can change because of location and historical time. If the world was not as Islamophobic as it is, I might not be writing ghazals. Since, ghazal is love poetry, and to love in India is now a radical and subversive act, I write in this form. So, my English ghazal is coming from certain traditions and within India I found this English ghazal to be more ecumenical and syncretic. So, I wouldn't say which is tougher, but it is the more important need for me to execute this.

Akshaya: So, you intend to say that writing ghazal in itself is an act of resistance? Political resistance?

Maaz: I would like to think so in my case. A lot of people are exploring the ghazal form also as curiosity. I can't speak for them. I think of it as, yes, bending English to my will. Internationally, there are poetic forms such as the haiku that seem to gain more prominence in English. For us, in India and the Persianate East, in many different ways, in terms of linguistic, cultural performance, and in terms of other ways of doing politics, the ghazal must be an important genre to bring to English. It certainly is important for me. In this form of love poetry, at times when loving the other is made difficult by conservative institutions and politics, I seek to push the envelope with this form of love poetry. By writing the ghazal I create new syntaxes, new rhythms, rhymes, refrains, and non-linear narratives in English, countermanding the Western linear narrative poetry of free verse. Thus, my ghazals put forth a politics of love and friendship, and

throw a postcolonial challenge to English poetics as it exists with an Anglo-American English hegemonic model. In times when even place names with Perso-Arabic inheritances are being changed, I write English ghazals with Perso-Arabic motifs, characters, and words.

Akshaya: But I have seen that you have written poems on themes which have nothing to do with Islamophobia as much. There is a poem on Rohith Vemula. That interests me because normally poetry is used for themes of social injustice or human rights, but not for so overtly politically charged kind of situations.

Maaz: Akhil Katyal, who is here, had written a very short poem from a line in Rohit's suicide letter. The poem you refer to was a kind of a response poem to Akhil's poem. I wrote it in the form of a ghazal. I am not sure if I still agree with writing that kind of directly political ghazal, like I said earlier I am now moving more towards abstraction, so I am not using political references as overtly. So, it is not one of my favorite poems in this collection although the cause at that time was very moving.

The first poem I remember I ever wrote was an Urdu sher in response to the Babri Masjid demolition. So, different political causes seem to move me, I think, from very early on, and here also, it was an individual's demise, probably under discriminatory circumstances.

So, the ghazal for Rohith Vemula has an epigraph which is a couple of lines quoted from the suicide note: "Never was a man treated as a mind as a glorious thing made of stardust." The poem is called "Stardust." I will read the poem, if you allow me:

One grew up familiar in India with the magazine of
"Stardust",
Then the word acquired new meaning, the real sheen of
stardust.

It will be the aura of lady-killer Khans no more,
Bhim's descendants call for the whole tureen of stardust.

The bold and reckless, the spotless fear this dirt,
They wish to stifle the power foreseen of stardust.

All of us made up of this substance, some abuse it
More than others, the in-between of stardust.

The Goths took refuge in Antilia, it's a monstrosity now
In the city of slums, the obscene of stardust.

Some stardust is fed by foie gras, others try and fail
To sell their kidneys, the untouched, unseen of stardust

Blood is up for spoils, but will it ever boil?
When a light dies, will we careen off stardust?

You inherited it reduced to kitsch, gossip of films, Maaz
Rohith reclaimed your makeup, made up, pristine, of
stardust.

To an extent I would like to think that a poem happens. There are things you can plan, you can keep reading, practice, including translation, and doing things, but there is something that strikes you out of the unknown, moves you all of a sudden and then a poem happens. This suicide note moved a lot of us.

Akshaya: The way you mobilize ghazal for political purposes is exceptional. It in a way amounts to reinventing the ghazal. If you look at the penultimate couplet, you use a very fiery expression: "will it ever boil?". How do you bring something like this within the relatively even-tempered mood of ghazal? Ghazal does not allow you to "boil".

Maaz: Even Ghalib was not considered a revolutionary poet. There is a sher:

*Rag-e-sang se tapakta voh lahu ki phir na thamta
Jise gham samjh rhe ho ye agar sharaar hota.*

Rag-e-sang would be vein of marble, so this grief which if it becomes rage can even melt marble and can make blood pour from it. It is as if in a poem made of two-line verses lava is compounded, that is brimming over, ready to explode. The power of this poetry must overwhelm.

I see my own ghazals a bit like that. They can be delicate, but they can be mighty too.

Akshaya: So Ghalib is a revolutionary poet?

Maaz: It depends on how you read it, at least in some verses. In personal life, Ghalib was a survivor. He appealed to the powers that be, be it the Mughal king of Delhi, other nawabs, or the British resident in Delhi, or even Queen Victoria. He managed to survive the 1857 mutiny retributions from the British despite having been a member of the court of the king who was exiled to Rangoon. However, in his private letters, he expressed a lot of anguish, grief, and even anger. His poetry is full of life, love, vigour, and a modern questioning self. He is radical in his expression of the strongest of emotions. It might be a stretch to call Ghalib a revolutionary, but his verses embody incredible power.

Akshaya: In your collection *Ghazalnama*, why do you club two different forms – one of *ghazal* and another of *nama*?

Maaz: See, in English there had already been *Trotter Nama* by Allen Solly, and *nama* can mean letter, preface, or treatise. Although there are not only ghazals in this collection, there are other poems also. But the aesthetic that I was trying to evoke is the ghazal aesthetic. Like Faiz was doing in his *nazms*, the universe is that of the ghazal. So, Faiz uses a lot of poetic elements from the ghazal, using the ghazal universe. So even when I am writing about a subject such as Rohith Vemula, sometimes I am writing in the ghazal form. When I am writing in other forms also the kind of aesthetic and imagery I am using is from this kind of tradition. So, I wanted the collection to be a sort of homage to that form.

Akshaya: In this collection you have of course written poems which are not in the ghazal form, but ghazal as an influence and trope infiltrates. But this has also happened of late that earlier people used to demarcate an original book of poems and a book of translations. Increasingly I have seen that, though you have said from Urdu, but people even do not really want to use this as a marker of separation. They appropriate translation, for instance in Shahid Ali. He translates and he never says he translates. There is a full Ghalib ghazal there. He never mentions. So, are the days of writing exclusively a book of translations over in that sense, because you have put them in one running kind of collection.

Maaz: No, I have published a full book of translation, Mirza Ghalib's *Chiragh-e-Dair* as *Temple Lamp*. In *Ghazalnama* too, I have clearly attributed all the translations to the original authors. When the book was subtitled "Poems from Delhi, Belfast, and Urdu" and you asked me this question what is Urdu? Urdu for me is also a place like Delhi and Belfast. Language is also kind of a mental space you inhabit and cannot move away from. So, Urdu in the subtitle was anyway there. The translations were meant to be interspersed throughout the collection. They were not supposed to be a separate section of translations which there is now. So, the current sequence of sections is Delhi, Belfast, Urdu, and Delhi again. But to answer your broader question then. Translation still is for me, particularly when I do poetry, it is a part of my practice. I have reproduced the Urdu originals in the Persian script here and I have given my translation. When you are recreating a poem in your own words, the reader is reading your words, so there is a claim that you are making to some kind of ownership or at least to that version of the original poem that is definitely yours. And there is a certain poetic skill that is required to undertake a poetic translation.

Akshaya: But if one owns the translated poems, why should one not treat them at par with one's original poems? I would rather go for the kind of practice that Shahid Ali does. For instance, Tagore writes *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*. He never says he has translated the *bhakti* verses; he just owns them.

Maaz: I would not. I think it is a matter of choice. I write some original poetry and try to write some original prose as well. I do think there is a difference. It used to be the South Asian Indian tradition to appropriate even the translated. A lot of people were doing this kind of appropriation. But we live in a world of copyrights, we are also conditioned by capitalism as well. But I feel that for me it is a matter of intellectual honesty too; I really don't know and can't say for sure, whether it is me living in this world which is increasingly capitalist and this idea of copyright cannot be wished away or a duty and responsibility I feel towards the original author.

Akshaya: Is Ghalib still under copyright regime? Often, we hear that some verses of Ghalib which circulate in the social media, were never written by Ghalib.

Maaz: Ghalib would be out of copyright, but I am not just speaking of the idea of copyright in that there is private and intellectual property to whom somebody has a claim. What I am talking about is an ethical position regarding that. So, it is not just the capitalist side of it, but I feel it incumbent upon me to own up to the fact that certain images and ideas of a certain work that I am recreating are of another author's mind. I did not really think of them, I am working with them.

Akshaya: But there is a greater ethic – that you own them unconditionally.

Maaz: I feel compelled to have some kind of distinction there. So, I will make an acknowledgment, a dedication, or epigraph. The first poem has an epigraph from John Hollander's "Ghazal on Ghazals" for example. Because in a way it was inspired from that. I can only speak for myself.

Akshaya: True, true. One is that you have translated a range of poets. Even Amir Khusro is translated and Faiz, too. These two poets have been translated number of times and people have translated them in free verse, in the form of ghazals as well. This question always intrigues me. What is the incentive of translating the already translated, multiply translated? What is the motivation to do it all over

again? Do you think a new translation would make a serious difference to the existing ones?

Maaz: I think it is the greatest homage you can pay to poets and poems you really love and admire. You read them closely and then you begin to think how you will enter them and carry them to the other language you work in and you make an attempt. It is not as consciously thinking, “Oh! Is there a better translation or not? What is the point of doing this?” I don’t think you always end up thinking like that, although I must also say that at one level, yes. There is a poem here, a translation from Ghalib.

*Ye na thi humari qismat ki visal-e-yar hota
agar aur jeete rehte yahi intazar hota*

I won’t read all of the famous ghazal by Ghalib. I might read most of my translation. I am not a great fan of transcreations personally. There has to be some negotiation. If you have butchered the original then that’s not quite owning it. I read a translation of this poem by Vijay Seshadri which I did not particularly like. So, I thought let me attempt one, and, in an hour and a half, I had a draft ready. This is one of the later drafts that I am going to read now.

It wasn’t our destiny to be with our lover,
Had we lived anymore, the way it would’ve been longer!

I live by your promise, knowing it to be false,
Wouldn’t I’ve died of joy, if I were a believer?

Through your caprice we learnt that the pledge was weak,
With such ease would it break if it were any stronger?

They should ask my heart, how your half-drawn arrows,
Could pierce it through, and where’d they get their power?

What friendship is this that friends become counselors?
There should’ve been a healer, a sympathizer!

Blood would pour unstoppably from the veins of marble,
What you believe to be grief may be scorching fire!

If this torment's heart-breaking, where'd we go hiding?
If it weren't the pain of love, it'd be our career.

To whom do I complain, of this sad night's refrain?
Death wouldn't be too bad, if only once it were.

This dishonour on death, why didn't we drown instead?
There would've been no tomb, there would've been no bier.

Who can see Him? He is One, the Monad. Were there
any duality, our four eyes would pair.

These matters of mystic thought, these renderings of yours,
Ghalib, we'd call you a saint, were you not a drinker.

This was my attempt.

Akshaya: When you read translations, you find stark difference between one and the other. Did you ever think translating Ghalib's *ghazal* in some radical way, say, as a pop song?

Maaz: Someone could. I think I have not attempted that. It could be done. I mean all experiments are valid and there will be an audience. There are hip-hop ghazals that have been written. Patricia Smith has a Hip-Hop Ghazal with "hips" as her *radeef*. So, people are welcome to do it. I think there is scope for people who enjoy that kind of thing, to take pleasure from the different kinds. And there is pleasure to be had from reading different translations of the same work as well.

Akshaya: Going back to Shahid Ali's translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, he does not follow the metrical obligations and he translates ghazals into free verse. What do you say about it? Should ghazals necessarily be translated as a ghazals in the target language?

Maaz: I would like ideally that to happen, but yes free verse frees you to do other things. Sometimes you can translate the meaning

better, you have more openness, broken away from the limits of form. But again, the question becomes about which aspect is it that you wish to translate and emphasize. A ghazal for me cannot exist without its form. By form I do not even mean the *qaafia* and the *radif*, “*rhyme ho yeh zaruri nahin hai*.” So, for example consider this *masnavi* (*Chiragh-e-Dair*) that I have translated—*Temple Lamp*. *Masnavi* is the epic poem. *Padmaavat* is a *masnavi*. So, this is a long poem but this is also written in couplets. Each will have its own rhyme and refrain. But I did not translate it with rhyme and refrain. What was essential for me there was this idea that each couplet is made up of two parts. The first line is either a question or exposition that has to be resolved in interesting ways in the second line. This equal, two-part structure of each *sher* is what I tried to recreate. The fidelity to autonomous *shers* is the integrity of the ghazal too that is most fundamental. So, when a ghazal is rendered in free verse where lines are also broken arbitrarily and the meaning of a single couplet is translated arbitrarily say in five lines, then it no longer remains a ghazal. Why call it a ghazal? If you are only interested in translating meaning then why even translate poetry? Translate a newspaper report.

Akshaya: Can English ghazal – translated or original – be sung like an Urdu ghazal? Did you ever think in terms of asking or commissioning a singer to sing these ghazals?

Maaz: I haven’t yet actually found a good sung rendition of the English ghazal. Tanya Wells, the British singer of Urdu ghazals, does sing the English translation of a *sher* or two at times, but I have not heard a full ghazal in English sung. On the other hand, I have done musical performances of my ghazal readings with the vocalist Priya Kanungo where we each performed in alternative interludes. I recited two *sher* at a time of from my dual ghazal *Amaltas-Monsoon*, while Priya would sing one *antara* of the *Raag Yaman*.

Akshaya: Coming to your translation of *Chiragh-e-Dair*, you talk about Persian cosmopolis. Here in this translated poem *Temple Lamp*, Delhi is given up and Banaras is owned by Ghalib without any sense of guilt. As a translator, you go along with Ghalib here. How does the

essential Delhiwalla in you cope up with you this kind of Delhi-bashing that Ghalib does?

Maaz: For Ghalib, Banaras comes at the cost of Delhi, yes. But I went to Banaras for the first time when researching for this book and I liked it. A part of me loved it. There is a very funny incident which happened. I asked a *panda*—the priests who sit on the ghats under the umbrella—for directions, as I had just reached the city. He asked me to come down and put a tilak on me, which I have rarely done in life. The other time was in school at an award function and this was the second time. I didn't like it in school actually, but this time I was somehow almost enchanted by it. It felt very natural, the way he did it. It was as if Banaras had claimed me. So, if one loves one city, it does not mean that one has to not like other cities. In Ghalib's case there are historical causes, for the protestations he makes against Delhi in the poem and his appreciation of Banaras, and I think some of this is also performance. So, as poets and readers we also perform sometimes, not everything is literal. Ghalib is running away from debt in Delhi and is going to Calcutta to have his pension reinstated from the British to the full at the time. So, he reaches Banaras and he grieves that some of his best friends are not writing to him. He has grievances against the city. Firstly, Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi is mentioned—he was the great great grandfather of Javed Akhtar and Farhan Akhtar. Khairabadi was a jurist and poetry connoisseur who edited Ghalib's Diwan for him. He once adjudged Ghalib to be guilty in a case and sentenced him to prison or to pay a hefty fine. Ghalib did not have that money himself and Khairabadi paid the money on his behalf. These are the kind of friends Ghalib is complaining about. So, I don't think these are real complaints, these are just sentimental *shikwas* that he has with the best of his friends. He still loves them, so I think it is that kind of a situation for him. Because you see him lamenting Delhi intensely in the diaries and letters post-1857, so it is not like he didn't like Delhi. Banaras really enthused him. He has written in letters and even in later life stating that if he had been young and had gone to Banaras, then he would have just stayed on there forever. Ghalib likes Calcutta a lot too, but he loves Banaras.

Akshaya: So, people say that his admiration for Banaras was more spontaneous and his admiration for Calcutta was, because he was after his pension. What do you think makes the distinction?

Maaz: He doesn't explicitly make it anywhere, as far as I know. But for me the fact that the greatest homage a person or poet can pay to someone or some place is to write about that place in poetry. And Banaras is the only place on which he has written a long poem. So, I do think he loved Banaras in many ways. There are possible guesses as to why he loved it. Banaras is also famous for its *bazaar-e-husn* and so on. He writes in great praise of the bodies and the beauties he sees at the Banaras ghats. He doesn't meet anyone of note in Banaras. No one who is important or part of the elite culture at the time knows that Ghalib is in Banaras. So, he stays there secretly. Calcutta on the other hand was a seat of power, it was where a modern literary culture was already established. Even newspapers had started there. So, he finds a more vibrant public culture there that is not there in Banaras.

Akshaya: Why should he be so angry with Allahabad? Allahabad is also *sangam*. But his denunciation of Allahabad is no-less literary.

Maaz: Again, we don't know exactly why. But there were possibly followers of rival poet Qateel who harassed him. There is a hilarious letter by Ghalib that I have actually translated in the introduction where he says a lot of things about Allahabad.

“What a ridiculous place is Allahabad! May God get rid of it; for it has no healing for the sick, nor anything of note for the gentleman. Neither do men and women have any life here, nor do its young and old have any love or kindness in their hearts. Its people are a blot on the face of this earth. Its desolate inhabitation is only worth tilling as farmland . . . It is unfair to call this terrible valley a city, and it is so shameful that a person should stay in this dwelling of ghosts . . . Because it has heard that the sinful would also obtain grace for the sake of the virtuous, it has cast its hundred thousand dishonours with its three thousand hopes with the lot of Banaras, and sent the river Ganges speeding towards Banaras as a sign of respect.

However much of a burden Banaras may find it to look at this black-faced city, its heart is comforted by the knowledge that the Ganga lies between the two. By God, if the return journey from Calcutta means that I have to travel through Ilahabad, then I shall drop the very idea of returning home and never return. Suffice it to say, after spending a night and day in this city of ghosts for the crime of not having had my luggage delivered yet, I found a ride the next morning, and quickly reached the banks of the Jamuna. I crossed the river like a fast gust of wind and made my way to Banaras.”

Akshaya: Ghalib lavishes exceptional praise on Banaras. He is at his lyrical best. Can you read some lines, specifically on Banaras, from your translated poem?

Maaz: Thank you, I would like to read from near of the middle of the poem where Ghalib is at his most fulsome in praising Banaras.

40

Be it in spring, or in summer, or winter,
the weather here each season is that of heaven.

41

Escaping the bleakest winters
and scorching summers,

spring pitches winter
and summer camps in Kashi.

42

Autumn, when it shakes its wings
in pride,

becomes on (Kashi's) forehead
a proud sandalwood mark.

43

Bowing in respect to the very air
of this garden (that is Banaras),

the spring breeze wears
a janéu made of flowers.

44

If it not be a tilak
on the forehead of the sky,

then pray, tell, what is
that many-hued wave of twilight?

45

Each fleck of dirt here
in its ecstasy is a temple,

every thorn with its verdure
becomes paradise.

46

This settlement is the seat
of the idol-worshipping faithful,

from beginning to end
it is the pilgrimage of mystics.

47

The (supreme) place of worship for
the conch-blowers,

surely, (Banaras) is the Kaaba
of Hindustan.

Akshaya: As I was reading this “Temple Lamp,” what struck me most was the limited range of imagery. For instance, look at this repetitive use of the image of paradise for Banaras. It is liberally used in Persian poetry. Jahangir invokes the same image for Kashmir. Does this not point towards the deficit of imagery in Persian or Urdu poetry?

Maaz: It is the most important image in the Abrahamic tradition. The idea is that man was thrown out of this ideal place which was paradise. Paradise was a garden of pleasure. Geographically, if it existed at all, it was somewhere in Iraq, which is not so paradisiacal anymore. Yet, there is deep yearning for it among many believers and poets. So, I think it is a foundational belief that any place that has to be good or is the best can only be that. It is something that is at the root of this very way of thinking and you are supposed to return to it. If you die and if you do well in life, you will return to paradise. In Ghalib's case with Banaras, at one level one can say that it is just abstract imagery that he used to call Banaras *pardes*, but that is not the only reasons. I have tried to show the other reasons in the book in my introduction using James Prinsep's sketches of that time that show a green, garden-like Banaras. Banaras in early 19th century was actually not like we see it today. It was a very green city, and did not have the kind of pollution and traffic it has now. Gaudoliya bazaar is now this big famous bazaar. A small river called Godavari used to flow there. Maidagin Chowk used to be Mandakini Talao, a pond. All of these existed when Ghalib went there. So, there was much greenery in Banaras with many water bodies, not just the Ganga. Ghalib had been ailing for a while and as he came to Banaras he managed to recover his health. He came there in winter time when it was probably not that cold there. In the verdant environs of Banaras Ghalib did find a healing touch. In terms of the people he saw around, the evident piety and metaphysics, I have not read those sections of the poem aloud just now—the sections where he is describing the piety of the people—all those things considered, he probably did really find Banaras a veritable paradise.

Akshaya: Let us change gears, and switch from the promises of paradise to the pangs of Partition. This is a question on *The Sixth River* by Fikr Taunsvi, which you translate in English. Of course, this is a very important book because this was written just at the stroke of Partition – one month prior and one month after to Partition, and the writer has given first-hand account from ground zero. But Fikr Taunsvi is known for his humour and what you get here is just one to two sentences of humour, rest of it is all saturnine. Partition as a trauma, subsumes the possibility of humour. Where is his trademark humour?

Maaz: I think in that moment Fikr is not as much of a humorist, probably, certainly not as much as later. We must remember Taunsvi is publishing *Chhata Darya* in 1948, his trademark as humour happened later. Before Partition he was a poet and an editor. He had just published his first poetry collection, *Hayule*, in 1947 and he had been editing for the Progressive and Modernist magazines from Lahore. And he never wanted to leave Lahore, he was a communist. So, he only left because Mumtaz Mufti betrays him. He didn't care about religion and this idea of nations. For him the *suba* that is the province is important, Punjab and Lahore are important. The cultural identity is important. It's actually the partition that shook the poetry out of him and here he produces dark satire, probably his first piece of writing after partition and then he becomes a satirist full time and over time a comic satirist. He wrote a daily column called "Pyaz ke chilke" for over 25 years in the Urdu Daily *Milaap*. I am actually working to translate that now. And he wrote it 5-6 times a week and that comic satire is making fun of the government, the buses in Delhi, the new societies that have been created and so on. He has lost a daughter and he mentions it almost as if in passing and then he just moves on. In a sense he is anticipating Manto ever before Manto writes his partition stories.

Akshaya: With this we come to an end to this very animated session of conversation. The aesthetic choices that you make are very precisely defined.



“Spirituality can go in any direction”

**Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Sarabjeet
Garcha**

(This is an edited version of the conversation that took place between the poet Sarabjeet Garcha and Prof. Akshaya Kumar in Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh)

Akshaya Kumar: All these years poetry has undergone many transformations and avant-garde experimentations. At times such experiments overtake the poetic emotion. The excessive experimentation in a way distances and distracts the potential reader from the charms of poetry. My first encounter with Sarabjeet Garcha’s poems has been through journals and anthologies, wherein he features often with conspicuous regularity. The reading of his stray poems always left an embalmed calmness in my mind, and made me crave for his full-length collections. Only recently did I manage to get hold of his three collections, namely, *Lullaby of the Ever-Retuning*, *A Clock in the Far Past*, and *All We Have*. One lingering impression after reading these collections has been that Garcha’s poetry retains the charisma of poetry, its intimate cadence and inherent lyricism. He brings poetry back home, a form of literature that has been in some kind of an exile. The faintest stirrings send him into a poetic frenzy as he seeks to:

be a raindrop to learn to glide
like a lyric on a leaf

be a shiver in the skin of squirrel
to know what it is to touch a tree ...

(“Lines from a Lost Leaf”, *A Clock in the Far Past*, 32)

As a seeker, Garcha clamours to dig deep into the drama of life. This perhaps is the mandate of poetry. But what redeems his poetry from over-dramatization is its delicate tension. His poetry hovers in and around an interstitial space – even as it aims to dive deep, it is acutely aware of the limitations of such an overreach. The ending of his poem “Interface” in a way sums up the predicament of his inward plunge: “He turns around but trips/ .../ marooned between dream and deep dream” (*A Clock in the Far Past*, 7). The enlightened in-betweenness, acquired in the process is suggested in the poem “Iteration” thus: “... it’s impossible to know/ wakefulness from sleep” (*All We Have*, 11). He resides inside the layers formed by one blanket over another blanket:

Someone spreads another blanket
over me and in my sleep I see
that everything you wanted to tell me
is cushioned between these two layers
warmed by a prayer.

(“Wordless”, *All We Have*, 13)

But Garcha in his early poetry, particularly written in Hindi in his collection *Vaani Phir Bhi Shunyamanaa*, comes across as a poet who is under the spell of some vague *chhayavadi* impulse. Strangely enough in the very first collection, the destination is *shunya*, which to me is rather too an audacious a beginning:

Mann ke saghan gagan barsaun
Tann ke taral surya chhalkaun
Pranaya pran ki aahuti dekar
Sarvayapt surbhi ban jaun

Nirala’s grit, Pant’s grace, and Prasad’s mysticism – all mixed together – seem to find some echo in this collection, but the poetry remains more performative than experiential. In later collections, which are written in English, Garcha’s idiom, however, is much more calibrated. It is slow-paced, the time runs very slow, and instead of

the destination, the journey and the travails of the passage are traced through a very frugal kind of poetic narrative.

After this slightly longish introductory remarks, let me begin the conversation with Sarabjeet Garcha. My first question relates to your initial uncertainty about the preferred medium of your poetic journey. You begin in Hindi and switch to English poetry. The choice of language is always a problem with a multilingual writer, particularly with one who has competence in more than two to three languages. But is it just a switch from one language to another? Or is it a switch from one kind of attitude to another? When you write English poetry I come across a very different Garcha. Garcha who calibrates, who treads slowly and who unveils the reality in measured ways. There is no such impatience to jump and dive headlong into the abyss of the infinite.

Sarabjeet Garcha: First and foremost, I would like to make a minor correction to what you said. I actually began with English poetry, but my first book is out of print now. It was published a few months before I got married at the age of twenty-six, and I never wanted to publish it. My friend published it for me because one day he saw my diaries and poems and said that he wanted to publish them. So, I said, “Okay, let me at least revise them.” I revised and published the poems and just forgot about the book. And I thought, *I am done with poetry; I don’t think I can write anymore*. But then, once poetry takes hold of you, you are taken for life. It will never leave you. I did not realize that. I was penning something in my diary then. The poems collected in the second manuscript were again published by the same person, about seven or eight years later, when I was in my early thirties. And that too happened because he wanted to publish the book. I said, “Look, these are reconstructions of the *advaita* philosophy that I have got from you.” I haven’t read any philosophy as such, but I have hobnobbed with persons who have been disciples of well-known spiritual gurus. This person was one of them, but he did not have any guru. So maybe that was one kind of acquisition that I wanted to bring across. I was experimenting; I was enjoying the feel of language. And this book is all about it. I am playing with language – that is what I

feel. There is a lot of repetition, and the rhythm that I picked up in this book, the rhyme and meter, where I got it from is again all serendipity. One day, one afternoon at Dyal Singh Library in Delhi I picked up a book. I had never heard the name of the author before. His name was Kanhaiya Lal Sethia. One thing I learned that day is, never go by the name. It sounds like some Marwari seth's name. I picked up the book and read one poem, and I was blown away. I mean, it was a very simple poem, but the rhythm never left me. The poem was about death and I thought, *Okay, let me take this book home*. Then I started reading it. There were about forty-two poems in the book. And I still remember that poem. There were many poems there and I said that okay maybe I can also write like this. And I started experimenting with my own Hindi vocabulary and the vocabulary that I had picked up from my friends. My friends were very well versed in Hindi. I was educated in an English medium school so I did not have that kind of Hindi, but I acquired it from them. So, your company actually influences your language a lot and that is how it all began. After that book at the same time in 2011, my second book in English, *Lullaby of the Ever-Returning*, appeared. It appeared after a gap of almost eight years, I think. That's the longest gap between my books. And as I said, I had never planned that I would have a book out, but I had been writing regularly. And I also dumped a lot of my work, which means I revised compulsively. That is why you will see that my first book is very different from my second book. So, in the second book I wanted to bring alive the Punjab I had in my imagination because I have never lived in Punjab. The Punjab that I think and dream about has come from my grandparents actually, so I tried to reconstruct some bit of it in the book, apart from the many love poems that I included in it.

AK: Good that you referred to the genetic pull of Punjab on your creative unconscious, but as I go through your poems only one kind of Punjab emerges. And that is the Punjab of its love lore, of its romance, its *qissas*. Of course, love has its two shades and two distinct registers – love bordering on metaphysics and spirituality, and love which is not more than a carnal desire. And you also navigate across these two shades. But still, I feel that in your *Lullaby*

of the Ever-Returning, you are soft-peddalling Punjab so much? You do refer to “the rugged raspiness of Punjab’s waters” (18) and its “rinsing wounds [that] time has left unhealed” (19), but the volatility of Punjab’s recent past is underplayed. Punjab has seen so much of turmoil post-Green Revolution, and the simmers of discontent among the youth are too palpable to be missed out.

SG: Well, again, the kind of poems I include are romantic. But that is the Punjab I dream about. So maybe you can give me some bit of license there. The Punjab that you’ll see now in my other books – and it might not be a book of poems – will be something different. Because I feel I am also physically more acquainted with Punjab now than I was fifteen or twenty years ago. However, intermittent visits aren’t enough to slake my thirst for feeling the place in my bones. I yearn to be there for a longer stretch of time. Thankfully, I now have friends who can take me into the heart of rural Punjab. I am not yet done with Punjab. There’s much more to follow.

AK: Just look at the use of your language. It is an uncanny, gothic language of lullabies, rustles, ruins, and midnight vigils that you exploit the most. In couplets such as these – “Although you soothsay the continuity of souls, / Is there anyone who can foretell of the vanishing?” (“Ghazal for the Vanishing”, *Lullaby of the Ever-Returning*, 12) – you create a mood of eeriness. Take up your poem “A Rustle in the Ruins”, which you dedicate to the famous Punjabi poet Shiv Kumar Batalavi, who is known for his pathos and is heralded as *biraha da sultan*. You lyricize “the kiss of calamity”. You foreground his melancholic predilections, but let us not forget that even as he recasts Luna as a young stepmother who has sexual desires, the social aspects of her being a low-caste hilly woman are very significantly hinted at. How do you relate to Shiv Kumar Batalvi? Can you explain the impulse behind the poem “A Rustle in the Ruins?”

SG: Yeah, certainly. I have already mentioned it in the notes that the images in that poem have been picked up from Shiv Kumar Batalvi’s poems, so you can say it has been written after him. In the early 2000s

I was obsessed with Batalvi's poetry, and of course I have also read *Luna*, and it has had a deep impact on me. But I could never let go of the lover boy Shiv, you see. He really influenced me like no other poet. Of course, I also liked other poets such as Mohan Singh and Puran Singh. I have read them. And Nanak also refers to love in his own way when he talks of *baramaha*, but Shiv was something else ... First, I wanted to translate him, and then I saw that I was failing in the endeavour, because he cannot be translated. He can be reimagined in another language, because his poetry is so woven into Punjabi that it cannot really be translated. I have seen many other translations, including of *Luna*, but they are not adequate translations. I would say that they fail. So, I was definitely trying to reconstruct some bit of Shiv in maybe some of these poems, but not all of them. As I said, maybe it was my nostalgia for Punjab, a Punjab I have never lived in.

AK: When I read "A Rustle in the Ruins", I found that you were more or less translating various images of Batalvi into English. Can I generalize and say that modern Indian English poetry is a by-product of failed translational efforts of poets?

SG: No, not really. As I said, it is dedicated to Shiv Kumar Batalvi, and I made it very clear in the notes that some images have been taken from his poems, but I converted many of his poems into one poem. So, there is a lot of creative intensity involved in dovetailing various images of Shiv Kumar Batalvi into one running poem.

AK: Yes, that is what translators can always do. I know that this poem is a series of images you picked up from Batalvi and then put them together in a sequence. Tell me about your journey from Batalvi to Baba Nanak. I mean, Nanak features a lot later on. There are many poems on and around Guru Nanak in your later collections. In *All We Have*, the entire last section (V) is devoted to what can be called as "Nanak poems". What I find very interesting is that even as you deal with these semi-spiritual kinds of poems, you create a narrative. Spirituality, otherwise, is a blackhole; it can suck you up. And writing poems under that kind of spiritual blight, if I am not wrong, can

actually smother the poetic prowess. But then how do you maintain the poetic balance, and how do you bring poetics into the narrative of spirituality?

SG: First, I will begin with my obsession with Nanak. It began when I was seven or eight years old. I lived in a building which was earlier a rest house and it was converted into a building because the people who came there as pilgrims became permanent residents. And they paid a rent to the landlord, who belonged to the Nirmala sect. His name was Pandit Narhari Narayan Singh. He died when I was eight and he was 103. I still have vivid memories about him, the kind of person he was. He really fascinated me, with his long beard and everything. I knew that he was some special person, but I did not know anything about spiritualism. And my only tryst with poetry... at that time I would go to the gurudwara in the afternoon when there was nobody and I would just touch the Guru Granth Sahib. I only knew that it is something very special, you see. It has something, but is beyond my reach. I did not even know that it has poetry. I would sit where the granthi sits and take the ceremonial fly whisk and play with it. There was a photograph of Nanak, a common photograph we see everywhere. That was unusual, because normally you don't see any photographs in gurudwaras. But as I said, the landlord belonged to the Nirmala sect. And there was also a bell. It never struck me that there's no bell in a gurudwara. At the back of my mind, Nanak was being played to me morning and evening by my mama in Bhai Tarlochan Singh's voice. She had an audio cassette—T-Series. I think many of us know about it; it's very famous. She would play it in the morning and again in the evening, and I was unconsciously listening to Nanak all the time. Only in my early teens did I become aware of it without understanding anything. I would then make an effort to understand, ask questions about him, and find out more about him. Back then, we did not have the benefit of the Internet, so it was all question and answer. Simple. If I had a question, I would approach my elders or my friends. My friends of course did not know anything about him, so I would approach my elders and ask them. Some of them would answer, and others would say, "No, no, beta, *paath karo*." I was like, "I am ready to do it, but only if I understand it." I could

not understand it. So, there the fascination began and then, of course, we know that Baba Nanak is an egalitarian and his poetry has great logic to it if you read it. He is a pragmatist. So, despite being called a Bhakti poet, if we see that he is referring to an unknown entity, it is not necessarily someone invisible sitting seven skies above us. He is talking of an ideal which is inside you. That is how I interpret it.

As you said, spirituality can go in any direction. I feel that when I start writing a poem, I have a vague sense of where it can go, but I don't know the path I will take or where the poem will take me. So, I try to maintain that element of mystery and allow the poem to work itself upon me, rather than resisting it and making my own interventions, because then it becomes artificial. Maybe that is why you see that it will not really be spiritual and mystical in the typical sense of the word. Does that answer your question?

AK: It takes me to another question. We have seen most of the modern English poets do go back to the Bhakti reservoir, and they fashion themselves as modern *bhaktas*. I am happy that I could find somebody who is in a way rewriting Nanak, but your rewriting stops short of being playful. It remains very reverential. This is how you end your poem "First Light":

.... For days, they've been
dusting their little house, stocking up
the kitchen. Who knows
what he loves to eat? All they know is
he loves. And that is enough
for them to recognise Nanak. (83)

This is poetry of surrender, without qualification.

SG: I think reverence is something that a poet can't do without. That's what I feel, you see. And that reverence starts with language. So, you begin with that veneration. Unless you have it, I don't think you can become a poet. It is impossible. But the object of reverence can shift. It can be a person. It can be your lover, mother, anybody. It

can be an ideal. Maybe for me it is Nanak, who has spoken deeply to me through word and action. He's the one who has also shown me that it isn't enough to be an armchair poet.

AK: Just pushing you more on this because reverence could be very intimidating, and reverence actually inhibits you to be free in the sense that it pre-empts you to be intimate with Guru Nanak. When I read your poems in that orbit of the semi-sacred, they read really well. But then the whole opportunity of rediscovering Nanak in a very intimate, friendly, and perhaps non-reverential way somehow remains untapped. What do you say?

SG: Again, you see, it begins with reverence, but it does not end there. There are many instances. I look upon Baba Nanak as a person, and a very vulnerable person at that. Should I read "Stopover?" We all know that Nanak's companion was not really averse to the idiosyncrasies that you have to deal with when you are travelling without planning. So, Mardana—somebody asked me why is he shown hungry in all the stories? I told them that the hunger is actually for something else. It's not just for food.

Nanak in the ruins outside a village.
The word *come* is dearer to him
than *go*, so instead of *Go*, *Mardana*, he says
Come, Mardana. Make yourself at home.

The night a wordless companion
they both take in cicada song,
a music much older than the walls
gnawed off by that fiend called time.

Give the *rabab* a rest, he hears Nanak say.
Mardana nestles the instrument into
what must have once been an alcove
for toy, bangle, turban and diya alike.

A fallen roofbeam for a pillow, the dirt floor
for a bed and the still air for a blanket

was much more than the pupil spurned
by a whole village could have asked for,

He tries, but can't take his eyes
off the cold mud stove in the corner.
His lips remember the taste of a river,
his hands the clasp of the master

Who can let go of the whole world
but never of those who choose to rise.
His only wish tonight is to find
a ruse to forgive, a means to fill
his eyes with the sleep of the guru,
to see that which never sleeps,
his ears awake to the one voice
repeating, Come, *Mardana*.
Dream time's over. Arise.

(*All We Have*, 84-85)

So, I think that here I have not really shown Nanak as a very spiritual person, you see. It can be somebody else in his place who is your companion. Travelling without planning sometimes also changes your perspective. I know that from first-hand experience, because last year during winter I took my car and drove straight from Delhi to Assam. I was driving for four days, three nights. I had a companion with me and our stops were not planned. We just had an inkling that we might stop at such-and-such place. When you travel like that, you see things which you might not have seen or experienced before. And then I began to think about Nanak again, because we at least have all these facilities: you can book a hotel, you have apps and everything. Think about a person who did not perhaps even have a map and who set out on a journey not even knowing the next destination. The village, the person he would come across. That, I feel, is very inspiring for me. I need to develop the same kind of thirst which the Internet has taken away from me.

AK: It's true that one has this fascination for the unseen and an expectation of the unprecedented also. But you say in your poem "Calibrations": "It's time / to find solace in proverbs / ... / to lay all verbs to rest ..." (*All We Have*, 44) So, is this quest without action? What do you say?

SG: It is a means to reach a silence that is your own. That is why I say, "Lay all verbs to rest," because verbs can be dangerous. And maybe that is why—I don't know to what extent I have succeeded in it—I feel I have taken to poetry to express something that has been unsayable for me. It can be something as simple as the changing colour of daylight every day. I have noticed that difference from when I was six years old till now, when I am in my forties. I can see and feel that difference inside me, but when I want to convey or articulate the feeling, I am totally transported into another world because of a simple question that a child asks. Or not even a question. Just by the look in his or her eyes. There are so many things that I get blown over by, so I try to express them through poetry. But I don't know. Even now I don't have a blueprint or template for writing a poem. I just go by instinct, and sometimes it fails me. Fails me miserably. And that is why I have many failed poems in a cold storage box that I maintain, you see. I say to myself, "Well, it is not ready to be published." It is okay to write junk, but it is not okay to continue writing junk alone.

AK: There is this Indian critic V.K. Chari who has written a very good book on Walt Whitman's poetry. And he says that in the poetry of Walt Whitman you come across two registers. One is that in which you have that high-octane *upanishadic* flight. But he says that there is also very significantly the register of the *New York Times*. I find a lot of Nanak in your poetry. I find even a lot of Batalvi here. But where is *Punjab Kesari*?

SG: You will not see *Punjab Kesari*, but you will come across oblique references. There is one poem, a very simple one. It talks of the current times: "Arrival."

Come. I am standing
on Platform No. 2.

The morning paper's talking
to itself. I overhear it saying,
The times are dark.

In a space cloven
by arrivals and departures
an unseen bird is singing
so I don't believe the paper anymore

But only wait to see
my own sunlight
alight from the carriage
and bloom in my arms,

The departing train's heartbeat
thrumming up four free feet.

AK: So, there is a reference to a platform and a paper too. But there is also a reference to an unseen bird which you keep overhearing. And the very existence of paper or platform becomes just incidental, and not instrumental. My point is that your poetry is all about things which are half-seen, unseen. You prefer half-lights, dark nights, and more often you are in a dream land, that too at the time of the night. Is poetry a discourse of the night? Or can there be poetry of daylight, broad daylight also?

SG: Yes. I have several poems about daylight—for instance, “A Glowing Day”. By the way, it has nothing to do with Shiv Kumar Batalvi's “Ajj Din Chadheya”.

The avid eye hoards luminous days
to irradiate the universe
expanding inside the head,
and you naively think
mornings never tire of you.

If it weren't for the erratic,

breathing iridescence of dreams, all
the brightness treasured behind
daydreaming eyes that spills
into the waking hours

would remain unrequited.
Not heat nor haze nor
the frosty ways of deep winters
can muffle the stray unruly day
that has decided to glow:
the lone luminous day

hard bent upon burrowing the silt
over which the river
drunk with your dreams flows.

(A Clock in the Far Past, 47)

AK: So, as I said, you are talking about a patch of sunlight. As I said, somehow there is this plaintive lyricism in your poetry. It is shy of a full-throttle celebration of life. There is some kind of withdrawal from that kind of full plunge into life.

SG: There is no withdrawal. I am still approaching it, maybe.

AK: You were referring to silence. I got a little alarmed because poetry is all about exfoliation of silence rather than a lapse into silence. Is all poetry kind of a build-up to silence?

SG: Maybe. For me at least it is a way of approaching my inner silence. Someday I will definitely go silent. I am sure of that. It can be a build-up to a silence which can lead to something else. Who knows.

AK: Is there something after silence?

SG: Yes, there is.

AK: Because when you say that silence is what enamours you and that is maybe your last poem. How do you see in this kind of an

outreach for the future of the narrative? Because in some of the poems I could see that you use mathematics and then you talk about a building where the ground floor comes to the first floor and the first floor goes to the top. There is a struggle to create a narrative. I am just curious to know whether there can be an architecture of silence?

SG: I think there can be, yes. And everybody's architecture will be different.

AK: I mean through your poems. You have the poem "Well Grounded." How can somebody be well grounded and yet be silent? I would like for you to explain to me the architecture of that poem because it reminds me a lot of Kabir.

SG: No, I don't think so. I have never read him consciously. I have never read a book by him separately. If you live in a high-rise, the architecture that I have in mind is that when you step out you should not step out into the corridor. No matter which floor you live on, you should step out into the garden. So how does that happen? It's what you call a wild dream. It's like science fiction.

AK: Is this a movement forward or backward?

SG: Whatever it is. I don't really limit myself there. When an idea grips me, I like to chase it to its culmination. So, this poem is a result of that. Let me read it:

He wants architectural inventors to go beyond optics
to make his lush illusion seem more real and everlasting:

Irrespective of which floor one lives on in a building,
one should get the opportunity to step out—fully

and truly out—into, say, an arbour, and not into a corridor.
The stairs and the balconies must vanish, so too all of the
other

apartments on the floor. For this, neo-architects will have to
play with the principle of pulleys, converting the whole
building

into a gigantic elevator which operates by thought alone
so someone living on even the top floor would automatically

step out into the ground-level outdoors on just opening
the apartment's main door. By the time the thought
consumes

itself, the building, within milliseconds, will have thrust
itself

below ground into a deep well, quickly aligning the floor

under the near-future wanderer's feet with the ground,
the windowpanes of the other, temporarily buried dwellings

telecasting, to those inside them, the actual skyline in real
time.

As for making the next-door units disappear, invisibility
cloaks

alone won't do, as the roamer wants them to become
imperceptible

to one another for ever, so that all those residing in the
building

will not bother about the simultaneity of each other's desire
to open the door and walk out into a world

that still places faith in the woods.

Here I imagine an entire building as a lift "which operates by
thought alone". For instance, if you live on the ninth floor and want
to step out of your flat, your wish alone will start operating the
mechanism that pulls the building into a "deep well" till the ninth
floor aligns with the ground level before you open the door and step
out. Now, when that happens, all the floors below yours will sink into
darkness, and all residents below your floor will only see darkness
outside their windows. However, during that time, a screen on the
interior wall of the well will telecast the outdoors so that those gone
down don't even realise that the building has sunk. But what if

several persons on different floors simultaneously get the thought of stepping out? The poem plays with this idea of simultaneity.

AK: As I said that this is a surprising kind of coexistence that you clamour for the silence and at the same time you lay out its blueprint. And there is a journey step by step. But there is this poem called “Frugal Narrative” also. That’s what I am saying: you want to speak but yet you are very reticent. Why is this reticence? Is this reticence poetry? Why should a poet necessarily be a reticent one?

SG: I am not fully in favour of reticence, but maybe frugality, yeah, that is the keyword for me—to be as concise as possible because saying too much can spoil things and it can definitely spoil a poem. I have seen many poems being ruined by saying too much or not stopping where one should have. A poem which should have ended at the fourth line goes up to forty lines, and that kills the poem. It is overdone. So, yeah, I have tried to reach that kind of thrift. And I see my own mistakes as I began developing as a poet. I see where I have erred, and made mistakes. I try to learn from them and at least not repeat them.

AK: It’s true that a poem has to have its own organic kind of a closure, but then I have seen that in your earlier poems the images stretch, they tend to be become relentlessly multi-scopic. In your poem “A Drunkard’s Rituals”, the images stretch. The very opening stanza is breathless:

On falling down
he would kiss loose dirt,
taste its texture,
gulp its grammar so that
by the time his legs could
give him back his dignity,
he would hush-hush
chronicles of lost civilizations
swirl in the solitude

of his mouth.

(*Lullaby of the Ever-Returning*, 45)

Don't you think that this series of verbs—fall, kiss, taste, gulp, give, swirl—tests the attention of prospective reader of your poetry?

SG: Yes, it is relentless in *Lullaby*, but you will see that this fascination for images is declining towards the third book. *A Clock in the Far Past* is quite restrained in that sense.

AK: In your latest book *All We Have* the imagery becomes very abstract and the length of the poems also goes down. For instance, the title itself suggests lack of trust in the capability of words to carry the burden of emotion. Words are the only source to articulate the unsayable. But if you look at the titles of some of the poems—such as “Almost”, “Light”, “Exist”, “Dilemma”, and “Arrival”—they are minimalistic, and bare. All these are philosophical titles. How do you look at it? Is it an evolution of the poet or devolution of the poet?

SG: Maybe. I don't look at them as philosophical. For me they are very utilitarian. The book grew organically, so did the titles of the poems.

AK: A poem like “Handkerchief” suddenly surprises in this semi-spiritual, quasi-philosophical drift of your poetic idiom. The little handkerchief with “every inch of it” “embroidered with lover's name” (*All We Have*, 22) breaks the dry spell. The poem provides flashes of your abiding interest in the emotion of love. In another poem, “Blink”, you concretize an abstract idea of infinity with rare intimacy: “the symbol of infinity is handcuffs, / each loop a permanent ornament / on my wrist that remembers the touch ...” (*All We Have*, 21).

SG: Actually, you will see that this book is divided into five parts. I divided my first book into four parts, where the final part consisted of prose poems. I don't even know whether I should call them prose poems because at the time I knew I was writing something that was

poetic and it could be called a prose poem. Now I definitely know what a prose poem is. And then even *Lullaby* was divided into sections. When I started collecting my poems, I saw that there was a thread connecting some of them. Then there is a whole section on love poems. So, they are not really planted. They have been extracted from my diary, or they are a part of my journey. There is nothing deliberate about it.

AK: You have recycled many folk tales and motifs. That brings me to another question. Either you go back to Batalvi, or to Nanak, or to folk tales. It is true that a poet has a cultural reservoir and he has to use or harness these things to his advantage. But does that not really suggest that instead of encountering reality firsthand, you approach it through the mediation of a tale already in circulation?

SG: There was someone who said that as a child you start with folktales and as you grow up, you start reading folktales again. I am not really reading them, but I have been trying to make sense of them in my mind. That is why they come up. It's not that I am trying to be regressive. It's not just a play in retelling. It has a resonance with some of the emotions that I am going through at a particular time, and that particular folktale conveys it the best.

There is a whole section on Punjab. I have three poems on Nanak, maybe a couple of folktales retold. One thing I want to say is that many poems come to me in dreams and, you see, when you are dreaming it is a different poem, and when you wake up it becomes a different poem. And sometimes you forget all about it. You just know that you dreamt of it; that's the only memory you have. So, that nostalgia for the lost is also something that makes me write or reconstruct what I might have dreamt about. That is why you sense that kind of dreaminess in some of my poems.

AK: Dreaminess and a bit of mistiness, and a bit of fuzziness.

SG: And also glimpses of light. So, it's not only about closed windows.

AK: Never closed. It used to be in *chhayavad* also that you actually mystify the sounds, the sights, and bring some kind of a deliberate fuzziness about it.

SG: Yes, again, fuzziness can be a result. But as I said, the adjective “deliberate” is not correct for me.

AK: Okay, I can understand. Somewhere in the poems, I come across references that you are fascinated by the tantric practices. I may be wrong, but at times you refer to cinema as some kind of semi-spiritual sight. Where do you bring in cinema here? You refer to *aghoris* and all those things.

SG: (*Laughing*) There is one poem, yes. I have read some bit of *tantra*. As I said, I have hobnobbed with people who are really invested into these things and these practices. So, my acquaintance with this stuff is not just limited to books, but is owed to my interactions with people who have undergone those experiences. I am still in touch with some individuals who I know are not into these practices, but follow different kinds of spiritual methods, mostly to do with meditation. Not really tantra as such. They tell me about their experiences. I don’t really set out time for myself to meditate, but I have done it occasionally.

AK: I only regret that I don’t have friends enough who could be my ready resource for writing poems. Where is the role of personal experience in writing poetry?

SG: I think any piece of writing can be interpreted in multiple ways. That’s also true for poetry. As regards my own experience, there is definitely a bit of me in all the poems. So, for me, even a poem on Nanak is autobiographical to some extent because I see myself as an observer there sometimes. They are part and parcel of my personal experience. A dream is also your experience. But the effort to say the unsayable is what has been pushing me to write.

AK: What about your poetic craft? Because except for one ghazal there is no particular form that you stick to.

SG: I do stick to form once in a while. Using off rhymes, assonance, working on the stanza—the appearance of the poem, not just visual—eye rhymes. I do that. For instance, I have this short poem:

There is a life beyond
will. If not a mountain
climb a hill. Never found
one? Undo what's certain.

You are the moment
time chose to become—
not a random arrow
shot by the bowman

you think invented time,
hill and mountain.

(All We Have, 6)

It uses slant rhymes such as “beyond/found”, “mountain/certain”, and “moment/bowman”. Besides, I also work on the rhythm a lot.

AK: This poem “Two Lives” says a lot about your poetic craft. Can you explain that poem to us?

SG: Certainly. It is a prose poem. Let me read it out first.

The surgeon tried his best, but he couldn't save the subject's life. When an illness is arcane, medicine is but subterfuge. The progression of disease was asymptomatic. The vitals showed no anomaly, but the breathing was erratic, threatening to stop any moment. Experts attributed this systemic disturbance to a neurological source. Friends felt the soul had been smothered. Others recommended the intervention of an exorcist to wipe clean the evil shadow oppressing the very being of the subject. The possibility of multiple organ failure wasn't ruled out. Even the significant other was at the end of what remained of his wit. Euthanasia was the only alternative.

The editor tried his best, but couldn't save the poem's essence. When prosody is profane, poetry is but chicanery. The progression of thought was defective. The metaphors showed no lacunae, but the rhythm was spasmodic, threatening to fall flat any moment. Reviewers attributed this overall breakdown to a neurological tic. Friends felt the soul had been subdued. Others recommended the intervention of a linguist to wipe clean the primeval clichés oppressing the very texture of the poem. The possibility of multiple phoneme failure wasn't ruled out. Even the celebrated poet was at the end of what remained of his grit. Deletion was the only alternative.

That explains how I also delete many of my poems. But then even if I delete a poem, it is not really deleted because it lingers in the mind somewhere and then comes out in some other form.

AK: Any poem in these collections which you think has staged a comeback from those junk files? Let us see how deletion is brought back to life.

SG: "Charged" is one such poem. From its previous drafts, I could rescue only one line—the first: "Someday, I'll get to it". Then came the next two lines as a single line, which I knew had to be broken to preserve the form the poem had chosen for itself. Then, slowly, I built it further, without knowing how it would end. This is how it reads:

Someday, I'll get to it—
get to my oracular bit revolving
in the ionospheric orbit.

Up there, I'll unburden your soul
of all earthly information,
buff up the silence

Of cosmic bodies twinkling
away into eternity, and
soothsay the evolution

Of a world not governed by
if-this-then-that. Save
your words till then. Climb

Out of planetary plans to be
embowered by desires
which have achieved
escape velocity.

(A Clock in the Far Past, 26)

AK: This whole idea of escape velocity is very interesting. Escape is one thing you seem to long for. You adore a wasp as an ‘escape artist’. It is interesting that you seek the possibility of spiritual emancipation even in the wayward movements of a wasp that enters your bathroom through the exhaust fan. Keats at least needed a nightingale, or Yeats the bird linnet for an escape into fantasy.

SG: No, no. Epiphanies can come to you in any form. So even at that time the wasp will not know what it is doing to your mind, but as you say, you are the world, the world is inside you. So a wasp can be a medium to transform you to some extent—at least to bring you that epiphany and to help you make sense of things. That is the idea behind taking it as an escape artist. It escapes, it manages to move out. And that gives you hope, and also tells you that you are not just governed by circumstances.

AK: You dedicate your poems to poets and gurus from Punjab. Normally we have seen that in English, poets have their foreign gods too. Can you expand upon your pantheon of artist gods?

SG: There are two poets I love the most. One is W.S. Merwin and the other is John Haines. Both American poets. The kind of silence I have been talking about is something I have seen in Merwin’s work also. He uses simple language, but his poems are very complex if you try to interpret them, and they transform you when you have read them. He has never disappointed me. He is one poet who really does think with very simple, quotidian words and does magic with them. Then, I admire John Haines because he lived in the Alaskan landscape for

twenty-five years, building his house with his own hands. He trapped animals because he could not buy any food. Off and on, he came to universities to teach. But if you look at his poetry, it is hundred percent authentic. It comes from direct experience. That is something very difficult to achieve, and I feel that very few poets can do that throughout their career.

AK: You have referred to your fondness for Mangalesh Dabral. In fact, you have dedicated your latest collection to him. Your poem “Scripture” is a kind of elegy that you have written in memory of Mangalesh. His relationship with his native mountainous landscape is very intimately portrayed in lines such as these:

The mountain looks at you
as if to disclose the cave
in which all stories are strewn
like cowries in a fakir’s lap

(All We Have, 45)

In what ways has Mangalesh Dabral informed you?

SG: Mangalesh Dabral fascinated me because of his authenticity of experience, the simplicity of his language. He was a wizard of editing. He paid a lot of attention to form. He is, I think, one of the most significant poets India has known in the last fifty years.

AK: Thank you, Garcha, for this very animating session with us. (*Addressing the audience*) Of course, there are many aspects of his poetry, and his contribution to poetry as publisher to be covered in one session. Yet, I hope within the limits of time, we could zero in on Garcha’s art of poetry specifically, and the overall mandate of poetry in general.



**“Red is visceral, red is amniotic”
Reading Sudeep Sen’s *Red***

Jhilam Chattaraj*

*If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.*

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *Brahma* (Emerson)

Introduction

If the colour of blood is red, then what is red in itself ? (Casey). Perhaps, ‘red’ is the beginning — the hot heaving earth, that “underneath a heap / Of jarring atoms lay, / And could not heave her head”, until lifted by “heavenly harmony”, the music of the spheres (Dryden 117). Perhaps, ‘red’ is the ending — the Doomsday when the “dead shall live / the living die” and music shall “untune the sky”. And, between the opening and closing, ‘red’ becomes a hydra-headed creature, leaping through landscapes — turning everything it touches into red: life, love, literature, culture, and nature.

In Sudeep Sen’s *Red* — a multi-genre book of poetry, prose, and photography — we may find ourselves in the “amniotic” belly of this creature. *Red* illustrates Sen’s creative response to the ecotones and the wider ecology in and around South Africa’s Nirox Foundation and the Cradle of Humankind. It is a cinematic, panoptic, cosmic ball, breathing literary life into the autumnal beauty of ‘ecoscaping’ — water, skies, clouds, trees, flowers, grasslands, stones, fossils, wood, vultures, toucans, starlings, lions, cheetahs, zebras, impalas, giraffes, wildebeests — each poem is an appeal to conserve harmony among all that breathes.

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Red is also rhetoric. A language of literary refraction that preserves stories of vanishing worlds. We see through Sen's colour spectrum, a rare visual experience of sustained associations between nations, ethnographies, rituals, and disruptions — both in private and political spaces. So, is *Red* a significant book? Is it valuable enough to avow like Audre Lorde, that "poetry is not a luxury?" Imaginative enough to carry us on the Keatsian "wings of Poesy", to a universe of mysteries? Magnetic enough to bring back the Yeatsian "falcon" to the "falconer"? *Red* is all of this and much more. *Red* is *motion*; *Red* is *dialogue*; *Red* is *roots*; *Red* is *geohumanities*; *Red* is the *beating heart of a bird-poet*.

Red as Motion

The Woman in White, *The Masque of Red Death*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Black Beauty*, and *The Bluest Eye* — colours have always been a vital literary device in English literature. Not only do they imprint the literary imagination with symbolical possibilities, but also add a scientific dimension to a work of art, especially in terms of motion. This is not a coincidence — readers familiar with Sudeep Sen's poetry would know that 'physics' (and science and architecture in general) have always captivated the imagination of the poet.

In an interview, Sen once said, "Science has always been an important part of my work. The way I looked at objects was very much influenced by the way I thought about light when I was thinking of physics — refraction, reflection, and so on. It has always been a very strong shadow in my writing space" (Kingsnorth 53). Colour is a transient medium. "It can move in, on, above, below, behind, within, towards, and under; but its most potential power is movement, particularly in-between. It moves between states, between dimensions, space, matter and time; between internal and external; between human perception and the world; between light and shadow; between the eye and the brain; between the imaginary, the illusory, and the so-called *real*. It specifies notions of transparency, translucency, opacity, and of proximity and distance" (Tauke 36).

In Sudeep Sen's work, the colour is 'red' and it seeps into the form and the formless. *Red* exhibits possibilities of the human

consciousness from the cosmic beginning of the earth to the post-human universe. In 'Part 1', titled 'Children of the Stars', the poem, 'Ritual', creates a moving colour scheme — from "heavy-grey clouds", to "pompom-purple". In 'Split Fossil', "a filigree of coloured lace-lines", moves towards "splitting light — / angular shafts of coloured cones / radiating centrifugally". 'Dolomite', carries "incarnadine granite", to "old continent's Black history". "Congealed crimson rock shades", split open in the poem, 'Children of the Stars'. In 'My Intimate Skies', "memory is starlight"; "It is astronomy's language, / a slow charting of celestial memory on the granite-black backdrop —." In the poem, 'Waterfall', "Greenish-blue pool water" cools the poet — surrounds him with — "a calm meditation —." In 'Sun(w)hole', "Red packed-earth, mud, stones and bones —" meld into the African sunset: "By now, the setting sun's deep earth-red African-orange / accentuates the wall cerise, ruddier. / Red congeals, holding everything together". These are not myriad colours of an objective scape, but portraits of the poet himself; an old-fashioned soul rising in the modern world through the ordinary miracles of colour.

"Colour, in early modern rhetorical terms, meant figurative language. The colours of rhetoric communicate something more than propositional content. They show that language can be used non-literally, and can speak outside the bounds of truth and falsity. In Puttenham's account, poetry's colourful rhetoric "inueigleth the iudgement" in a way that ordinary speech does not (8). Actions, no less than words, are called coloured when they trouble judgement. Calvin tells us that the custom of confession ceased because "a certain woman faining that she came to confession, was found so to have coloured under that pretence the unhonest companie that she used with a certain Deacon" (fol. 140v). Colour indexes a gap between what seems and what is. Colour's absence is then noted to close this gap. The Princess, in Tyler's translation of Calahorra's *The Mirrour of Princely Deeds*, is "not able to colour her affection". Internal states are made external affairs through the language of colour. Using colour in these ways emphasizes that judgment is predicated on sense experience, but we also see that truth sometimes exceeds sense experience or is perverted by it" (Casey 18).

Colour is an unavoidable element in Sudeep Sen's artistic world; it is rooted in Sen's interest in photography and light. In an Interview with Shivnetri Kushwaha, *Garhwal Post*, Sen speaks about the influence of colours:

SK: We would love to know about your journey as a photographer and a graphic artist.

SS: I have actually been trained in documentary filmmaking. One of my postgraduate degrees is a Master of Science in Journalism from Columbia University in New York. I have been taking photographs from a young age. And much later when I made documentary films, I worked both as the cameraman and the director. Photography and poetry writing have been close allies for me, both being equally important like the two sides of the same coin, or Side A & B of a vinyl record. My photographs tend to be abstract in nature — with the emphasis on pattern, shape, shade, light, colour, absence of colour, depth of field, and so on. I like to focus on what is unnoticed by the everyday eye.

(Kushwaha 279)

Red illustrates Sen's explorations of the ordinary through the aesthetic eye of colours. It is transferrable and transmutable. *Red* is the motion of light; the sparks that are born with every human, non-human, and even galactic touch:

I trace the contours of the cosmos,
plumb its depths of dense darkness.

Witch-haired asteroid-streaks —
diamond-pointed starlight shafts —

try to pin-locate light's primal source.
I do not have a compass or telescope
or any modern instrumentation

to deconstruct galactic mysteries
(“Origin of Light” 83)

Red as a Dialogue

A dialogue is also a conversation. It is an effective communication strategy between two entities to build a healthy relationship and work together for a better world. In the present Metaverse, where we all live primarily, isolated in a virtual vortex, the poem ‘Red I’ in ‘Part 2’ is a plea to participate in flesh and blood in the reveries of the world. ‘Red’ like Rabindranath Tagore harks to all ‘*griho bashi-s*’ (home-bound people) to open their doors and windows and talk to each other. ‘Red I’ highlights the need for communication, the determination to search common thresholds between cultures and unite for a greater cause:

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.
(“Red” 31)

Sudeep Sen like David Bohm, perceives dialogue as the flow of shared meaning within groups of people or larger societies (Bohm):

My blood — alive in red heat.
Red is visceral, red is amniotic,

red is rebirth, red is *de rigueur*.
With the power of poetry,

I can transform all. With the power
of my poetry, I can ignite all.
(“Red” 37)

Poetry is Sen’s medium to spread awareness about the dangers of climate change. Environmental damages cannot be resolved until man repairs his relationship with other men; the world must come together as communities with shared interests. Nature is not an isolated structure; it is an ecosystem where man, animals, plants, and minerals work together.

Sen’s previous book, *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation*, was a humane commentary on man’s role in the pandemic; a book that reflected upon the consequences of environmental hazards but also offered hope to readers. The idea of the ‘Anthropocene’ is fraught with definitional inadequacies in the fields of anthropology, the human sciences, and environmental humanities. Critics like Donna J. Haraway, Jason W. Moore, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Alf Hornborg have expressed their concerns on climate crises through different terms like ‘Capitalocene’, ‘World Ecology’, and ‘The Dithering’. In the given context, it is apt that a poet speaks. This is the uniqueness of Sen’s *Anthropocene* — it delivers urgent messages on climate consciousness through images, metaphors, rhythms, and narratives, instead of jargon. Like all good poetry, it is the marriage of truth and beauty. As Jonathan Safran Foer puts it, “History not only makes a good story in retrospect; good stories become history” (Von n.p.).

The poem, ‘Red’ weaves several inter-cultural references to African and Indian ways of life, indicating the existence of communities that already live in harmony with nature; not everyone is out there to destroy the world. The anthropocentric worldview evolves into ‘communocene’*, a geological phase ushered by emotionally awakened men and women — they are united by a common purpose to preserve the earth. Sen’s idea here is very similar

to Vandana Shiva's idea of, 'ecocene'. Shiva writes, "The Ecocene is informed by the increasing awareness among humans of the ecological processes of the earth that shape and sustain life. We are part of the Earth community. We are earth citizens. The earth has rights, and we have to care for the earth, all her beings, and our fellow humans. The Ecocene asks us to correct and transcend the mistakes, false assumptions, and limitations that have brought us to the precipice of ecological collapse" (Shiva 97).

Sen's idea of establishing a permanent relationship of nurture through the poem, 'Red' materialised in its actual performance on the 28th of May at the Nirox Word Festival, 2023. This act of performativity, which is more than a performance, is also an echo of the idea of the 'Symbiocene'. Glenn Albrecht and Gavin Van Horn argue that the next era in human history should be named the Symbiocene (from the Greek *symbiosis*, or companionship). The scientific meaning of the word "symbiosis" implies living together for mutual benefit. They wish to use this profoundly important concept as the basis for what they hope will be the next period of Earth's history. As a core aspect of ecological thinking, symbiosis affirms the interconnectedness of life and all living things. "As many thinkers have pointed out, such interconnection and interaction put a human worldview back into the community of life and resists the Hobbesian and Spencerian views of nature as essentially hostile and a competitive war of all against all. No doubt, the conflict between organisms exists, but an overall balance of interests (eco-homeostasis) is in the total interest of all life. In addition, ecology itself is a radical concept in that it requires us all to live within the limits of nature and to live with all the other life forms that share this home we call the Earth" (Albrecht 83). Sen finds a common rhythm of coexistence in Mahatma Gandhi's presence in South Africa:

The morning sun bathes the brown
thatched cottage roofs — the finely woven
reeds preserving history in their folds —
the uneven wall-plaster mapping the
glow's gentle ink.

Serenity, simplicity, sparseness populates
the spaces here. Bapu's cursive scripts —
deep-etched on scattered concrete wall-
slabs.

The silence in this place is constant.
Mahatma Gandhi, Herman Kallenbach —
intimate inhabitants from a time of turmoil
— soldiers of peace, architects of destiny.
(“Satyagraha House” 98)

In ‘Red’, Sen imagines a world rich with the varied forms of ‘red’. He creates thirty different manifestations of the idea of red — cultural, spiritual, environmental, ethnic, regional, and political. Red is “quartzite”, “Red is a ‘toucan’s fossil beak””; “Red is also a carved skull”; Red is “red rash, micro-warts birthing itch” — Red is a “red hyena”; Red is “defiance”; Red is “molten — red is joy”; Red is ‘love’, among many other representations. The poem ‘Red’ presents a poet who persists in reaching out to the world — a poet who is also a public intellectual — ready to seek and respond. More Emersonian than Saidian— more Romila Thapar’s idea of an inquisitive intellectual — one who stirs up contrapuntal conversations (Lightman).

Red as Roots

“I did not choose poetry, poetry chose me” (Chattaraj n.p.). ‘Red II’ is a quest for roots — the origin of Sen’s poetry and its consequent growth across frontiers, cultures, and memories. The section begins with the prose poem, ‘Red Fence’. This poem is particularly about Sen’s experience of Africa. It is a meditation on the poet’s beginning in poetry. The fence, a predictable symbol of fragmentation, and isolation stand stark on the grass, as a tangible expression of the ‘poetic act’. The fence is an echo of the poet’s desire to seek freedom through poetry. The ‘Red Fence’ is the ‘red talisman’ and sits still like a Buddha:

There are no gatekeepers here, no topographical or
political boundaries obstructing travel. The fence is

a porous connector, a conductor, and a conduit for the elements to flow through. Air travels (like breathing), unhindered — through filters, organs, chambers, capillaries — each mirroring a mini-state, a country, a micro-continent. Free flow is a political act, an act of freedom (42).

The next poem, ‘Rash Red’, explores the corporeal truth of the poet. Readers move like mites through his rash-eaten skin. It is like “thorn-scarred desert-ravaged cacti”, waiting for some cool relief. The poet is a stretched piece of dermis, lying parched and coarse, waiting for some gentle tactile experience; a desire that later transmutes into the desires of the flesh. The body in this poem is not a vehicle to carry the poet’s existence in the world, it is the main actor in the drama of life. The poem is a reminder of several of Sen’s prose poems in the book, *EroText: Desire, Disease, Delusion, Dream, Downpour*. The body, both in its beauty and drudgery has always occupied Sen’s work. Sen in an Interview with Jhilam Chattaraj in the book, *Sudeep Sen: A Critical Study* (Nair 137), states:

The human body is very important to me. I remember, as a young boy, seeing the Carl Sagan documentaries on the wider cosmos, the macro and micro. One episode was on the human body where a computer-generated rocket is shown to travel inside our body, sailing through the arteries, veins, ventricles, and auricles. And having seen all the earlier episodes, which concentrated on the cosmos, I realised that the internal architecture of the human body is not dissimilar to the cosmic one outside. The cell and atomic structures, their architectural patterning is very mathematical, organised and harmonic. So, the celestial bodies and human bodies deeply mirror each other, even though the scales vary. (255)

The next prose poem, ‘Holi’, is a significant one:

Forests full of redolent, fire-bright, orange *palash* flowers flood my mind. I imagine I am walking in Bengal's Purulia groves surrounded by red, and more red. It is the colour of my memory now, lit in passion. Today is Holi, India's festival of colour. I sit far away in South Africa's Gauteng where the colours I see are saturated blues, greens and browns. The air is pure, the light sharp, and everything smells of nature at its freshest. (45)

Memory, nostalgia, and ethnic pride come alive through the tint of red. Sen echoes Rabindranath Tagore, and far in the distant land of Africa, he wishes to be touched by the gentle petals of the 'palash'. The palash flower is the queen of spring flora in India. Thickets of red-orange blossoms are ideal for bees and birds to begin their new life in a new ecosystem, regenerated each spring. "Memories establish connections between a collective and individual past, between origins, heritage, and history. Those who have left their places of birth to make homes elsewhere are familiar with the question, "Where do you come from?" and respond in innumerable well-rehearsed ways (Agnew 144). Sen writes evocatively in the poem, 'Dig', *four monostiches*:

I slow-scour for bones — as some do for gold.

I speak with the stars — to decipher cosmic codes.

I seek my ancestors — to map my genealogy.

I dig — it is a quest — for past's present & future.
(92)

"Diasporas construct racialized, sexualized, gendered, and oppositional subjectivities and shape the cosmopolitan intellectual commitment of scholars. The diasporic individual often has a double consciousness, privileged knowledge, and perspective that is consonant with postmodernity and globalization" (Agnew 144). This insistence on roots is a testimony to the fact that no matter where we go, we cannot change who we are, essentially. The 'end of history',

thus, is not a possibility— our ethnic moorings stand strong and whorl within the gyres of history that not historians but poets visualise — in poetry.

Red as Landscape

‘Part 4’ of *Red*, titled ‘Cranial Red, Bone Red’, is a graphic exhibition of an artist’s vision of geography. We may understand Sen’s work from the perspective of geohumanities. Sen’s knowledge of the African landscape, the Nirox Foundation, and the wider ‘Cradle of Humankind’ creates a visual experience of geography for readers across the globe. This geography is laced with the poet’s imagination. *Red* provides a critical exploration, and a celebration, of the relationship between geography and contemporary visual arts — “With the growth of research in the GeoHumanities and Spatial Humanities, there is an imperative to extend and deepen considerations of the form and import of geography-art relations. Such reflections are increasingly important as geography-art intersections come to encompass not only relationships built through interpretation but also those built through shared practices, wherein geographers work as and with artists, curators and other creative practitioners” (Hawkins n.p.).

Sudeep Sen approaches *Red* in the same spirit. *Red* emerges as a representation of ‘creative geography’. The poem, ‘Before the Beginning’, presents stones of the Kalahari Desert as messengers of Africa’s colonial past. Stones that are born with abstract forms, gain a new form in the hands of the sculptors and echo songs of the ancestors. The stones, and the sand, are ancient bards, and no matter, the modern mutations in form and structure, they will always remain sentinels of the earth — ‘Before beginning’:

I see the glazed quartzite of Kalahari — jewels of the desert

—

brought here to this vast serenity of earth, water, light.

Before you start grinding, shaping them into your own
narratives, you arrange the colony of history-soaked stones

in no particular pattern. But I see a coded striated matrix —
mapping an architecture of shapes, weights, hues.
(53)

Something very particular happens here. Sen not only paints his idea of geography as an oral narrative but also interweaves the idea of time. *Red* becomes a unit of measuring time. Anything in its 'red' form is always in its beginning; the foetus in the 'amniotic' fluid of the womb; the sun, rising 'red' over the sky; a wound when fresh, is 'red'. *Red* is also the measure of the ending. The sun sets 'red', blazing 'red' in the sky and the lifeless body burns in embers and becomes 'red'. The book *Red*, emerges as a qualitative measure of our time on earth:

Vesicle-like, the brain bleeds pink-white —
stone hues of the Namibian desert.

Weather's mood and time cast their imprint
on the craft's grafting. Even chain-saws,

grinders, buffers, polishers, cannot predict
its outcome — its shape, its sculpted intent.
("Memory: Head" 55)

This poem, 'Memory: Head', highlights a unique aspect of Sen's poetry. The poet once said, "Poetry is like a disease. It is a mental health problem" (Saxena 39). The poem is a map of his mind and it seems to correlate with African flora and fauna. His usually razor-sharp memory survives like a whisper among rocks with a sculpted intent.

Red is the Beating Heart of a Bird-Poet

'Part 6', 'Brown, Black, White', is a treat for readers wanting to learn about the inner spheres of the poet. We assume that "I" (in part) is the vehicle for the poet to add autobiographical elements in *Red*. In 'Synthetic Heart', Sen weaves a beautiful connection between an African song and an Indian word:

a spontaneous duet with poetry. Haunting hum-
chants, guttural clicks, elongated lyrical strains

string songs of humanity, love, brotherhood.
Your salt-pepper beard, plaited dreadlocks,

lend lyrics to your tongue, singing 'Subaleka' —
threading syntax in this crisp-dry Savannah air.

In my language, "Subh lekha" translates as 'pure
writing', or "Subha lekha" as 'morning words'
(73)

This link with African culture evolves into a connection with African birds. Sen seems to have reached a spiritual summit through poetry. In his early poems, Sen stood by the window looking out into the world, but now, he looks inward. Sen is recurrent in his use of bird imagery throughout this collection. Perhaps, a desire for departure from the mundane festivities of the world. For example, the poem, 'Two Birds', is a celebration of communication between two birds, in a parallel universe. He writes in the poem:

Amid relentless stormy weather,
growling dense black clouds —
an unexpected sliver of sunshine,

brief and bright. In that momentary
light, I spot a blue bird tracing
love songs. I feel weightless, in flight.
(“Flight” 84)

Human language becomes inadequate to the poet and he begins to converse with the birds in Africa. In his imagination, birds arrive and the poet lovingly deciphers their twitter:

I decipher bird language
through their tweets —
decoding their twitter.

I feel their feathers ruffle,
hear their slow whispers,
grade their plumule colours,

cup their pliant bodies.
Blue birds, red birds,
seagulls readily visit me

across hemispheres,
continents and shores —
flying spontaneously

at my imagination's call.
They fly on instinct,
buoyant with the lightness

of their own avian dialect —
a language I understand.
Circling, swooping, they

perch gently on my palms —
plumage fluffed.
Now, I am one of them.

(“Bird Language” 85)

In the poem, ‘Waiting for Light’, Sen writes about a fireplace — stagnant, unheated, waiting for warmth and light; without light, there is no action, there are no possibilities of existence; the hearth waits like the poet — for passion, for illumination, for tenderness and kindness to fill the body, mind, and soul.

In ‘Flotsam Haiku’, Sen imagines the crimson sea and yearns for a glimpse of “Nator-er Banalata Sen”, who might bring some solace to his parched eyes. Banalata has always been a haunting figure in Sen’s poetry. Sen’s admiration of the Bengali poet, Jibanananda Das, and his iconic poem ‘Banalata Sen’, find a place even in the most unexpected places; within the African savannah. Sen’s Bengali soul stokes ideas that have enriched his artistic

nucleus since his early years as a poet. In an interview with Ziaul Karim, Sen once said:

ZK: One discovers that in the pages of your various books, you move smoothly between one home and another.

SS: I think the reason why you don't see any sense of displacement in my writing is because I'm actually a very rooted person. My rootedness comes from my family and the way I was brought up. I'm first and foremost a Bengali writer who just happens to write in another Indian language that is English. So, my cultural and intellectual spaces are very much defined by the fact that I come from a thoroughly Bengali milieu. I am also fortunate to have grown up in a trilingual situation — I spoke Bengali at home, Hindi on the streets, and English at school, not by design but by circumstance. So, this wonderful tripartite situation was such that I could slip in and out of several mother tongues and languages. At the same time, it certainly made it linguistically richer, and we as South Asians are very lucky because of that. I also come from a typically liberal, educated, middle-class Bengali family who have always been an immense source of strength for me. So, that kind of jargon-ridden 'postcolonial' displacement you are talking about is very alien as a concept to me, and even more difficult for a person with my background to rationally understand. The other aspect of this is that I grew up in the capital city of Delhi, which is a very cosmopolitan place; it has a curious mix of the First and Third World atmospheres, depending on where or what you are engaged in at any given moment. So, wherever I have travelled subsequently, be it a cosmopolitan place or a rural one, I was in some manner or the other, somewhat familiar with that new place from before; at least I was never in a state of cultural shock, however remote. We, in India, have been exposed to the Western culture, along with our very own, from our early childhood, so neither of them is unfamiliar to us. So, when one is actually inhabiting these so-called Western (and Eastern spaces), they are places one feels equally at home.

In fact, I quite enjoy being in both worlds. I love the taste of *singara*, *sandesh*, *kabab*, and *phuchka*; and at the same time, I love blue cheese, smoked salmon, wine, and single malt. I do not personally see any conflict in these two worlds; rather, I feel lucky and infinitely richer in experience, since my taste buds as well as my intellectual and emotional terrain can accommodate all of that happily and simultaneously (Karim 52-53).

‘South African Woodcut’ in ‘Part 10’, carries poems on the South African landscape. The poem, ‘Durban’ in certain ways is an echo of Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*:

The city rises and falls as easily as the waves
never allowing one the same perspective.
But here, one is sure of two things:
the perennial sunshine, and
the separateness of the races that do not mix.
(73)

The poem, ‘Dargle Valley, Midlands Meander’, concludes the poet’s relationship with the soil — a Shakespearean birth from dust and return to dust, and in between, we experience, fire, water, and air. An elemental birth from ‘red’ and demise in ‘red’.

Conclusion

Red is a book of intensity. In terms of the content, it is an extension of Sen’s previous book, *Anthropocene*, and in form, it is a blend of objective and subjective stances. Critics observe that over the years, “Sen’s style has evolved into a highly objective form of poetry premised on architectural composition, clarity of thought and a spectacular range of images — his poems, especially in the definitive collection, *Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980-2015*, imprint the reader’s imagination like the bejewelled domes of Samarkand. His work has engaged poets, writers, and critics across borders and cultures. Sen’s poetry demands complete submission of the reader. An initiated reader of poetry would know that Sen’s poetry adopts techniques of artistic

‘defamiliarization’ as elaborated by Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky. Sen’s idea is to prolong the process of understanding the poem — for it is not merely words arranged in stanzas, but an artwork as detailed as the textured body of an ancient rock exposed to the winds of time. One has to look at his poems with the precision of a horologist or a goldsmith; his merit lies in carving fine details — like the wings of a butterfly; complex, subtle, a celebration of pure intricacy” (Chattaraj n.p.).

Red is a spectacular and important addition to Sudeep Sen’s body of work — a visceral, passionate experiment with colours — a wing-powered link between India and Africa. *Red* makes a significant effort to initiate dialogue between communities of the world — to wake up, break upon a hug, and sing together of a space unbroken by race, class, caste, or religion.

Red is movement, *Red* is dialogue, *Red* is landscape, and *Red* is and always will be the poet’s heart — warm and beating.

Notes:

*Communocene: ‘Communocene’ is a neologism coined by the author of the paper in the context of the creative approach of the poem ‘Red’ by Sudeep Sen. The term does not have a theoretical history or background but it is inspired by terms like ‘anthropocene’, ‘capitalocene,’ and ‘ecocene.’

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Teaching How to Write a Poem: Notes Towards a Practice Pedagogy from a Public University

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Abstract

In a country where Creative Writing as a university discipline is relatively new and scattered, how does one evolve a robust classroom pedagogy suited to the birthpangs of the discipline? How do you understand and respond to the transition that most students make from largely humanities classrooms to specifically creative writing ones, turning the unstructured ‘osmotic’ models of learning creative expression that they are used to, to a more intentional, a more ‘expository’ pedagogy which is not necessarily dependent on, as it usual is in a traditional English department, on the goodwill of a few kind teachers (who colour our first creative drafts red in rare acts of fosterage, always more serendipitous than institutionalised) or on the cultural capital of the institution and the students it admits.

I suggest that this can be attempted through a combination of at least three different methods, geared towards creating (hopefully) the figure of the ‘critical-practitioner’. I have tried to employ these methods over the last decade of teaching the writing of poetry, in both public and private university classrooms in the Delhi-NCR region. One of them is the careful adaptation of the literature-review method — a staple of critical writing pedagogy — to the creative writing classroom, where we evolve, what I call the ‘bibliography of affect’, wherein we allow ‘research’ to inflect the (often furiously tendered) evidence of experience and feelings commonplace among the new practitioners of the lyric. This allows us to let go of the

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defensiveness of the first sentence almost all creative writing teachers hear in their classroom: *but this is how I felt it*. This method also begs us to consider the ‘critical’ and the ‘creative’, not as watertight compartments, but instead as ‘modes’ or ‘dispositions’ which can be inhabited simultaneously both in the classroom culture we evolve and in the conceptualization of our syllabi.

Keywords: affect, creative expression, pedagogy

Prologue

In his poem ‘Fosterage’, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (d. 2013) pays tribute to his literary mentor Michael McLaverty (d. 1992), short-story writer and novelist, and also the headmaster of St. Thomas’s Secondary School in Belfast where Heaney joined as staff in the early sixties (*North* 127). McLaverty “fostered me”, Heaney writes, and “sent me out, with words / [i]mposing on my tongue like obols” (127). Obols, Greek coins placed in the mouths of the dead as a payment to Charon to ferry them into the underworld.

McLaverty ferried Heaney into the world of writing. He gave him sound writerly advice in neat aphorisms (“...to hell with overstating”, “Go your own way”), prepared for him a customised literary bibliography (“Remember Katherine Mansfield...”), and checked the excesses of a younger writer “newly cubbed in language” (“Don’t have the veins bulging in your biro”) (127). We all wish for a teacher like this, patient, generous and honest in their assessment of our work.

Enrolled in my B.A. in English literature in Delhi University between 2003 and 2006, I had lucked out. (Dr.) Lalita Subbu (d. 2011), who had been teaching in Hindu College for decades, took me under her wings. Over cups of coffee at the nearby DSchool Cafe, she listened to my poems and short-stories, and even an abortive undergraduate attempt at a magic-realist novella, over several hours that were informed by advice, kindness and critique. She coloured the drafts red, suggesting alternative words, punctuations and sentence structures. She shaded whole passages to be dropped. In short, my

early creative education happened outside the classroom, informally, through the fortuitousness of a good and kind teacher.

This fortuitousness was not incidental. Instead, it constituted the work of the literature classroom by marking its constitutive *outside*. There was no formal creative writing education in the country at the time. Inside the literature classroom, we were being trained as good ‘literary studies’ people, to become critics and teachers, to closely read and unpack literary texts, not explicitly to *write* them. Feedback on one’s assignments, the useful kind, one that was qualitatively rich and not just a score — not just high praise or damning dismissal — depended on the benevolence of a teacher.

However, in the classroom, any education of writing was largely *osmotic* as opposed to *expository*. You soaked it in while reading the carefully selected syllabi, or following up on the suggestions a teacher happened to drop. It depended, I realised in retrospect, foremost on the ease you had with the language you were reading and listening to, and conditioned by this ease, it was often seen to travel in the circuits between the so-called ‘good’ students and the so-called ‘good’ teachers. The social or cultural capital they might come with prior to their classroom contact was obfuscated in this charismatic encounter.

The practice of creative writing, if any, of the students, grew in more mysterious ways, on its own as it were, autonomously in the para-classrooms. In the corridor conversations. In quick staff-room discussions. On the coffee-tables with those kind teachers who gave you time. And in literary societies with a few fellow enthusiasts and mentors, whose feedback was unstructured and playful, with all its attendant highs and risks.

Creative work was the wilder sibling of the more sober analytical work happening inside the classroom. And like siblings, they often did not speak to each other. The classroom did not say anything directly to the creative work but prepared the foundation for it through often well-designed and fairly diverse literature courses which expanded the horizons of our familiarity, made us enter critical

debates on representation, questioned our assumptions and put our worldviews in a flux, all necessary ingredients for a writer.

The time recalled here was the annual mode of teaching in Delhi University. It was not marked by the rush of the semester or the panic of the trimester. The exams were only at the end of the year. Time could be expended more playfully over the months. So the 'creative' component was a bonus, its surprising but possible precipitate, its existing potentiality, rather than something that was inbuilt in the programme. We were given new ways of thinking that spilled over the genre of analytical essay which we were required to write and be assessed on, spilling over into a creative practice which was not mandated by any course. The specific writing pedagogy, if any, was *osmotic*, instinctive, unstructured, and depended on the goodwill of a few. Those who found their McLaverty's were rare.

Turning the *Osmotic* into an *Expository* Pedagogy Or, Institutionalizing Luck in the Creative Writing Classroom

What Lalita Subbu got me started off on has held me through all these years. The poems I got to write became both confidants that held one's hand in difficult personal moments and also became ways of addressing very public conversations. What they did not do was ensure the grub on the table. After my graduation, and a PhD, I returned to Delhi where I taught in different literature departments, in public and private universities, before the poetry writing was properly integrated into 'work'.

I joined the School of Culture and Creative Expressions (hereafter SCCE) at Ambedkar University Delhi (hereafter AUD), a relatively young university. The School, it was said, combined 'Practice' and 'Studies' pedagogy. The school was new, and I was new to it. With poetry writing increasingly coming to dominate what I wrote and thought about, I was keen on letting the creative work not be entirely oblivious and run parallel to what I could call a *career*. The School promised this convergence between *studying* and *practising* literary writing.

At the SCCE, with its emphasis on ‘culture’ and ‘creative expressions’, I encountered a new ecosystem for my teaching and thinking, one that I was not used to, familiar so far only with the traditional literature classroom and the English department ecosystem. Instead, here I was placed instead within the creative arts — visual, cinematic, writerly and performative. The School had four Masters programmes: two practice ones, one in Literary Art - Creative Writing (which I joined) and another in Visual Arts, and two Studies programmes, one in Performance Studies, another in Film Studies.

This was a new cluster of disciplines, with new conceits and assumptions about the students and the classroom. It opened up a set of distinct pedagogical practices, conversations, challenges and world-views that I had not been attuned to so far. As a teacher, these new contiguities proved to be watershed. A literature classroom extended into this sphere but its manners and preoccupations were rendered quite defamiliarized.

The SCCE was set up by pedagogues and practitioners who were dissatisfied by the nature of the practice pedagogy in the country, the kind that had largely existed for Visual Arts and Performative Arts till that point. As I pored over the bulky minutes of the early meetings of the university Academic Council, I learned that the School had been “visualised to impart a new vision of art pedagogy and practice” (*Minutes*, AUD Academic Council n.p.). The founders’ assessment was that most such practice programmes in the country had a heavy, lopsided emphasis on individual practice alone, and that they are primarily ‘generative’ or merely ‘technical’ or skill-based in nature, rather than ‘critical’ or ‘reflective’. “The focus,” the founders argued,

of almost all the existing visual art, literature [they meant writing], performing art, and film educational institutions is in the direction of imparting various kinds of technical knowledge and skills and/or in the nature of routine, if not uncritical learning of theory and history. The area of creative concept developing, newer presentation modes and experimentation in newer mediums, and an

intention for effective viewer/reader participation are most often or at least relatively sidelined in the current available institutions. (*Minutes* n.p.)

The SCCE wished to fill this gap. It was quasi-heroic in its ambition. The founding document had the habitual optimism of all founding documents and perhaps some of the necessary unkindness for what had gone before, but it had its finger on the pulse of creative pedagogy in the country as it existed by the first decade of this century. In filling the gaps that it meant to, strangely enough, the pedagogy of the literature classroom would not be forsaken entirely but instead be re-adapted.

The SCCE did not wish for the students to only *generate* work, or simply equip them with the technical ‘skills’ to do so, but instead, integrated to this, it also wanted them to experience, along the arc of their four semesters, carefully designed and institutionally mandated occasions where they, and their peers, would stop in their tracks and collectively reflect on their work. They did not want to leave it to *luck*, to the charm of *fortuitousness*. They wanted a technical arc for the students’ creative practice to develop in a crucible where their instinctive ways of thinking and doing, and their assumptions about the world, were constantly put into a flux.

The ideal laid in front of us was that of a *critical-practitioner*. Someone who is creating work while growing intellectually. Someone who is producing work and thinking carefully about the mediums and conditions of its production. Someone who relies on the labour of research as much as on the oracular moments of inspiration. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. For the teacher of poetry, this was going to throw very particular challenges. Over the last decade or so, I have tried to meet that challenge through at least three different methods, which have involved bridging the two kinds of classrooms I am familiar with and putting them into a conversation with each other, the literature classroom and the creative writing one. These methods are: One, the literature-review method, or, letting research and reading inflect experience and feeling through the concept of, what I call, ‘bibliography of affect’. Two, the exposition of technique method, where the technical

elements of a poem are not allowed to remain in its mysterious green room but are subject to explicit scrutiny, and three, the literary-critic method, where each student-author's text is collectively and discursively unpacked through prescribed protocols of careful feedback in the workshop setting. In this paper, I will focus on the first of these: the literature-review method (Kearns 800).

The Literature-Review Method, Or, The Bibliography of Affect

The literature review as a method is a cornerstone of critical writing in the humanities and the social sciences. What does its staple form entail? It assumes that there is an existing body of knowledge in a particular area which you have to necessarily engage with, necessarily research and navigate, to produce your own convincing and original intervention in that field or subject. This is an important and long-established model. When I tried to adapt it to the poetry writing classroom, I realised that there were many a slip between the cup and lip, that it was going to be trickier than I had foreseen. There were very peculiar impediments in its path, mostly to do with how we instinctively understand poetry. What underpinned this pedagogic adaptation was, what we can call, *the bibliography of affect*.

Poetry writing is both peculiarly and often held hostage to a received idea which remains commonsensical and unexamined in most of its contexts: that poetry comes from some mysterious place, hard to describe, a vague sort of space of interiority is evoked here but never really described. In fact, to describe it is to corrode it, is to betray the contract of lyric poetry, as it were. Such an *idée reçue* suffuses the room in the initial sessions of the poetry workshop, especially when the discipline of creative writing itself is hopelessly new, and students don't quite yet know what to expect from it. I noticed that students would not load this burden of strange, transcendental origins onto the novel, or the non-fiction essay, for instance. Those genres were imagined, by them, to require not just the blinding light of the oracles, received in sudden moments of inspiration like the poets are thought to do, but also the very mortal and necessary task of research and the discipline of craft. Of the humdrum labour of writing and revising, through many drafts. Lyric poetry, the kind of poetry that most of us read and write in the

contemporary, one which channels our personal voice and draws on our experience and feelings — as against epic poetry — drew this popular oracular assumption very close to its skin in the poetry writing classroom.

But this is how I felt it is the sentence every poetry writing teacher has heard when the student is defending a particular line or stanza, against an invitation to explore its phrasing or its underlying assumptions further by peers or instructors. *But this is how I felt it*. Or its companion sentence. *But this is how I experienced it*. It is offered as a mic-drop moment. It is a dead-end. It will brook no disconfirmation. It is a wall, which a literature classroom has not served to take down because it left creative practice outside its intentional pedagogic remit. It is a stoppage of all conversation because the evidence of feeling has been proffered. And lyric poetry is imagined to be the container par excellence of supposedly unmediated feelings, its soft accommodating repository, its final, kind embrace in words. You might as well ask someone not to run away from a bear they encounter in a forest, when the goosebumps on their arms, the racing of their hearts and the drying of their mouths is telling them to do so right away. It is the affective urgency of this sort that lies behind the defence of *But this is how I felt it*. How can you shove me into the jaws of the bear is another variation of how can you ask me to revisit and edit a line I have felt so deeply. And the primary building-block of a poem is thought to be, that which puts us in the way of those said feelings, something we call our *experience*.

In her recent book *Uneasy Translations*, the scholar and translator Rita Kothari, also a teacher, offers a different way to think about experience in the classroom. Where the classroom is not simply a space where apriori and set-in-stone experiences are brought to be only shared and offered as evidence behind some individual choice or position, or firmly-held identity, but instead, far more malleably, and perhaps more vulnerably, it is also something else. “The transactionality of giving and receiving knowledge in a classroom,” Kothari contends, “*is also an experience-produced and [an] experience-producing phenomenon*” (Kothari xiv; emphasis added). This requires some unpacking. She contends that the classroom is itself an experience, which is supposed to rub against our preexisting

experiences and bring them into a new relief. The classroom itself is felt, it impinges on you, enters your affective world, whether through the boredom of a long, interminable lecture, or the drop-dead intelligent remark of a classmate, or the off-handedness of a stuck-up peer, or the overwhelmingness of an idea under discussion which suddenly shakes your world.

Later in that same sentence, in another vital formulation, Kothari says that *the classroom is an experience-producing phenomenon*. What does she mean? Perhaps, it is that which shakes one's world. It implies that the classroom gives us new ways of thinking about, of apprehending, or of framing our existing, and future, experiences. In one sense, what Kothari is trying to say, is that we don't remain only the fixed or reified subjects of our prior experiences having now gone through the joys and vexations of a classroom, its possibilities and its frictions. For instance, for a dominant caste student, what might have been experienced as the feelings of easy triumphalism and joy at one's meritorious success earlier might now be experienced as some sobering form of guilt and a churning, as they realise the vast material yields his or her or their caste location had made possible so far in their life, which they hadn't bothered to consider before the classroom discussions made it apparent. Or, another instance, for a queer student, what might have been experienced as feelings of hesitation, anxiety and a difficult muddiness earlier might now be experienced as joyous perspicacity and empathy as they find themselves reflected in the text being collectively read in the classroom. There can be many other demonstrations of the classroom as an experience-producing phenomenon.

Another writer can help us decode this process. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, the British scholar Sara Ahmed turns away from "the 'Dumb View' of emotions" and turns us towards seeing emotions not as the simple outside of "intentionality" but existing resonantly beside it. "Emotions are intentional in the sense that they are 'about' something", Ahmed writes, "they involve a direction or orientation towards an object...[The crucial formulation here is that the] '*aboutness*' of emotions means they involve a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world" (7). Ahmed can be read as suggesting that emotions involve a stance on the world.

For instance, in her examples, British white-supremacist politicians might be propelled to the emotion of hatred or disgust towards the immigrant figure, but that hatred and disgust is not due to anything immanent in the figure of the immigrant, it is instead, because of the ‘contact’ between the white supremacist with the immigrant is mediated by the former’s racialized worldview, also dispersed in British public cultures, in which people are placed in an insalubrious hierarchy based on the colour of their skin or the place of their or their ancestors’ birth (8).

As a further example, she is suggesting that the same politician’s speech may trigger very different emotional reactions, of joy or triumph or hatred or disgust, all with their affective coordinates on the body, because the listeners inhabit the world with different stances. So, a change in our stance, in the way we understand the world, in our conscious knowledge of its hierarchies and challenges, will alter whether our skin will get joyous goosebumps or whether eyes will spontaneously roll in their sockets or our teeth will helplessly crunch against each other when we hear the same politician-speaker. The more we consciously know of the blindspots and ideals of the world, the more we explicitly delineate the ways in which we invest in the world and harbour its future visions, the ways we are oriented towards it, all of these knowings will also determine whether our eyes widen in fear or our blood vessels dilate and flush our skins with red as we encounter this or that face of this very world.

Prediscursive as it is, affect is not the final unassimilable of knowing. It exists beside it, is coassembled by it, in odd interpenetrating proximity. In her essay ‘Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins’, which is a cornerstone text for affect theory, the American scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick read the psychologist Silvan Tomkins to precisely ensure a place for the affective, that is not so easily assailable by the barbs of the anti-essentialists, but also to mark the ways that *the affective and the cognitive are coassembled, are transformed by each other*. “The distinction we have drawn between the cognitive half and the motivational half,” Sedgwick quotes Tomkins, “must be considered to be a fragile distinction between transformation and amplification...[c]ognitions coassembled with affects become hot

and urgent [let's say, I know you are wrong because I hate you]...[a]ffects coassembled with cognitions become better informed and smarter [I hate you because I know you are wrong]...[a]mplification without transformation would be blind; transformation without amplification would be weak" (518-19).

What does this discussion imply for a poetry writing classroom? It implies at least four insights. One, a much needed disarming of the oracular theory of lyric poetry, the capacity to do some plainspeaking regarding the genre without limiting oneself to easy transcendentalisms such as 'the line suddenly came to me as if in a dream' or in an opium-induced trance. Two, establishing poetry necessarily as an object of language, where the poem is now not seen as an unmediated medium of apriori feelings, but as something which co-constitutes those feelings in the writers' distinct "encounters with language" (Kothari 8), and three, as a corollary of the second, that the poem is an object of the labour of craft, whereby the techniques allow us to co-create affective worlds received in the poem from the writer and created by the poem for the reader, allowing us scrutinise how the affects that inhere in line-breaks, or sound patterns, or image-makings are also the function of particular craft elements around space, sound and sense in a poem.

Finally, the fourth insight can be framed thus: that the student-poets become more receptive to the idea of *the bibliography of affect*, because after all, even if the feelings they have felt have allegedly never been felt before, and are unique to them, craft and language which helps them bring those feelings to the page, have indeed been the subject of intense and immense manipulation by other writers, before and alongside them. That love, and grief, and joy, and disgust, and shame, have been attended to by other writers, whose resources — technical, linguistic, affective — we can all draw on in the classroom while giving shape to our own.

The effect of these four outcomes together helps me establish in class that the 'critical' and the 'creative' are not some separable, watertight compartments, instead they can be seen as symbiotic *modes* which we inhabit together. *Modes*, or *dispositions*, which can be inhabited contiguously, as the writer see-saws between them,

sitting not on any one seat but on top of the fulcrum, sometimes weighing this side, and sometimes that.

Seamus Heaney, for instance, in his essay “Feeling into Words,” wrote about how you find your own “poetic voice” in a necessary apprenticeship to other writers, through engaging with their voices and not in some isolated bubble (1-4). That in practice, you hear your own voice “coming from somebody else” (3). “How, then, do you find it?” he asks, speaking of one’s own poetic voice:

“In practice, you hear it coming from somebody else, you hear something in another writer’s sounds that flows in through your ear and enters the echo-chamber of your head and delights your whole nervous system in such a way that your reaction will be, ‘Ah, I wish I had said that, in that particular way.’ This other writer, in fact, has spoken something essential to you, something you recognize instinctively as a true sounding of aspects of yourself and your experience. And your first steps as a writer will be to imitate, consciously or unconsciously, those sounds that flowed in, that influence.” (3)

One of the writers who influenced him was the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). For Heaney, the result of reading him was a desire to write. Different writers take up this place for the many student-poets in the classroom.

For example, before asking the students to write a love poem, I attempt to displace the idea that writing about love requires only the material of one’s own feelings padded with some technical skills. What is coded into that week, is not simply the generative and workshopping task, instead, it is also the reading of a diverse set of poets who have written on this otherwise putatively inscrutable feeling, the one subject most prone to cliché. This method assumes a bibliographic foundation to affective exercises, which the oracular mode of poetry would have posited as mutually contradictory. Reading the Palestinian-American Naomi Shihab Nye’s ‘Valentine

for Ernest Mann', 'Identity Card' by S. Joseph in translation from Malayalam, 'Indian Summer' by the New Yorker Dorothy Parker, 'Want' by the queer son of immigrants Eduardo C. Corral, the Kashmiri Agha Shahid Ali's 'Lenox Hill', '[you fit into me]' by Margaret Atwood, 'Her' by the Scottish-Nigerian Jackie Kay, 'Mujhse pehli si muhabbat' by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, 'Munich, Winter 1973' by James Baldwin, 'For Willyce' by Pat Parker, 'A Time for Birdsong' by the Tamil poet Sukirtharani, 'Battle-Line' by Imtiaz Dharker and 'A Thank-You Note' by the Polish Wislawa Szymborska, reading and discussing these poems, in a mandated sequence before writing your own love poem tells us that the world of feeling does not exist in blissful isolation from the other very finite shapes that writers and thinkers have given it before and alongside us, and that we need to consider them, stay with them, research those writings and its contexts, read these texts closely *as writers*, draw on their technical manoeuvres and imagistic strategies, the way they intentionally deploy language to different ends, in the crucible of which, we begin to, are pushed to, give shape to our own precise feelings. Heaney would say, find our own "poetic voice".

Such is the field that the idea of bibliography of affect opens up. Creative Writing pedagogy of this kind does not want to leave things to luck, to *osmosis* alone. McLaverty had asked Heaney to read Joyce, Chekhov, Mansfield, Tolstoy, Lavin, Friel and Kavanagh, to read them *as a writer*, not just to be stunned by them but also to scrutinise the building blocks of their form and content in order to find his own literary voice (see Hillan: 2017). In their curricular vision, the poetry teacher attempts to plan and institutionalise such routes, both shared by and individuated for students.

Experience is not the outer boundary of what you need to know to write your poem, and the mere statement of feeling is not the guarantor of its persuasiveness. An encounter with other writers, important historical debates they are immersed in, critical perspectives of and in their works, technical skills of sound, space and sense that their works display, is imagined and deployed as a necessary rite of passage in creative self-discovery of the student-writer. The idea breathed into the air of the classroom is that research is not the outside of the creative process, reading is not an interruption

but instead a facilitator to your own writing, and critical thought and wide reading sharpens instead of impedes your capacity to express what we call ‘inner feelings’.

In doing so, we have our instincts deepened, our feelings internally differentiated and variegated, our emotions made more precise by being scaled to its object more closely, the cavities of our experiences further excavated, and our imagistic repertoires made more expansive and layered. By entering the sensorium of these poems, it activates in us a passion for difference, our capacity to parse those affective differences from within the large assail of our own experience, to “relentlessly”, in Baldwin’s memorable phrase, “[force] from this experience”, its “last drop” (qtd. in Kothari 3).

I will end with an example from one of my own poems, not because I think it is exceptional in any respect, but because in the way that it came to be, and the final shape that it took, it remains open to some plaintalking and not to the careless mumbo-jumbo of oracular talk:

Twelve variations on a Sobti line

इतना बारीक न सूतिये कि हमारी जान पर बन आए
آنے بن پر جان ہماری کہ سوتیے نہ باریک اتنا
Itna bareek na sutiye ki hamari jaan par ban aaye
Krishna Sobti

Do not thresh me so thin that I die.
Do not cut me so sharp that I break.
Do not braid me so fine that I sigh.
Do not shear me so close that I ache.
Do not press me so hard that I paper.
Do not knit me so tight that I tear.
Do not sear me so far that I vapour.
Do not draw me so red that I scare.
Do not crush me so muslin that I fly.
Do not burn me so ash that I winter.
Do not spin me so cunning that I cry.
Do not shard me so hot that I splinter.

Behind this poem, first of all, is the reading of Krishna Sobti's monumental Hindi-Urdu novel *Dil-O-Danish* (1993). Behind this poem is the experience of getting stuck on her line of remarkable vulnerability and claim, *Itna bareek na sutiye ki hamari jaan par ban aaye*, unable to wade out of the simultaneity of the feelings of vulnerability and claim in that line. Hovering over this poem is the technical sign of the syllable, that joyous little thing from the prosody classrooms, a unit of pronunciation having one vowel sound. No line exceeds ten syllables. No line has less than nine.

Before this poem is the experience of hearing Sobti's novel read out as a durational performance by Syeeda Hameed in the Anglo Arabic School in Ajmeri Gate (Delhi), in the neighbourhood where the novel was also set. It was directed by Anuradha Kapur, an SCCE colleague. Before this poem, was the jumping out of that one line in Syeda Hameed's voice, arched under the white Anglo-Arabic's gazebo, which made the hair on my hands stand up, which pushed me to pick up the novel, to read it closely. At the back of this poem is the feeling of longing for the early days of one particular intimacy, in which the reason why a particular man sauntered into my life was because he knew I loved this line in Krishna Sobti. How could he not attempt to meet someone who loved exactly what he had also loved in that line. Behind this poem is the gratitude to Krishna Sobti for bringing him near me.

Behind this poem is the humbling struggle to translate that one line from Sobti. Behind that struggle is the struggle of other translators. I think of A.K. Ramanujan acknowledging the polysemy of 'Samskara', the title of U.R. Ananthamurthy's Kannada novel. Behind this poem is the resonant co-existence of languages of Shahjahanabad. Stitched to this poem is the metrical foot of the anapest, the sequence of three syllable sounds in which the first two are unstressed and the last is stressed. Almost all lines of the poem are anapestic trimeter. "Do not *thresh* me so *thin* that I *die*. / Do not *cut* me so *sharp* that I *break*." (stress in italics). Behind this poem is the rhetorical device of anaphora which repeats a word at the beginning of neighbouring clauses, here the "Do not" that begins

every line, the repetition thus lending it emphasis, giving its plea a measure of a demand.

Behind this poem are the scores of “inspirations”, those which one breathed in — the root meaning of inspire is to breathe in — in the tradition of Bhakti poets, sedimenting slowly over the years, Bhakti poets from Akka Mahadevi to Lal Ded, from Janabai to Tukaram (the latter two in Kolatkar’s translations), who spoke with the godhead with the temerity of horizontality, did some straight-talking with the divine. Laced in this poem is the attempt at their kind of forthrightness. Behind this poem is the old delight of rhyme, the strong reassuring aural return that it offers like a gift, unlike people who do not return once they go.

If behind one poem, we can demonstrate, is all this, experience, technique, rhetoric, inspiration, prosody, reading, research, translating, rhyme, feeling and sound, then don’t we need to run through the gauntlet consisting of each of these variables in the classroom. At the end of which will be our poems.

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Palliprakiti and Girlhood in the Anthropocene: Studying Samapti from Tagore to Ray

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Abstract

The Anthropocene era, where human beings are the sole cause of ecological disruption, leads the paper to explore the significance of rural nature and girlhood ties. It examines how rural nature can shape girlhood to support ecological human-nature coexistence and a breakdown of hierarchical stratifications, given the increasing impact of urbanization in rural areas. Using Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Samapti* (1893) and Satyajit Ray's 1961 adaptation as a starting point, this paper investigates Mrinmoyee's close relationship with the natural environment and the non-human world. In this paper, the relevance of the rural nature-girlhood subject in the Anthropocene is primarily explained by Rabindranath Tagore's concept of *palliprakiti* (rural nature) and its organic relationship with women.

Keywords: samapti, rural nature, girlhood, anthropocene

Engagement with the natural world from a formative age is the only way to restore humanity to spiritual and ecological health.

Tagore

Introduction

Ever since its inception, the word Anthropocene has attracted the attention of academic scholars in the field of scientific and humanities research. The term Anthropocene was proposed by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer (2000) in a short article

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entitled “The Anthropocene” to emphasize the central role of humankind in geology and ecology in the current geological epoch” (Zottola and de Majo 454). The Anthropocene refers to the current geological age in which human beings and their activities dominate the earth’s climate and environment. Although the concept is a 21st-century phenomenon, the beginning of the Anthropocene could be marked roughly in the AD 1800 when the Industrial Revolution had almost wholly transformed England and had spread to many other countries in Europe and across the Atlantic to North America” (Steffen et al., 849). The Anthropocentric era also celebrates human exceptionalism due to its massive advancement in the industrial and technological world, positioning humans at the top of the hierarchy of living organisms in the ecosystem. The destruction of the earth's ecosystem can therefore be attributed to human beings in this new geological era. The rapid increase in urbanization is also a potential threat to destroy the rural nature of this planet. In order to maintain the balance in the ecosystem, rural nature and its abundance must be acknowledged as being critical to good health for the earth. In the early decades of the 20th century, Rabindranath Tagore apprehended this inevitable deterioration of rural nature due to the invasion of urbanization, and he addressed the issue in his lecture entitled “The Robbery of the Soil,” which he delivered at the University of Calcutta in 1922, along with Leonard Elmhurst. In Tagore’s words, “the city, in its intense egoism and pride, remains blissfully unconscious of the devastation it is continuously spreading within the village, the source and origin of its own life, health and joy” (“The Robbery of the Soil” 869). In an Anthropocene era, where humans extend their hierarchal domination over the natural world and non-human creatures, this paper discusses how rural nature aids in shaping girlhood that ultimately promises an ecological human-nature co-existence and a breakdown of the hierarchal strata. In analyzing Rabindranath Tagore’s short story “Samapti” (“The Conclusion” 1893) and its filmic adaptation of the same title by Satyajit Ray in 1961, the article explores how the female protagonist Mrinmoyee in her girlhood develops an inseparable bonding with the village’s natural surroundings and non-human world. The article uses Tagore’s concept of *palliprakiti* (rural nature)¹ and its organic ties with the rural women folk to establish an integral relationship between the two. It demonstrates that Mrinmoyee's childhood experience, in close

association with the village's natural surroundings and non-human beings, has contributed to a reconsideration of the human-nature relationship, which is much needed in today's human-dominated Anthropocene.

Palliprakiti and Girlhood

On the occasion of the 7th-anniversary celebration of the establishment of the Sriniketan (1921), Tagore's modeled village near Shantiniketan, he delivered a series of lectures addressing the future plan and ideals of the Sriniketan village. These lectures were later collected in the book titled, *Palliprakiti* (1962). These lectures equally addressed the prevalent problem of Indian peasants and provided practical solutions to them during that time. However, when "Samapti" (1893) was written, Tagore's idea of *Palliprakiti* referred to the blissful presence of nature in the rural landscape of Bengal. In the last two decades of the 19th century, Tagore frequently traveled to his family (zamindari) estates in Selaidah, Sazadpur, and Patisar in rural (east) Bengal. As a city-bred man from Calcutta, this was his initial exposure to the vastness of rural nature. In his book *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Nirad C Chaudhuri observes Tagore's stay in his family estates:

Calcutta was wholly outside the true Bengali landscape in which the blue of the sky, the green of the vegetation, and the grey of the waters mingled to create a vast expanse of tender stillness. Thus it happened that it was during his stay in his country estates, often floating in his houseboat on the rivers, that Tagore wrote some of his best work both in poetry and prose. (qtd. in Dutta and Robinson 109)

Commenting on Tagore's communion with rural nature, Satyajit Ray contemplates:

His own gains from this intimate contact with the fundamental aspects of life and nature, and the influence of this contact on his life and work - are beyond measure. Living mostly in his boat and watching life through the window, a whole new world of sights and sounds and feelings opened up before him. (qtd. in Dutta and Robinson 109)

Tagore was enamored by the bountiful presence of nature in rural Bengal. In his book *Chinnapatra* (*Scattered Letters*, 1912)² Tagore notes many inexpressive moments in the blissful company of nature during his time in the rural estates, which are reflected in his poetry and other literary works. In one of his letters to his niece Indira Devi, Tagore sketches the beautiful scenario of a sunset:

SHELIDAH, 1888

Just like that, beside this tiny river amidst the calmness of the trees, the sun goes down on its routine; and gradually, upon the horizonless grey and peaceful sand shore, the noiseless rise of uncountable twinkling stars in the evening sky— one must experience this here to perceive the wonder and magnitude of such a sight...all like an enchanting dream in the evening light.

It's hard to perceive the wonder and beauty of nature when one is in Calcutta. (32)

During his supervision of the family estates, Tagore discovered a close affinity between women and nature. While looking through the window of his house in the estate or dwelling in his boat on the river, Tagore had the occasional opportunity to observe the daily lives of the village folks closely. He reflected on how women always feel an inseparable connection to nature compared to men. Once, while resting in his boat on the river, he eloquently described an episode of the river ghat, demonstrating a connection between the girl and water. Tagore believed women and water share equal traits as nature's creations and wrote:

The younger girls never seem to get through their sporting in the water; it is a delight to hear their careless, merry laughter. The men gravely take their regulation number of dips and go away, but girls are on much more intimate terms with the water. Both are like babble and chatter and ripple and sparkle in the same simple and natural manner; both may languish and fade away under a scorching glare, yet both can take a blow without hopelessly breaking under it. The hard world, which, but for them, would be barren, cannot fathom the mystery of the soft embrace of their arms.

Woman is more at home with the water, laving in it, playing with it. (*Chinnapatra* 104-105)

The woman shares equal traits with nature because “she has had a uniformity of rhythm and beauty since her creation, unlike the men” (194). “The women are like all other nature’s beautiful creations, which are complete, organized and compatible” (194). Tagore believed this has been why “women have ever been compared with the songs, poems, creepers, flowers, and rivers” (194). For Tagore, not only do women resemble nature, but nature’s plan functions in shaping a woman as “an accomplished being who maintains an unbroken consistency in the manners, customs, speech, and adornment. Because for ages, nature has assigned her the role and has been helping her adapt to it” (193). Furthermore, “nature has molded the woman with its best craftsmanship by making her a mother” (194).

Mrinmoyee’s Girlhood in the Village’s Natural Surroundings

As the mystery of the rural nature and the quotidian lives of the village folks gradually unravel for Tagore, he comes across a village girl who intrigues him:

Shazadpur, July 1891.

There is another boat at this landing place, and on the shore in front of it a crowd of village women. Some are evidently embarking on a journey and the others seeing them off; infants, veils, and grey hairs are all mixed up in the gathering.

One girl in particular attracts my attention. She must be about eleven or twelve; but, buxom and sturdy, she might pass for fourteen or fifteen. She has a winsome face—very dark, but very pretty. Her hair is cut short like a boy’s, which well becomes her simple, frank, and alert expression... Her half-boyish, half-girlish manner is singularly attractive--a novel blend of masculine nonchalance and feminine charm. I had no idea there were such types among our village women in Bengal. (*Chinnapatra* 77)

The sight of the girl proves to be an immediate source of inspiration in molding the central character, Mrinmoyee in his short story “Samapti” (1893). Evidently, in Tagore’s story, one gathers that rural nature seems to shape the girlhood of Mrinmoyee. In Bangla, ‘Mrinmoyee’ means ‘made of mud/soil’; therefore, her name could be a metaphoric implication that she is an inseparable part of the village’s soil. Mrinmoyee is introduced in the story’s opening while sitting casually on the top of a heap of bricks by the riverbank and taking an interest in watching the predicament of newcomer Apurbo, drenched in the muddy surface of the riverbank. The narrator also informs that she visits the riverbank frequently to see the foreign boats mooring in the village river ghat, unlike the other villagers who never dare to visit there. Not only do the other villagers find her unique among the other girls her age, but the narrator does as well, stating that she befriends the village children and continues to play with them amidst the natural environment. The narrator attributes the qualities of various natural phenomena within Mrinmoyee. These qualities within her are meant to give the impression that Mrinmoyee shares a closer affinity with other natural beings. Her indomitable woman spirit represents ‘a running forest deer’ (Tagore “Samapti” 386). Her two big dark eyes show no fear, shame, or emotion— no humane qualities (386). Mrinmoyee’s eyes are like ‘a shining, clean, and sparkling lake’ (388). She stands on the riverbank like ‘a fearless fawn without the fear of hunter and observes the newcomer passengers from the foreign boats’ (386). Not only does she possess the qualities of natural phenomena, but she also champions a direct way of communication with natural objects. The resonant laughter of Mrinmoyee reverberates through the air and in the rustling leaves in the branches of the village trees. Her laughter plays and sounds like the anklets of nature, dancing in the blue sky (388). Again, her laughter could play an alarming sound as its sweetness and waves can wake the birds of the nearby banyan tree (386). Therefore, by endowing Mrinmoyee with the inherent characteristics of natural beings and making her able to communicate with nature, the narrator establishes Mrinmoyee as an inseparable component of the natural realm. On the other hand, looking from an ecological perspective, Tagore’s characterization of Mrinmoyee reiterates that “humans are biocultural creatures... who are embedded in various ecologies and networks of relations and who can integrate their acknowledgment of

their embodiment, animality, physicality, dependence, and vulnerability into their self-conception and their orientation toward and modes of being in the world” (Frost 3). Timothy Morton’s claim— “[A] human is made up of nonhuman components and is directly related to nonhumans”— substantiates Tagore’s depiction of Mrinmoyee that she as a human is not “any special or different species” (18). Instead, she embodies herself as a part of nature and its elements. Contrary to the deciding proclamation of the Anthropocene, she is not superior as a species; instead, she conforms to having the qualities of non-human beings and other natural phenomena embedded in her. Therefore, she could also become a force to protect non-human beings and sustain ecological co-existence and harmony.

In his film, *Samapti* (1961), Ray has framed Mrinmoyee’s deeper interactions with the natural world through an intricately constructed narrative. She has a penchant for climbing trees, and enjoying swinging on a chair tied to a long tree beside the river. Along with her companions, she spends time playing around an old, wheeled chariot placed on the riverbank. Besides being given the qualities of non-human creatures in Tagore’s story, Mrinmoyee befriends an animal, a chipmunk, in Ray’s film and names it Chorki (windlass). Moreover, she is concerned about Chorki’s wellbeing, and hides it inside the old chariot on the riverbank, as her mother won’t allow her to keep it in their home. Extending love and kindness to non-human pets is a recurrent theme in Ray’s early movies. In the opening scene of *Pather Panchali* (1955), Durga feeds and takes care of her pet cats. Apu and Durga are seen delighted while fetching their little pet calf back home from the field. Reasonably, although Mrinmoyee has no non-human companion in Tagore’s text, Ray’s adaptation picturizes Mrinmoyee’s connection to non-human beings in multiple scenes. It is no surprise that Ray was aware that Tagore had always advocated a kinship of love and mutual co-existence between human and non-human creatures. Tagore grieves for the merciless human behaviors towards the non-human. In a letter to his niece, featured in *Chinnapatra*, Tagore emphasizes ‘the sinful’ destruction of non-human lives in utter human callousness: “How many living creatures are sacrificed only to grace the dishes at a dinner-party...so long as we are unconscious of our cruelty, we may not be to blame. But if,

after our pity is aroused, we persist in throttling our feelings simply in order to join others in their preying upon life, we insult all that is good in us. I have decided to try a vegetarian diet” (204). Not only does Tagore vow to change his diet, but he proposes the best possible solution to this crisis. A great alternative to this sinful act is to spread love toward all living beings— “I feel that the highest commandment is that of sympathy for all sentient beings. Love is the foundation of all religion” (204). Tagore alludes to Banbhatta, the ancient Indian poet, to signify the inseparable traits of all living beings, “in some ways, birds are like us human beings. At one point, both barely have any difference. Banbhatta’s imagination caught this feeling, and he expressed the same in his writing” (206). Tagore also refers to ancient Indian scriptures where the bonding between humans and non-humans is celebrated: “to Indians, the idea of the transmigration of the soul from animal to man, and man to an animal does not seem strange, and so from our scriptures, pity for all sentient creatures has not been banished as a sentimental exaggeration” (229). By befriending a non-human creature, Mrinmoyee subverts the purported hierarchical domination of humans over other species and nature. Instead, she develops “*a relational web*— a human and non-human special web and interdependency... that undermines the positions of *human exceptionalism*” (Junker and Jennings 9; italics in the original). According to Mathew Hall, “altruistic involvement with non-humans builds up a relationship of care and responsibility... situating non-humans in ethical relationships is one of the most powerful methods for reversing the hierarchy which pervades human ecological action” (388). By displaying her kinship with the non-human creature, Mrinmoyee establishes what Junker and Jennings call “‘transcorporeality’ an ecological interdependence grounded in an embodied ‘sense of species in relation’” (17).

Mrinmoyee’s persistent communion with nature and her care towards non-human beings help her grow as an individual. Mrinmoyee lives “a fully realized human life,” which Tagore believes one can achieve if surrounded by “the participative presence of the natural world around them” (Shrivastava 331). According to Kalyan Sen Gupta, Tagore believes that when a human realizes his/her identity with nature, he/she is emancipated from his narrow individual enclosure, and the circle of his/her concerns and

sympathies extends to everything by which he/she is surrounded (61). Mrinmoyee seems to have transcended the narrow circle of human prejudices around her. Instead, she has embraced the nature surrounding her existence. As a result, she has turned into a 'spirited' and a 'free—out of bondage' girl (Tagore "Samapti" 386). While Mrinmoyee's characteristics are defined by her closeness to nature, Apurbo (renamed as Amulya in Ray's film) seems to be a person to whom the village's natural surroundings never appeal. In Tagore's story, the narrator presents Apurbo as a college-educated, proud man who 'has gained erudition and spent a very long time in Calcutta' (386). He also dissociates himself from being a simple village person because he serves as a critic for the monthly magazine *Biswadeep* (*The Light of the World*). He has rare and expensive belongings like costly essences, polished shoes, Rubini's camphor, and colored paper for writing letters. His book *Harmonium Siksha* (*The Lessons of Harmonium*) and a complete notebook will soon be published. Ray's film captures the interior of Amulya's room, which is also decorated with a bookshelf, a table clock, a gramophone, and a photo frame of Napoleon. He loves to play music on the gramophone, which produces its artificial machine sound, contrasting the natural sound of the village. The gramophone plays a song: *Bosiya Bijane keno eka mone* (why do you sit alone in a lonely place?).³ Amulya is also heard humming the song occasionally. The line from the song could be a metaphor for Amulya's lonely status, as the entire village also looks like an unfamiliar place to him. The photo of Napoleon is a metaphor for Amulya's proud nature. Ray has framed a different world for Amulya in his room, which may be a misfit in the village's natural surroundings. Accordingly, Amulya initially fails to perceive the intricacies of Mrinmoyee's actions when he observes her in the village. He feels rather annoyed around her and labels her a 'shameless' and 'insolent' girl ((Ray "Samapti"). Even the servant Hari informs Amulya that she is known to the villagers as *Pagli* (a madcap). Nirupama's character is a foil to Mrinmoyee. Nirupama is from a well-to-do family in the village. Unlike Mrinmoyee, she has received formal education as she studies "Bangla grammar, geography, arithmetic, history of India and domestic science—volume two" (Tagore "Samapti" 387). She is also trained in harmonium and singing. In Ray's film, Amulya's mother hails Nirupama as well accomplished in household chores besides being

educated. These are probably the reasons that Amulya's mother wants him to marry Nirupama. Nirupama's singular appearance occurs when Amulya visits Nirupama's house to see her at a bridal meeting preceding the marriage. During the meeting, Nirupama is stunned and silent, and she answers Amulya's questions only when she receives a nudge from the lady sitting behind her. To the narrator of Tagore's story, Nirupama is a "a timid and heart-trembling girl" who is furnished, decorated, given a ribbon on her head, and wrapped in a saree, resembling 'a well-dressed heap of shyness' (Tagore, "Samapti" 387).

There is a dichotomy between Mrinmoyee and Nirupama/Apurbo vis-à-vis learning and education. Although there is no mention of Mrinmoyee's formal education in Tagore's text, she claims to have had a little formal education in Ray's film. However, her primary source of education is rural nature, which teaches and shapes her in all aspects of life. Assem Shrivastava notes how Tagore emphasizes learning from the natural world – "It is not only the formal education of the institution but also continuous engagement with the natural world from a formative age that is equally obligatory to grow as a conscious and ecologically aware human being" (331). "To retain the young minds' constant contact with nature, Tagore located his educational experiment in the rural setting of Santiniketan and not in urban Kolkata. To him, open skies, planted fields, and swaying palms are more essential to untrammelled learning and the formation of the mind than the hectic cultural exchanges a modern metropolis affords, and a village denies." (Shrivastava 331). In his essay "An Easter University", Tagore talks about "attaining a religious ideal (spiritual harmony) for the growth of the mind by making provision for students to live in intimate touch with nature, daily to grow in an atmosphere of service offered to all creatures, tending trees, feeding birds and animals, learning to feel the immense mystery of the soil and water and air" (Tagore *Creative Unity* 201). Unlike Amulya and Nirupama, Mrinmoyee claims to have little formal education and a constant entanglement with the natural surroundings, which are her primary source of learning.

Mrinmoyee's Marriage: An Ecological Grief

According to Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis, “ecological grief is a natural response to ecological losses— loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (275). However, the processes of grieving and mourning can take many forms, differ across cultures, vary significantly among individuals, and even be experienced differently by the same individual each time a different loss is encountered (275). The event of marriage marks the beginning of an episode of ecological grief in Mrinmoyee’s life because the process of marriage demands a complete separation of Mrinmoyee’s bond with nature. Mrinmoyee’s ecological grief may not concern the loss of species or ecosystems but her individual life, which suffers sudden dissociation from the natural world. Although Amulya initially resents Mrinmoyee, he still falls in love with her as he perceives “not only the physical beauty but also the simplicity of Mrinmoyee’s face, which spears one deep down the heart” (Tagore “Samapti” 385). Amulya’s mother, who was initially against her son marrying Mrinmoyee, finally agrees to accept Mrinmoyee as her daughter-in-law. The film shows how Mrinmoyee, passes Amulya’s mother’s test when she asks her questions about domestic chores to be qualified as her daughter-in-law. On the other hand, Mrinmoyee’s mother is elated to receive a marriage proposal from a well-to-do family, so she leaves no stone unturned to prepare her daughter for the marriage, prohibiting her from stepping outside until the ceremony concludes.

Ray has filmed how Mrinmoyee had devised innovative ways of protesting to stop her marriage. She tries to breach the boundary of the house her mother had created for her. She wants to run away secretly but is caught red-handed by her mother. While Mrinmoyee keeps weeping as she is caged, it is evident how she longs for her union with nature. She even goes to the extent of cutting her hair short to prevent her marriage, for which she is beaten severely by her mother. Ray has artistically used the editing in scenes when Mrinmoyee is beaten, and next, she, is on the marriage pedestal with Amulya. The organic appeal of the scene seems to be that Mrinmoyee is beaten to a marriage. The marriage night offers Mrinmoyee the opportunity to express her reluctance to marriage and how it deprives her of the exposure she enjoys in the village’s natural surroundings. That is why, according to the narrator of Tagore’s story, all her

adventures with nature stop suddenly, and it seems 'Mrinmoyee's world has shrunk into Apurbo's mother's inner house within a night' (Tagore "Samapti" 389). In her conversation with Amulya on the marriage night, Mrinmoyee gathers the courage to inform Amulya that she has been forcibly married without her consent. She even alleges Amulya "Why do you close me inside the house? Free me. Let me go" (Ray "Samapti"). Mrinmoyee expresses her anger by denying her love for Amulya vociferously when the latter asks her "Don't you love me, Mrinmoyee?" (Ray "Samapti").

However, in order to make her rendezvous with nature, a courageous Mrinmoyee elopes in the middle of her marriage night. Without Amulya's knowledge, she secretly goes to the roof and climbs down the tree to run to the riverside. It follows Mrinmoyee's emotional midnight tryst with her pet Chorki, who has been kept hidden inside the old chariot. She then sways in the swinging chair tied to a tree beside the river and falls asleep in the chair beside the river. This beautiful scene of Mrinmoyee's adventure seems to have occurred on a moonlit night. The happiness on her face, which the moonlight makes visible, makes her forgetful of all the restrictions of marriage and the household. It shows her joyous union with nature until she is caged again by her furious mother-in-law. When a gradual rupture grows between Mrinmoyee and the village's natural surroundings, both Tagore's text and Ray's film concentrate on Mrinmoyee's inevitable journey of maturing from girlhood to womanhood. She goes through the ordeals of a lonely wife as Amulya returns to the city to continue his further studies. Tagore's story dramatizes how Mrinmoyee stops playing with the children and is seen barely outside the home. For Ray, the process of this transformation begins realistically. Mrinmoyee's mother disapproves of Mrinmoyee's stay at the house after the marriage. She criticizes Mrinmoyee for not securing a place at her husband's home. Mrinmoyee stays inside the house and weeps the entire day. Ray extends Mrinmoyee's transformation process while creating two consecutive evocative scenes in the film. The first of them is the death of Chorki. Through the demise of Chorki, Ray's film forces a metaphoric indication of Mrinmoyee's maturity from childhood to womanhood. Rakhal brings to Mrinmoyee the dead Chorki, and Mrinmoyee's calm face in a big close-up shows no concern for the

incident. Instead, she orders Rakhal to burn it by the riverside. Ray creates another scene where Mrinmoyee enthusiastically writes a letter to Amulya, which reads *Tumi Fire Eso* (Please come back here). This scene in the film shows how Mrinmoyee is eagerly expecting the return of Amulya. Due to her transition to womanhood, it seems that Mrinmoyee accepts the world of Amulya. Mrinmoyee's standing beside the gramophone is a metaphoric indication that she can find a place and live in harmony in Amulya's world. The ultimate closing of the door confirms that Mrinmoyee embraces Amulya's world. But Mrinmoyee's union with Amulya's world comes at the expense of her confessing that "she wouldn't climb trees anymore" (Ray "Samapti"). Mrinmoyee was able to disagree with Amulya's rhetorical question to her in their marriage, "Do the housewives climb trees or take swinging in a swinging chair" (Ray "Samapti")? She answered Amulya "I do. I like doing them. They are my happiness" (Ray "Samapti"). Thus, it doesn't seem viable for Mrinmoyee to terminate her connection with nature and conform to the social role of a wife and a daughter-in-law. But the question remains: how would Mrinmoyee maintain her distance from nature living so close to it?

As both Tagore and Ray keep the title of their works *Samapti*, which is translated as *The Conclusion*, they tend to design a denouement to the conjugal life of Mrinmoyee and Apurbo/Amulya. Writing in the 19th century, Tagore was perhaps concerned with the social security of a married woman to whom her husband's home really mattered. Even Ray had followed that, substantiating his case with the impression that Amulya is not a wife-beating husband like Haran, the milkman from the village. However, it is undeniable that the happy ending comes at the price of Mrinmoyee's lifelong separation from nature, a deep and compelling union. Before her final union with Amulya in the film, Mrinmoyee confesses that she will never climb a tree anymore. Thus, to enter Amulya's world, she must sacrifice her preferences and the happiness that nature bestowed on her. However, it is also true that nature has given her simplicity and spontaneity, which could make her different from all other girls; and a rupture with nature could slowly take away the qualities she possesses. These qualities of Mrinmoyee made her different from Nirupama, whom Amulya didn't agree to marry. However, forcing

Mrinmoyee to conform to her social role could remove her differences with Nirupama. Therefore, for Mrinmoyee, it's not a transition of girlhood but rather a loss of girlhood that could be in harmony with nature. The question also remains: is it relevant for Mrinmoyee to forsake nature in order to conform to the traditional role of a wife and daughter-in-law?

Conclusion

This article seeks to explore the importance of kinship between human beings and nature in the Anthropocene Age. When the world is facing an imminent threat to the health of the planet, humanistic enquiries cannot afford to overlook two of the greatest minds of 20th-century India: Tagore and Ray. Both their timeless literary and cinematic works can be regarded as treasures of the humanities that can provide insights into emergent concerns and questions. An analysis of Tagore's "Samapti" and its cinematic rendition by Ray recontextualizes the attention to the significance of rural nature and girlhood. Mrinmoyee's girlhood, which is shaped by the rural nature, promises a mutual co-existence of human beings, the natural environment, and non-human beings. Conversely, human beings are also gradually losing touch with rural nature. Clarifying Tagore's concern about human beings' 'gradual retreat' from the natural world, Aseem Shrivastava writes, "In the past, humankind lived in physical proximity to forests. Children were born there. This inspired a creaturely affection and empathy (*mamatwabodh*) with the forest, besides dependence upon it for countless material needs. Such a life recognized the need to nurture its habitat. Since the onset of modern urbanization, this symbiosis declined and grew remote: with greater ecological distance, *mamatwabodh* mutated into *nirmamata* (mercilessness)" (332). Thus, reading Tagore anew in "Samapti" can also accentuate the revival of human welfare in relation to natural habitation and its importance in the 21st century.

Endnotes

1. Aseem Shrivastava, in his article "An Ecology of Spirit: Tagore's experience with Nature," gives an etymology of the word *palliprakiti*: [T]he title is difficult to render in English.

It can mean 'the nature of villages' but, more basically, 'nature in the villages' or 'rural nature', implying that villages are closer to the natural world than cities. ('*Shahar-prakriti*' or 'urban nature' would make little sense.)

2. Chinnapatra is a collection of letters Tagore wrote to his relatives, mostly to his niece Indira
3. Devi, between 1885 and 1898.
4. The song is a composition by Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), the famous Bengali poet.

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Forest as a Space of Liminality and Liminal Experiences: A Reading of Avinuo Kire's *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*

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Abstract

This paper aims to delve into the various dimensions of the forest, specifically in terms of liminality or in-betweenness, as depicted in Avinuo Kire's folk fantasy novel *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* (2022), set in Nagaland. The concept of liminality was initially introduced by Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, where he delineates three integral stages in any rite of passage: separation, transition or liminal, and aggregation. Building upon Gennep's groundwork, Victor Turner, a later theorist, extensively delves into the intricacies of the transitional or liminal stage. The analysis will employ two distinct approaches to investigate the relationship between the forest and liminality. Firstly, it will scrutinize the topography of the forest itself as a liminal space, highlighting its inherent characteristics that contribute to the betwixt and between nature of liminality. Secondly, the paper will delve into the liminal experiences of the protagonist, Vime, subsequent to her encounter with the forest.

Keywords: Forest, Liminality, Nagaland, Rites of passage, transition.

Liminality as a Concept

The concept of liminality was introduced by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, originally penned in French in 1908 and later translated into English in 1960. Gennep categorised certain ceremonies performed across cultures, exploring how these rituals initiate a 'passage' or shift in an

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individual's life. He classified the activities involved with these ceremonies into three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation, which he also referred to as preliminal, liminal, and postliminal rites, respectively (Gennep 11). The liminal or transition phase is where an individual "wavers between two worlds" (18). In the sequence of the ceremony, structures like doors and gates serve as liminal or threshold zones, not only as a physical boundary but also as signifying the demarcation between the "foreign and domestic," "profane and sacred" (20). In the realm of anthropology, another figure, Victor Turner, develops extensively on the nuanced characteristics of the liminal phase in his thought-provoking essay titled "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," Turner precisely delves into the workings of this transitional period, describing it as a "period of margin or 'liminality'" and "interstructural." ("Betwixt and Between" 93). Turner views the transition phase as "a process, a becoming... a transformation" rather than a 'state' which, according to him, is fixed and stable (94). This phase is complex and ambiguous, as the subject's position is "structurally... invisible" (95).

In the intricate web of transition, the individual finds themselves in a state of profound indeterminacy, existing in a realm where they are "no longer classified" in relation to the preceding phase and neither classified in terms of the succeeding phase ("Betwixt and Between" 96). This liminal juncture, as substantially dealt with in Turner's other work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, unfolds a tapestry of ambiguity. Turner highlights that the attributes of liminality, embodied by liminal personae or "threshold people," are inherently elusive and ambiguous. This condition, he asserts, allows these individuals to effortlessly slip through the intricate network of classifications that typically serve to locate states and positions within cultural spaces (*The Ritual Process* 95). In the realm of liminality, these entities defy easy categorization, residing in a state of perpetual ambiguity. Neither firmly situated "here" nor definitively placed "there," they move between the positions prescribed and organized by the complex interplay of "law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" norms (*The Ritual Process* 95). This conceptualization of liminality as a state of neither-here-nor-there highlights its elusive nature, challenging the conventional boundaries

and classifications that society so often relies upon to structure and define the spaces individuals occupy within cultural and social frameworks. Analogous to Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, the phenomenon of liminal is subversive. Unbounded by societal norms, liminality as a phase, space, or experience offers freedom and a number of possibilities. Turner remarks:

These liminal areas of time and space... are open to the play of thought, feelings and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of a society's ongoing life. (*The Ritual Process* vii)

Furthermore, Turner asserts that the antistructural nature of liminality embodies the impulse of the social process, functioning as a subjunctive mood where suppositions, desires, and possibilities attain legitimacy (*The Ritual Process* vii). Turner's works extend the implication of the term beyond Genep's simple classification of stages in the rites of passage. It is being interpreted and explored in disciplines like psychology, geography, sociology, and literature, among others. In a modern and complex society, Turner identifies the manifestation of liminality in the creation of art and literature, suggesting that these liminal expressions serve as a fertile ground for the production of creative works (*On the Edge of the Bush* 124). In its broader connotations, the phenomenon of liminality extends beyond the functional aspects delineated by Genep's classification of rites of passage. Turner illuminates how artists and writers navigate the subtleties of liminality through the adept use of "tropes, metaphors, metonyms, and symbolic configurations" (124). As an integral part of the human experience, liminality transcends mere ritualistic categorizations, finding expression in the multifaceted realms of artistic creation and literary exploration.

Avinuo Kire's *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*

The following sections primarily delve into the depiction of the forest and liminality in Avinuo Kire's *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* through two approaches – firstly, an examination of the forest as a liminal space, and secondly, an investigation into the protagonist

Vime's experiences within the forest, navigating the nuanced realm of liminality. In the intricate tapestry of Kire's novel, the forest unfolds as a geographical space that lacks clear and precise boundaries. For instance, the cobbled footpath initially leads Vime into the forest, yet upon her attempt to retrace her steps towards home, she is bewildered to find that "there was no footpath where she knew it ought to be" (Kire 5). This subtle yet profound shift in the forest's spatial dynamics emphasizes its liminal nature, where paths and landmarks fluidly alter, challenging the very foundations of spatial orientation. Adding another layer of complexity to the forest's liminality is the presence of a tree named Kijobode, a guardian of the forest acknowledged by the spirit Tei as the "gateway between the human and spirit world" (Kire 8). Significantly, this gateway remains concealed from the awareness of people, only occasionally unveiling itself to permit human passage. The forest, through the enigmatic presence of Kijobode, emerges not merely as a physical landscape but as a threshold between realms, where the boundaries between the material and the spiritual become permeable, embodying the essence of liminality.

Furthermore, Kire's narrative craftsmanship amplifies the forest's dynamic nature by showcasing its ability to change its landscape at will. Within its expansive domain, the forest incorporates diverse topographies, seamlessly transitioning from fields to lakes, gardens, and beyond. This fluidity and adaptability in the forest's features mirror the flexibility inherent in liminal spaces, where transformations and transitions occur with an almost mystical quality, challenging conventional expectations and offering a canvas for multifaceted experiences. Moreover, our conventional understanding of time as a linear progression is also challenged when discussing liminal spaces. Within the forest, the progression of the day can abruptly shift from afternoon to dusk and back to the afternoon. The narrative reveals a striking occurrence when, after what seemed like an extended stay in the forest, they suddenly awaken in a hospital, discovering that five days had elapsed. The disconcerting revelation intensifies as Vime's father explains that they were discovered unconscious next to the footpath merely a few hours after their absence. This incongruity between perceived and actual time introduces an unsettling aspect to the liminal space, where

the conventional boundaries of time appear to fragment. Vime and Khrielie grapple with the dissonance between their subjective experience within the forest and the objective measure of time in the external world (Kire 165). Moreover, Victor Turner's interpretation of liminality as "the domain of the 'interesting,' or of 'uncommon sense'" (*On the Edge of the Bush* 160) remains valid in the context of the forest in the novel, as it serves as a gateway to a world often overlooked by humans – a realm lying beyond the boundaries of human imagination. The inhabitants of the forest are characterized by fluid or multiple identities. For instance, the tree Kijubode is portrayed as a wise and old man capable of speech. Some other inhabitants are the *Nephilims*, offsprings of men and spirits; *Miawenuos*, described as "diminutive and shy female spirits with long hair and inverted legs" (Kire 22); and *Tekhumiavis* or were-tigers – men capable of transforming their spirits into tigers. As Turner notes, the coexistence of "opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" ("Betwixt and Between" 237).

The character of Tei, a spirit of Vime's age, is particularly intriguing as it resonates with the archetype of the trickster – a liminal figure present in various myths. There is no single definition of a trickster; each culture has its own array of trickster figures with distinct qualities. Generally elusive, the trickster is both friend and foe to humans, exhibiting cleverness and intelligence while engaging in mischievous pranks (Pelton 1; Russo 250). In the novel, on the one hand, Tei becomes a friend to Vime by fulfilling her wish to see her mother; on the other hand, she tries to trap Vime and Khrielie in the forest. As Kijubode explains, such mischievous spirits "can lure vulnerable grieving humans" to the other realm, which is prohibited (Kire 113). Though appearing tiny, Tei possesses "superhuman strength" (23). Another element characterizing Tei as a trickster is her appearance. Initially seen in traditional dress, resembling a girl of Vime's age (5), Tei later appears different, making it challenging for Vime to determine her gender. Tei also appears naked, lacking visible genitalia, possibly suggesting a sexless nature, a characteristic shared by some tricksters. Thus, Tei's existence is also beyond the confinements of sex and gender.

The significance of these figures within the context of liminality can be understood through the concepts of *sacra* and *sacerrima*. *Sacra* refers to the secrets communicated to individuals undergoing initiation rites. These revelations occur through exhibitions, actions, or instructions and are characterised by the elements of ‘disproportion,’ ‘monstrousness,’ and ‘mystery’ (“Betwixt and Between” 103). These elements “withdrawn from their usual settings and combined with one another in a totally unique configuration...startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted” (105). The inhabitants of the forest in Kire’s novel not only serve as captivating characters within the narrative but also hold profound significance within Naga cosmology, myths, and legends. In Victor Turner’s terms, these forest inhabitants can be considered as *sacerrima* or ‘most sacred things,’ entities that, according to Turner, are often elucidated through myths recounting the world-making activities of supernatural beginnings “at the beginning of things” (“Betwixt and Between” 107). The tale of the creation of the earth and the heavens, narrated by the tree Kijubode, is deeply rooted in the Naga’s rich folk tradition, offering a glimpse into the intricate domain of their cosmological beliefs. It recounts that the spirits and humans inhabited a world where their realms often merged seamlessly (Kire 111). However, the advent of human activities, such as the exploitation of nature to construct roads, ushered in the “great exodus,” tearing apart families of both humans and spirits (111). This mythical narrative underscores the profound impact of human actions on the symbiotic relationship between the living and the non-living. The spirits and demons, in response to human interference, retreated from the forests, leaving the hills behind as “keepers of the forest” (113). This mythological tale serves a didactic purpose, aiming to impart wisdom to Vime, the protagonist, about the nature of grief and loss. Kijubode, acting as the storyteller, emphasizes the inherent duality of human experience, conveying that beauty and terror are inseparable facets of the human journey (114). The narrative also urges reflection on the destructive consequences of human actions on the delicate balance between the spiritual and the material.

Another writer from Nagaland, Easterine Kire, also talks about the importance of such myths and folktales. In an interview, she asserts, “The stories are community property, they are shared memory, they are the tribe’s means of passing down history, moral education, rituals and cultural information” (Longkumar 394). Mrs. Sebu, a character from the novel, expresses how elements of nature played an active role in people’s lives in the past (Kire 74). Man’s relationship with nature was twofold; nature and its components were both revered and feared. However, with the advent of Christianity in the tribal lands, nature lost the influence it once had on humans. The colonial modernity brought in by the West in the forms of missionary education and religion sought to ‘tame’ and ‘enlighten’ the Nagas. The Nagas were seen as superstitious, for they believed that the spirits dwelling in nature could cause them untoward harm. Christianity, on the other hand, advocated that there was only one true God; aside from that, it was the individual’s actions that determined their fate and not some element. Thus, the Nagas started embracing the new religion because it brought them out of their fear of nature (Nukshirenla and Dhanaraju 50). Eventually, the regard they had towards it also diminished, and nature became a subsidiary part of their lives.

As humanity asserted its superiority over other life forms on the planet, it led to the creation of boundaries and distinctions such as man vs nature, civilization vs savagery, and logic vs faith. However, the apparent “structural ties” (*The Ritual Process* 96) between various elements sometimes fail to function or provide answers to certain questions. In this context, the forest serves as an anti-structural domain where traditional ties or binaries no longer hold. If we look into Vime’s experience in the in-between world, it is marked by contrast and juxtaposition. For instance, the forest acts as a medium of transport between the past and the present for Vime. The image of her mother that Vime conjures up varies each time. Initially, Vime sees her mother in her maternal grandparents’ place, appearing “younger and lot slimmer” (Kire 23). The broad daylight sun changes into dusk as Vime is transported to a mesmerizing valley where she sees her mother. The time of the day – dusk – aligns with the after-life stage that her mother is in, a place “where human souls stop to take rest before their final journey to paradise” (44). In another

instance, Vime envisions her mother in the kitchen at her own house. However, she later discovers that it was not her mother but “filaments of your [Vime’s] own memory” (109) that Tei used to deceive her. Vime’s vision of her mother raises questions about one’s understanding of reality and truth and the working of memory. The realm of the spirits is sustained through the memories of human beings and is capable of contracting and expanding accordingly. It bears a resemblance to the human consciousness, which harbours, reshapes and preserves the past in myriad ways.

The trajectory of the story unfolds from Vime’s initial innocence and curiosity to a dark, terrifying phase. Numerous instances in the novel highlight the coexistence of safety and danger within the threshold. Vime’s sight of her mother inside the forest brings in a host of experiences for her. She was close to her mother and shared everything with her, but after her demise, she had started feeling a lack of understanding from others. Her elder sister, Neime, was loved by everyone, and people would advise Vime to be more like her sister. She perceived herself as “the misfit, the oddball” (36), who did not belong with other people. Consequently, the forest provided her with solace and a sense of belonging, though for a brief period of time. The narrator describes, “With each step she took, she experienced a sense of belonging, feeling that this was right where she was meant to be” (40). Similarly, for Khrielie (Vime’s father’s newly married wife), the forest served as “a place of refuge” (60) during her formative years. Born to a British soldier who left when Khrielie was still in her mother’s womb, she had a difficult childhood. Her mother, overcome with sadness and devastation, withdrew into her own world. Khrielie would play in the woods, envisioning her “mother being happy and gay” (60). Thus, the forest offers both characters moments that appear to be lacking in their real lives. The narrative, however, takes a turn when Tei offers Vime the opportunity to meet her mother, albeit at the cost of her soul. Tei wishes to bind Vime’s soul forever to her forest song. The forest song, which initially appeared melodious and “evocatively conjured blissful visions of children laughing in the woods amidst the happy gurgling of streams of water” (13), undergoes a sudden transformation. It becomes “a ubiquitous presence, like a pesky bee

buzzing around her head, refusing to leave” (49). The following excerpt reveals the facet of the forest that Vime could not see earlier:

The woman she met was right. The forest did not look as inviting in the late hours. Early dusk had begun to set and a wraithlike mist shrouded the wood like a thin muslin cloak... It suddenly dawned on Vime that there was an unnatural stillness about the atmosphere. She strained her ears for sounds of birds chirping and the familiar cries of forest creatures but she could only hear the uneasy beating of her heart. (46)

Yet, despite her reluctance, Vime tells Tei that she is willing to do whatever it takes to meet her mother. Immediately afterwards, she experiences a chilling sensation passing through her body. Thereafter, whenever she approaches the forest, the song has a different impact on her. It no longer charms her; instead, it “made her feel strange; incomplete, like her insides had grown hollow, soulless” (76). Furthermore, like a nightmare, the song begins to infiltrate her dreams and consciousness. Vime faces another challenge when Tei captures Khrielie; if she goes to rescue Khrielie, she must give up her chance to meet her mother. As an individual standing at the threshold, Vime must decide her future course of action. Showing maturity, she chooses to prioritize finding Khrielie. The primary purpose of the rites of passage is transformation. Thus, Vime’s journey to the forest is not merely an episode in her life; it carries the seed of change from a naïve girl to a mature individual who has learnt to accept and embrace grief. The tragic demise of her mother marks the initiation of Vime’s journey, leaving her feeling as if her “centre was now lost” (3), a poignant indication of the separation phase within the rites of passage framework. According to Turner, this separation phase involves the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a set of cultural conditions, essentially signifying a departure from a prior state (*The Ritual Process* 94). Vime’s encounter with otherworldly beings within the forest, particularly with the sage-like figure of Kijubode, assumes the role of an elder guiding a neophyte through the rites. Through Kijubode’s guidance, Vime is bestowed with a distinctive perspective on mortality and death, being enlightened with the profound notion

that her mother's soul has been liberated from the confines of her decaying body (Kire 109).

In the later part of the story, Vime again has glimpses of her mother; however, these visions are not rooted in her own memories but emanate from her father's recollections. Furthermore, her mother's image is replaced by that of her father, standing "completely alone within a vortex of darkness" (135). This transformation in the image serves as a catalyst for Vime's realization that she is not alone in her grief; as the narrator describes the moment, "For the first time, Vime forgot her own brokenness and felt the suffering of another in a truly visceral way" (135). Vime, initially devastated by her father's remarriage, eventually accepts Khrielie's presence in her life. Their connection is forged through shared experiences in the forest, both past and present, culminating in a bond that becomes instrumental in Vime's evolving understanding and positive outlook towards life. As the narrative unfolds, Vime's transformative journey reaches its pinnacle, summarized in her sister's observation that she "came back a different person" (172). This finally marks the incorporation phase in the rites of passage. In this phase, Vime achieves a "relatively stable state once more" (*The Ritual Process* 95). This culmination underscores the depth and richness of Vime's transformative odyssey, portraying how her experiences within the liminal space of the forest have left an indelible mark on her character and outlook on life.

To deeply understand the transitions and changes in human consciousness, one must view it through the lens of psychology as well. The shifts and dis/re-orientations an individual experiences at times are topics discussed in psychology. Carl Jung's theory regarding the psyche and the connection between the outer and inner worlds can be suitably applied to comprehending the space of the forest. Kire's utilization of the forest space holds significant symbolism. Jung extensively examines the symbolic nature of things around us in his works. Jung notes the connection primitive humans would make between "outer sensory experiences" and one's "inner, psychic occurrences" (Jung 7). He terms this level of unconscious as "the collective unconscious" (3) and its contents as "archetypes" (4) because of its universality. The forest in *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* can be placed under the "archetypes of transformation" (80), which Jung defines as "typical situations, places, ways and means"

(80), and its goal is “illumination or higher consciousness” (82). Similarly, JC Cooper, in his work *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, draws an equivalence between the forest and the “realm of the psyche” (71). He articulates the forest’s role as a threshold symbol, a symbolic representation of the soul venturing into the perils of the unknown – a realm encompassing death, the secrets of nature, and the spiritual world that mankind must penetrate to unravel meaning (71). Myths and legends from across the world are filled with episodes where characters dream or conjure up such images. These are interpreted in terms of humankind’s condition and its past, present and/or future. In literature and art, the forest is often used as a symbol to represent the depths of the human psyche or unconsciousness. It serves as a mirror to one’s true self, a guide to the subconscious mind, and a glimpse into another reality that may not be easily understood. As a metaphor for the human mind, the forest represents one’s fears and doubts, threatening to consume an individual completely. As the protagonist journeys through the forest, they are confronted with their own internal struggles and must navigate through the labyrinth of their own mind. The only way to navigate through it is to witness and experience the beauty of life, realize that not everything is lost, and move forward by accepting the past.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the forest in Kire's narrative transcends its physical existence, becoming a potent symbol interwoven with psychological depth and symbolic resonance. It symbolizes not only the complexities of the human psyche but also the transformative journey towards self-discovery and acceptance. The forest, as a liminal space, implies the potential for coexistence and harmony amid contrasting elements such as vitality and decay, life and death, man and animal, safety and danger, chaos and peace, happiness and grief, past and present, civilization and savagery, and light and darkness. The liminal or in-between state is also characterized by ‘unhomeliness,’ where one moves away from familiarity. As a result, this kind of contested space allows for multiple possibilities. Kire has also stressed how nature is a crucial force for the development and well-being of the individual as well as the society. The novel, thus, imparts

valuable lessons on the cycle of life and everything that comes with it.

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Diffracted Reality in *Waterland*: Variations of Space and Time in Matter, of Matter and by Matter

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Abstract

Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) suggests itself as an antecedent to Karen Barad's philosophical framework, particularly her pioneering notion of spacetime-mattering. Swift's narrative intricacies and thematic explorations, set in the Fenland region and its evolving history, align with Barad's ideas concerning the inseparability of space, time, and matter. This paper is a critical investigation into how *Waterland* forecasts and embraces key components of Barad's spacetime-mattering, as well as how Swift's literary narrative anticipates Barad's later theorization of the dynamic interplay of entities, temporalities, and landscapes. As I navigate the narrative complexity of *Waterland*, I engage with an imaginative literary journey that predates and parallels Barad's vital findings, examining how Swift's work serves as a fascinating platform for contemplating the interwoven existence of reality in the framework of spacetime-mattering.

Keywords: diffraction, entanglement, narrative, spacetime-matterings

Reflections on Spacetime and *Spacetime-mattering*

In classical physics, space and time were regarded as separate, absolute, and independent concepts. Space was envisioned as a three-dimensional continuum in which things exist, move, and interact, but time was viewed as a distinct and absolute characteristic driving the emergence of physical systems. This conceptual divide has its origins in the writings of philosophers and scientists like Newton and

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Descartes, who saw the cosmos as a mechanical in nature, deterministic in operation, similar to clockwork. In contrast, the formulation of Einstein's special and later general theory of relativity in the early twentieth century marked a significant shift in our understanding of space and time; Einstein propounded the idea of spacetime. Special relativity initially defined spacetime as a unified four-dimensional manifold that incorporated temporal and spatial dimensions into one. It revealed that spacetime is not an absolute backdrop, but rather, is relative and dynamic, curving and stretching in due to the presence of mass and energy. This relativistic paradigm was a deviation from previous classical dualism, implying a dependency between space and time, and simultaneously presaging the concept of spacetime mattering. The quantum shift, which occurred concurrently with relativity, drastically altered the notion of spacetime. Quantum physics questioned classical determinism and the concept of a clearly established spacetime at minuscule scales. In another sense, the anomalies of quantum physics revealed an entirely novel feature of spacetime, one that is linked to the probabilistic character of quantum processes. Quantum physics, therefore, not only challenged traditional notions of space and time, but it required new ontological investigations into the underlying fabric of reality. However, when the physicists progressed into the quantum domain, the classical unity of spacetime suffered further disruptions. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle in quantum field theory rendered spacetime intrinsically uncertain, as it positioned a fundamental indeterminacy into the very foundation of reality. Quantum gravity theories, like string theory and loop quantum gravity, have proceeded on this path, presenting spacetime as a fluctuating quantum entity with emergent features, essentially overcoming classical space-time duality. Concurrently, Karen Barad's notion of spacetime mattering shows an extensive resonance with present-day physics. Their work addresses the divide between philosophy and quantum physics, providing a new perspective that integrates human action and materiality into the spacetime continuum. Barad's proposal of an intertwined, performative spacetime goes beyond an ordinary perception of reality, prompting a radical reconfiguration of the conceptual framework around the categories of time and reality.

Narrative and History-telling in *Waterland*

Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), widely regarded as an acclaimed postmodernist writing in addition to being recently referred to as a "late twentieth-century regional novel," recounts the narrative of the marginal Fenlands employing an intricate negotiation of natural, geographical, colonial, and interpersonal accounts and histories (*The Future* 88). Tom Crick, the novel's narrator, protagonist and a school history teacher, begins sharing his own life-accounts instead of imparting history lessons to his pupils. Upon being pressed by his student, Price, regarding his teaching capabilities, and by the school's headmaster, Lewis Scott, concerning the likely future of his career and livelihood, Tom disregards the conventional method of teaching history in favour of storytelling. Tom begins to narrate past lives of his friends and families, as well as the history of the British empire and the regional Fenlands. His retrospective intimate and distinct tales, which go forward and backward, inside and outside regardless of time and location, weave together the wider narratives of the "French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, British imperialism, Thatcherite neo-conservatism, and capitalist modernity" (Pokhrel 77). His accounts are looping and recurrent as they mirror an ongoing sequence rooted in ecology and natural history, which is exemplified by the novel's narrative framework, which centres around the timeless spatio-temporal metaphor, land reclamation. The visual representation of the watery, marshy Fens' terrain demonstrates how it is perpetually altered and reconfigured, comparable to the diffractive dynamic narrative itself, while showing how shifts in the natural environment have an immediate influence on social life of the Fenlanders. These Fenlands also serve as a conduit for history's ever-shifting binaries, conundrums and indeterminacies. Swift's narrative approach to *Waterland* parallels Barad's commitment to entanglement. The dynamic design disturbs traditional chronological sequencing, demonstrating the way time as well as space do not constitute distinct concepts but are inescapably interconnected. The narrator, Tom Crick, traverses between the distant past and the present time, emphasising the performative conduct of memory and the continuing production of reality using narrative behaviour. This

narrative style echoes Barad's plea for an increasingly intra-active notion of temporality, requiring readers to negotiate the story's intertwined and diffractive strands. "The 'thickness' of *spacetime-matterings* cannot be consigned to a past that is done and gone. Time's matterings continue to proliferate spatially" (Gannon and Taylor 1167). The intertwining of historical events and human experiences in *Waterland* resembles Barad's idea of spacetime-mattering. Another important component of Barad's conceptualisation is the notion of reality, constituted as a continual phenomenon of intra-action between time, space and matter, in which entities emerge only after their interactions with one another. It becomes apparent when Swift examines the consequences of World War 2 on the Fens, demonstrating the way history and its forces alter personal perceptions of time. The characters manage their lives within the larger framework of historical occurrences, and the story implies that subjective temporality is a dynamic intra-action with historical and natural events, contradicting the idea of a straight and discrete temporal order. The novel's multifaceted narratives, encompassing artificial and natural histories, as well as environmental and social variables, in addition skilfully integrate numerous narratives with of recorded past and experiences of a regional geographical community, and also bind the intimate to the local, and the local to the national and international. The text communicates an even deeper awareness of a space and its past, wherein history is both a sequence of events and fairytales. History is depicted as a series of progressions and regressions, continuation and interruption, retreat and recurrence, rather than a march towards a totalising epistemic practice. History, or a narrative of the past, is "an absent cause" since it is only available for us in the written form (*The Political Unconscious* 82). *Waterland's* narrative, while eschewing the conceptions of a linear chronology and "unified communal consciousness," centers on the socio-historical reality of regional populations and the processes of change that affect them. *Waterland*, like the majority of Swift's oeuvre, remains reliant on historical engagement, particularly in revealing obscured histories and disenfranchised subjects and their concerns in history to light. The protagonist, Tom's narrative excavates several past events and memories as he attempts to comprehend his present reality by "only look[ing] backwards" (*Waterland* 126). He discusses a personal and

the historical overview of his hometown, as well as ancestral tales and histories, illustrating “history to be a form of storytelling” (Landow 197).

In the first case, Tom’s personal account invokes an impression of space, time, and memory as the foundation for history and storytelling. It does this by focusing on the East Anglian Fens’ spatial marginality and evolutionary histories. His tale, involving history, serves as “an inquest” “[t]o uncover the mysteries of cause and effect” and offers an avenue for reconciliation with the past and relating it to present day (*Waterland* 107). Tom portrays the Fens as an unusual but actual topographical phenomenon on the outskirts of modern England in a realistic narrative approach. The unstable Fens landscape, as well as the region’s watery reality and history, are shaped and reshaped by natural siltation and water flow processes. This is in the same vein as Barad’s views on ever-changing matter, “As the rings of trees mark the sedimented history of their intra-actions within and as part of the world, so matter carries within itself the sedimented historicalities of the practices through which it is produced as part of its ongoing becoming—it is ingrained and enriched in its becoming.” (180). Furthermore, the novel’s recourse away from conventionalized narrative structures, accompanied by myriad of timelines, is reminiscent of nineteenth-century realist traditions; its conventional storytelling emphasises material-historical reality of peripheral English towns by interweaving Fens historiography and geography history with dispersed national and universal perspectives. In the subsequent scenario, Tom’s conviction towards space demonstrates that the Fens, like every other region, have an exclusive story and history. Through his inventive creation of spaces, the narrative depicts the Fenlands as “[a] fairy-tale land,” with the ability to transmogrify an elusive land and environment into a lively location, and therefore, by association an imagined community (*Waterland* 3). Tom’s narration implies a constitution of materiality via iterative entanglement within the Fenlands’ geography through retelling(s) of a personal story and reconstructing both his individual and the collective pasts. The outlying region of the Fens is “a topos” or figural creation, as opposed to a mere factual concept (Dainotto 19). As Swift informs us, the Fens exist beyond a metaphor; they evocatively reflect “a process of history, human

endeavour, an elemental struggle, preserving the land against water and flooding” (“An Interview” 640). By emphasising the latent components of storytelling and history, especially the symbolic depiction of the Fens, the text reveals its underlying plot and its narrative logic, as well as the incorporation of the metaphor of land reclamation and differing ecological images and conventions to demonstrate how nonhuman agents are linked to Fenlanders’ identity and evolution, on one end of the spectrum, and to cultural, societal, and political phenomena, on the other. The uncertain, amphibious temperament of Fenlanders, who dwell on the periphery of English society as well as larger historical events and metanarratives, perfectly portrays their fragility and indeterminacy or in-betweenness in both the social and environmental realms. In other words, the act of storytelling becomes a performative intra-action within memory and reality. Swift’s actors intentionally build their own histories through storytelling, emphasising a performative element of personal perception and narration. This aligns with Barad’s assertion that reality is an ongoing process of entanglement, where subjectivity plays a crucial role in shaping the fabric of spacetime-mattering.

Diffraction Natureculture: Human and Nonhuman Times

Natureculture — the intricate interconnections or disputations that are present between natural and artificial history, as well as cultural and ecological phenomena—is essential to the novel’s differential materiality. Land reclamation processes which birth the Fens are compared with the anthropocentric idea of progress land reclamation; this instantiates a demonstration of how nature and social realities are inextricably linked. The landscape or more appropriately the waterscape of the Fens is a result of both nature and culture since it is built by nonhuman natural phenomena, human endeavours such as water drainage and diversion, narrative, memory, and folklore. The agential swampy landscape responds in both predictable and unforeseen ways to each of these aforementioned modes of becoming. Swift’s theory of reality is intra-active, and allows us to comprehend Fenlanders’ existence across time(s) by investigating the mutually reinforcing relationship of a peripheral English community and its surrounding ecosystem. The development of Tom’s purportedly fragmentary narrative is founded

in the materiality of the past (that is being re-written) and underpins a readily traceable logical progression that corresponds to a forward (and backward) trajectory of history, and corresponds to mutual emergence of temporality with(in) and outside space. Swift's material-discursive account "reminds us that place matters as much as time, geography as much as history, being as much as becoming, permanence as much as change" (Coupe 6). Environment and geography, as much as culture and history, influence the Fenlanders' cultural (and biological) identity and subjectivity. The Fens are neither merely presented as the novel's main setting, nor does a spatial metaphor of reclamation of land serve solely as a literary technique. Instead, the narrative depicts how human beings alongside nonhumans intra-act to shape the material and tangible reality of these marshes in complex fashions. The Fens and Fenlanders' livelihoods are shaped by a variety of natural components, including silt, eels, vegetation, water, fertile soil, sludge, and river systems. Additionally, the Fens have evolved through perpetual ecological processes and continuing human efforts involving dredging of mud, construction of embankments and sluices, and water drainage. In this regard, one might observe similarities with another one of Lawrence Buell's ideas for *Waterland*: "[t]he nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device, but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (*The Environmental Imagination* 7). The Fens present a miniature model of the reality and universe, composed of a diverse range of living and non-living entities, and the history of mankind is intertwined with the evolution of nature. They comprise a "water-logged land"—"a network of swamps and brackish lagoons," whose challenge "has always been the problem of drainage" (*Waterland* 68, 9). The Fens have developed amidst a simultaneous accretion and erosion of "[s]ilt: which shapes and undermines continents; which demolishes as it builds . . . neither progress nor decay" (8-9). Siltation, "the slow and arduous process, the interminable and ambiguous process," is allied with "the process of human siltation—of land reclamation" (10). As siltation "obstructs as it builds; unmakes as it makes," the interminable and abstruse natural phenomena and the geologic foundations of the Fenland illustrate the mutability of natural existence, and piercing distinction across the conventional perception of nature as an inert entity (11).

Even though Tom's storytelling shifts across time and space, yet his Fenland situated tale never lets go of the perspective of the Fens' peculiar atmosphere. Consider the novel's first chapter, "About the Fens," which not only includes detailed geographical and historical information, but also emphasises the trajectory of the Fens' industrial progression. This chapter illustrates that the Fens "are a low-lying region of eastern England, over 1,200 square miles in area, bounded to the west by the limestone hills of the Midlands, to the south and east by the chalk hills of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk. To the north, the Fens advance, on a twelve-mile front, to meet the North Sea at the Wash" (8). The region is notable for its fertile soil, which was formed by the accumulation of silt, marshy plants like poplars, and other flora. The Fens, which were formerly a watery marshland, have been partially restored but never absolutely reclaimed since the territories of land and water are constantly shifting, invading across each other and indeterminate. Human labours prove significant "in humanizing the natural world," and yet "this process of humanization, of rendering the natural meaningful, succeeds only partially and, indeed, confounds itself insofar as such labour becomes an object" (Decoste 389, 390). So, it may be interpreted that the dynamic materiality of the land and water within spacetime-matter is inscribed in Fenlanders' consciousness.

Histories and Memories

Barad maintains that "past matters and so does the future, but the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming" (181). And seen in a different light, *Waterland* echoes this alternative understanding of temporality by weaving flexible and conflicting ideas about both reality and past into its multifaceted narrative. Tom's examination through narrative relies on his recollections and imaginations of a marginalised place that is frequently ignored by mainstream Western narratives. While the natural world presents phenomena as they truly are, human history has certain ideological and political inclinations (Brewer and Tillyard 50-1). Tom's place-based anecdotes and histories about two families—the Cricks and the Atkinsons—and their efforts to recover

land from waters are important to a material-discursive understanding of spacetime-matter. The Cricks, as recounted by Tom, emerged from water, whereas the Atkinsons emerged from beer; as a consequence, “[w]hile the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns” (*Waterland* 17). The Cricks were “water people,” who trapped eels, but later they became “land people” (13). Their land upholding labours all the same “did not cease [them] to be water people. Perhaps they became amphibians” (13). Tom, who now resides and works in Greenwich, represents his native soil, the Fens, and its adjacent region, in tandem. While attempting to do so, he emphasises the local historiography, historic topography, and the ecological history of the Fens, this he terms “an empty wilderness” (3). As Eric Berlatsky posits, *Waterland’s* “narrative is a dialectic between reproduction and representation” (255–56). The text, while replicating material-discursive realities “has subtracted from our sense of the past as accessible and ‘present’ to us, not merely via discourses and narrative but materially as well, in the form of the referent” (256).

Tom reimagines the community around him combining storytelling with an intense curiosity in local myths and histories to illustrate the intricate interaction of social as well as ecological forces. His episodic approach offers a complementary narrative framework for decentring and critiquing a unified English discourse on the nation at large and its distinctive cultural makeup. Tom’s narrative is simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal, serving as an instrument of reconciling with the past. He envisions himself as a “historian-dredger,” whose task is to “keep scooping, scooping up from the depths this remorseless stuff that time leaves behind” (346). But history, Tom suspects, “is a thin garment, easily punctured by a knife blade called Now” (36). The narrator’s multifaceted narrative inquiry envisions a space connected by “a multitude of fibres,” and human civilization a consequence of a complex system of “primordial connections with others (both plants and animals, living and nonliving)” (McGinnis 2). To this effect, the novel demonstrates strong associations between nature and human thought rather than just adhering to conventional realism, which reinforces “reader expectations of referentiality” or fiction “about life in the world rather than the life of the mind” (Murphy 49). Tom’s retelling of the

Fens' narrative in the here and now, which may be referred as "narrative reinhabitation," reconsiders the Fenland population in a variety of ways, recognising ethical, philosophical, and political commitments to a region and a wider and more comprehensive world (Iovino 106). From one perspective, Tom's narrative reinhabitation shows history as a phenomenon that truly occurred in times past, rather than "make-believe," and criticises history's fabled nature (108). Tom refers to Fenland myths and histories as "these fantastic-but-true, believe-it-or-not-but-it-happened Tales of the Fens" (42). A second perspective prompts, Tom's narrative reinhabitation and demonstrates that history is unable to disregard dreams and fairy tales. History, according to Tom, is storytelling mixed with excavation of an unresolved question, and explanation is required "to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment" (62). This investigative approach seldom fails to yield solutions to history's unresolved puzzles. Therefore, "History: the Grand Narrative" attains the status of "the filler of vacuums" (62). It "goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It detours" (135). History traverses a circular path and replicates itself. Tom's account of history is a tale. Relating tales provides a vital means of conceptualising and recreating a local community's past, as well as exploring the community's wider, more meaningful links with the outside world. Tom emphasises the importance of narratives in our daily lives since man "is the storytelling animal" (62). The family's experience and history offer context for his personal life, past and present, much as natural history does for the evolution of humanity. Tom begins his own narrative at the age of 53, describing his family's experience. His family "lived in a fairy-tale place. In a lock-keeper's cottage, by a river, in the middle of the Fens. Far away from the wide world" (1). This sentence and the first page serve as a metonym for the entirety of the narrative, combining a space-based identity with an ancestral background of the Cricks, the enigmatic Fens, and navigable rivers. Tom constantly informs the reader that the Cricks resided in "a lock-keeper's cottage beside the Leem River, a tributary (a fictional one imagined by Swift) of the Great Ouse, and that the Fenlands are a fairy-tale place" (Pokhrel 96). Tom conjures up the tales of this region, which are etched in his memory, during the times of crucial private crises. Tom uses both first and third-person

narration, past and present tense, and anecdotes from his own life as well as those from of his family, friends, and region. Narrating events from his wife's perspective, Tom utilises "temporal and narrative distancing to narrate his and her past like a fairy tale in the present traumatic moment of his broken married life"—"Once upon a time there was a history teacher's wife who, for quite specific and historical reasons, couldn't have a child . . . and his wife was not a woman to resort to make-believe" (*Waterland* 127; Pokhrel 96). When he intermixes his personal memory with social and historical narratives, it transforms into a historical memory.

Narrativising Becoming

The dynamism of organic and artificial narrative processes undermines the distinction between abstract imaginations and tangible material realities, implying the cyclical nature of time, reality, and history, which is related to flexible nature of the concepts of selfhood and identity, as preferred by Barad. The Fenlands, formed by the constant crossing of water and silt, are represented as possessing "a slow, sly, insinuating agency," which is also attributed to the Cricks and the local population of the Fens (8). Tom instructs his pupils to say the word Ouse slowly: "Ouse, Ouse, Oooooouse," as it is "[a] sound which exudes slowness. A sound which suggests the slow, sluggish, forever oozing thing it is. A sound which invokes quiet flux . . . unmoved motion" (142). Furthermore, the Ouse flows not only to the sea, but also returns to its source. Leo Marx describes the "forever oozing" sound of the river as "the delicate interlacing of sounds that seem to unify society, landscape, and mind" (104). The symbolic representation of the Great Ouse, particularly its undisturbed flow, rhythmic impact, and circular movement, depicts the adaptability of realities that mould the Fenlanders' subjective experiences. To underscore this point, Tom corrects Heraclitus' assertion "two and a half thousand years ago... that we cannot step twice into the same river... because we are always stepping into the same river" (146). Rivers therefore represent the passage of time, unending evolution, and the connections between nature and human existence. The natural and human worlds interact and co-constitute each other "in the dance of relating" (Haraway 25).

Fictional accounts, such as *Waterland*, resist all forms of closure and consequently encourage readers to think more profoundly and imaginatively about contemporary problems by evoking empathy for marginalised others and the nonhuman. Tom's narrative emphasises space-based narratives and histories of the Cricks and Atkinsons, as well as their intimate relationships with the natural world, in order to highlight the intra-actions and entanglements between nature and culture, natural and cultural history, and humanity and nature. Their cultural identity is founded on an intense connection to the land and nature. Tom's tale, which replicates the tangible reality of the East Anglian Fens, not only integrates personal and provincial narratives, but also national and global histories. He employs storytelling to confront his history and seek a more harmonious relationship with the Fens. *Waterland*, emerges as a narrative palimpsest, and is primarily a backdrop for the disputation and arbitration of multiple meanings, paving the way towards fresh readings. As the paper explores the entangled narrative layers of *Waterland*, it becomes evident that Swift's storytelling transcends traditional narrative boundaries, echoing the later ideas of Karen Barad. Through a narrative that weaves together personal and historical timelines, intertwining human and non-human agency, and employing diffraction as a narrative technique, Swift brings to life the dynamic and entangled nature of reality. The novel becomes a site of literary exploration of *spacetimemattering*, inviting readers to reconsider their understanding of space, time, and matter in a world where these concepts are inextricably linked and co-constitutive.

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Unframing the Sacredpolis: Mapping Countervisuality in Kashinath Singh's *Kashi ka Assi*

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Abstract

In this paper, I intend to examine the popular narrative construction and visualization of the city of Varanasi as a monolithic entity with a distinctly Hindu character. Further, I will argue that Kashinath Singh's authoritative text on Varanasi, *Kashi ka Assi* subverts these hegemonic discourses by employing a countervisual unframing of the city. Singh employs a no holds barred approach in the novel as he paints a vivid picture of a specific neighbourhood of the city caught in transition – the titular Assi. In an acerbic tone that spares no one, Singh confronts and dismantles the many stereotypes associated with the city. His Varanasi is as filthy as it is sacred, the pandit here is as corrupt as the next conman, and the intellectual and the politician are cut from the same cloth. This paper will explore how Singh challenges the archetypal image of Varanasi to furnish a materialist understanding of the city that foregrounds its lived space.

Keywords: Visualization, Countervisuality, Lived Space, Visual Culture, Lefebvre

Introduction

Nicholas Mirzoeff begins his seminal treatise on visual culture, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, by stating that “modern life takes place onscreen” (1). Though terms like ‘modern life’ and ‘onscreen’ are ambiguous at best¹, Mirzoeff's emphatic declaration does foreground the deeply visual nature of our existence. In 1992,

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William J. T. Mitchell prophetically proclaimed the emergence of a “pictorial turn,” to herald the heightened dominance of ‘picture’ in contemporary life and the subsequent shift in academia from the verbal to the visual (11). It would perhaps be appropriate to mention at the outset that this emphasis on the visual does not merely refer to an increased preoccupation with the study of videos, images, or movies in the field of Visual Culture Studies. Hans Belting’s remark that “We live with images, we comprehend the world in images” in this regard offers an insight into the expansiveness of the terrain² (qtd. in Medick 249). Furthermore, it cautions the reader that the visual must not be conflated with only the perceptible object. In fact, Belting’s comment draws our attention to the “visualization of things that are not in themselves visual” (Mirzoeff, *Visual Culture* 6; 1st ed.). In this paper, I intend to examine the popular narrative visualization of the city of Varanasi as a monolithic entity that boasts of a distinctly Hindu character. Further, I will argue that Kashinath Singh’s formative text on Varanasi, *Kashi ka Assi* subverts these hegemonic discourses by employing a countervisual “unframing”³ of the city (Rogoff 17). Singh’s no holds barred approach in the novel as he paints a vivid picture of a specific neighbourhood of the city (the titular Assi) has been the subject of a lot of debate and opprobrium.⁴ In an acerbic tone that spares no one, Singh confronts the many stereotypes associated with the city and dismantles them unabashedly. His Varanasi is as filthy as it is sacred, the pandit here is as corrupt as the next conman, and the intellectual and the politician are cut from the same cloth. This paper will explore how Singh challenges the archetypal image of Varanasi as the epitome of the eternal Hindu city by rendering a materialist understanding of the city that foregrounds its lived space.

The Origin Story: Varanasi as the Hindu Sacredpolis

Known variously as Kashi, Banaras, or Varanasi, the city has dominated the Hindu imagination for centuries. Varanasi’s centrality in Hindu scriptures like the Puranas, its cosmic layout, its geographical situatedness by the Ganges, and the presence of the Vishwanath Jyotirlinga in the city—the holiest of Shiva temples—have all contributed to its privileged status in the Hindu imaginary.⁵ Its earliest known mentions can be found in Puranas, the most

extensive being *Kashi Khanda* of the *Skanda Purana*⁶ and the *Kashi Rahasya* of the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* (Eck 22-23). Far from being fact-laden descriptions, these accounts qualify as *mahatmya* or praise literature that extol and reinforce the city's sanctitude. For instance, in the *Kashi Khanda*, Shiva tells Skanda, his son, that Kashi is the most hallowed place in the three worlds. People with good karma and those with bad karma meet the same fate at death in Kashi, for the seeds of their sin do not germinate here. He reveals that even the gods want to die here since death in Kashi guarantees the attainment of *moksha*. He shares with Parvati that it is his favourite place of residence (Debroy 58). That is perhaps why the city has earned the epithet of 'Avimukta,' which means never forsaken by Shiva.⁷ He further explains that those who remain in Kashi take on the characteristics of Rudra or Shiva and thus are deserving of the honour that Shiva commands, and in death, they would become one with Shiva himself (Eck 32). Thus, in the Puranas, Varanasi emerges as the epicentre of a divine cosmos.

With the arrival of the Muslims in India, Varanasi loses some of its earlier glory as the seat of Hindu faith. While there was no overarching policy to govern the treatment of Hindu sacred sites during the Mughal rule, the religious life of the city had turned increasingly precarious at the time (Eck 83-84). Two distinct registers emerged in literature in response to these uncertainties. Nostalgia for the Kashi of golden days rekindled an interest in *mahatmyas*, which rose in significance during this period. The Sultanate period was also marked by the spread of the *bhakti* movement. Poet-saints like Kabir, Tulsi Das, and Ravidas, all of whom were born in Varanasi, gained prominence during this time. Kabir was contemptuous of religious conservatism and abhorred the politics of temple and mosque. Ravidas, too, questioned "the version of Hinduism that ties itself intimately to the caste system" (Hawley, Juergensmeyer 201). In that sense, both Kabir and Ravidas's poetry challenged the idea of a Brahmanical Varanasi. Contrary to this, Tulsi Das was firmly placed in the Hindu Vaishnava mainstream (Eck 87). One of his hymns presents Kashi as auspiciousness exemplified: "Serve with love all life through Kashi, the wishing-cow of this Dark Age, / It banishes woe, affliction, sin, disease, and it amasses all things auspicious" (qtd. in Eck 88).

“The Oxford and Mecca of Hinduism”: The British Visualization of Varanasi

The collapse of the Mughal empire eventually paved way for the advent of the British in India. For the next 200 years or so, Christian missionaries, administrators and travellers would engage with the sacredscape of the city and represent it through a multitude of narratives with the larger aim of achieving epistemic mastery over the land's supposed 'otherness'. Their main informants on the city were the Brahmans, who confirmed their assumption of the city as an ancient hotspot of Hindus, steeped in religious devotion (Dalmia 55). Rev. Matthew Atmore Sherring, a Protestant missionary in British India, wrote *The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times*, which is considered a pioneering work on the city. In the opening lines of the first chapter itself, Sherring admits that the city's history is shrouded in obscurity. Ironically, he then goes on to write that “For the sanctity of its inhabitants—of its temples and reservoirs—of its wells and streams—of the very soil that is trodden—of the very air that is breathed—and of everything in it and around it, Benares has been famed for thousands of years,” with no evidence to support his claim (Sherring 2). It becomes apparent that it is Sherring's visual encounter with the city, be it the ghats or the temples or the “ceremonies of the idolators,” that confirms many of his assumptions about the city, including his thoughts about its sacrality (vi). As such, he is both an active producer and a consumer of the dominant visuals of the city, imparting renewed authority to these images through repetition. As Mirzoeff argues, authorization of authority constantly seeks reassertion for it is always contested already (“The Right to Look” 474).

One must remember that Sherring is but one name in the long list of Britishers who continued to write on Varanasi, regurgitating previous claims about the city, asserting that it is the “Oxford and Mecca of Hinduism” and lauding its religious and ancient character (Cape 15).⁸ Vasudha Dalmia argues that it was the hyper-visibility of the people conducting daily rituals at the ghats, the formidable presence of the temples, the influx of new pilgrims every day that endowed the city with immense religious authority (57). She adds that the “multi-faceted myth of Banaras as propagated by the

Sanskritic traditions ... was thus newly standardized and reinforced by the British, who wished explicitly to derive benefit from the authority generated by it and co-opt and integrate in one way or another the bearers of this tradition” (68). Thus, the British visualization of Varanasi, through the use of colonial tropes, served to legitimize their power and resulted in a fossilized image of the city.⁹ Varanasi’s extensive documentation during the British reign only fortified its image as the bastion of Hinduism.

Shifting Gazes: The Varanasi of Post-Independence Travel-Writing

In the post-independence era, the literary representations of Varanasi, especially the genre of travel writing, largely continued to build onto the legacy of their colonial predecessors, adopting similar vocabulary and tenor. For instance, Pico Iyer’s account of Varanasi as an “undisturbed,” “fundamentally unchanged ... sacred citadel of Hinduism and a cultural hotspot” instantly reminds one of the British construction of the city as timeless. He goes on to describe the city as follows: “... there were goats with auspicious red marks on their foreheads trotting around, and embers burning, and oil lamps drifting out across the river in the fog. Along the walls beside the river were painted faces, laughing monkey gods, sacred looming phalluses” (Iyer). Instead of chronicling Varanasi as it appeared to him, Iyer’s report seems to be a projection of his own social fantasies.¹⁰ Anyone with a discerning eye would conveniently figure out that this canonical portrait is evoked for a Western readership, who is likely to be more receptive to such Oriental frameworks of perception.

Another case in point is Bishwanath Ghosh’s *Aimless in Banaras*, a travelogue born out the writer’s penchant for the city. Written in 2019, the book begins with an author’s note that cautions the reader against the sort of city that is of no interest to him – the Varanasi that lies outside of its “mindboggling maze of ghats and galis” (Ghosh). His declaration is tainted with both nonchalance and unchecked prejudice, setting the tone for the narrative to follow. The city space that does captivate Ghosh is the one that has been recorded and reported on ad infinitum, which Henri Lefebvre defines as “perceived space” in his ground-breaking “conceptual triad” of

spatiality (33). Lefebvre's perceived space is the space of popular perception and action. Andi Merrifield writes that spatial practices (or perceived space) structure "lived reality, include routes and networks, patterns and interactions that connect places and people, images with reality, and work with leisure" (110). In the context of Varanasi, the perceived would amount to its tapering alleys, its religious and built environment near the ghats and its prevalent conceptualisation as a sacred city. Alternatively, the perceived space is produced through a hegemonic visuality that orders everyday life, naturalises the dominant world order and "present(s) authority as self-evident" (Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look* 3). Thus, Ghosh's decision to chronicle parts of the city that have been eulogised innumerable times reflects the pervasiveness of the visual regime. Both Iyer and Ghosh make no attempt to venture forth and seek images of the city that defy its compartmentalization into the familiar tropes of 'eternal', 'sacred', 'city of death,' etc. Moreover, in this preference for the perceived space is concealed a repudiation of the "lived space" of Varanasi, which is the "space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'", the space which human "imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre 39). Though travelogues promise an 'eye-witness' account to readers, the refusal of travel writers to truly look beyond what is conveniently visible turns them into emissaries of the market economics and the dominant political power. The only way to overthrow the primacy of the conceived and the perceived then is to adopt a countervisual lens, which would actively claim 'the right to look' and foreground the otherwise elusive lived experience of people.

Kashinath Singh's Assi: The Paradigm of Countervisuality

Originally published in 2002, Singh's controversial tribute to his hometown is part of a trilogy written on Varanasi. Preceded by *Apna Morcha* (1972) and followed by *Rehan par Raghu* (2008), the novels span different time periods in the history of the city. While *Apna Morcha* focuses on the student agitation of the sixties in the BHU campus, *Rehan par Raghu* shines a light on the lives of a middle-class family in the era of globalisation. Out of these, *Kashi ka Assi* captures the city-in-transition in the aftermath of the reformation of the national fiscal policy and the liberalisation of the Indian market

in the nineties. Singh's sense of attachment to Varanasi, specifically Assi, a beloved *mohalla* leads him to bring together a polyphony of voices, anecdotes, folk songs, and characters based on real people to textualize what can only be deciphered as the lived space of Varanasi.

“Not for the Faint Hearted”: The Dialect of Assi as a Subversive Force

Singh begins *Kashi ka Assi* by issuing a fair warning to his readers – the novel is meant for adults and not for those with delicate sensibilities. This word of caution is offered to alert the readers about the copious use of expletives in the text. Singh justifies this by stating that language and Assi remain entangled in a bittersweet relationship just like that of a sister and her sister-in-law. Those who are quick to judge and get offended easily should steer clear of the book (Singh 11). In a particularly risky line, Singh writes “‘*Har har mahadev’ ke saath ‘bhonsadi ke’ naara iska saarvajanik abhivaadan hai*” (The slogan ‘har har mahadev’ chanted with the abuse ‘bhonsadi ke’ is Assi’s public greeting) (Singh 11). He writes, almost as if to provoke outrage, that while the former takes some effort to verbalise, the curse remains at one’s tip of the tongue. Singh’s unabashed attitude is a hallmark of the text, and might I venture, the fount for much of the novel’s ingenuity. One must not confuse his generous sprinkling of abuses in the narrative with any sort of rebelliousness on his part. Though the uninitiated might find the language jarring, even forced; however, Singh is merely writing in the local idiom. He leaves the acclimatisation to the diction on the reader, his focus honed on presenting an authentic testimony of the lives and times of the *Assiwallahs*. In another one of the episodes, an especially abusive character named Ramji Rai is asked by his friend Shailendra the reason for his abusive nature. Ramji, in his usual abrasive tone, responds with a slew of expletives and adds that he does not abuse consciously, the words just flow out of him on their own (Singh 88). It’s interesting that Singh names the character with a filthy mouth Ramji after the Hindu god. Ramji curses indiscriminately and his name, surprisingly, has no bearing on his temperament. Singh’s quirky cast of characters pays little heed to propriety. In that sense, the writer poses a challenge to the established caste hierarchy by making these characters act outside of their conventional caste roles.

Language, in the hands of Singh, refuses to defer to caste norms. Thus, a counternarrative emerges in which Varanasi is no envisaged as being thronged by devout Hindus or as the hotbed of Brahmin piety.

Singh's portrait of the city, unlike the ones outlined in the previous section, is devoid of any aestheticization of the sights and spaces of Varanasi. According to Mirzoeff, visuality gains legitimacy through a three-step model, the first of which is classification through naming, categorizing, and defining. In the second step, visuality segregates the earlier classified groups so that they cannot come together to revolt. And lastly, these separated, oppressed, groups are made to look aesthetically right or pleasing (*The Right to Look* 3). In a particularly candid moment in the book, Singh elucidates the essence of Assi as follows: "*Dhakke dena aur dhakke khana, zaleel karna aur zaleel hona, gaaliyaan dena aur gaaliyan paana Assi ki naagarikta ke maulik adhikaar aur kartavya hain*" (To push and to be pushed, to insult and to be insulted, to abuse and to be abused are the fundamental rights and duties of Assi's citizenship) (38). It becomes evident that Singh's motive is to encapsulate the true lived experience of Varanasi, even if it means formulating a new reality, one that should exist but does not and countering a realism that does exist but should not (Mirzoeff, "The Right to Look" 477).

Bhaang, Kavi Sammelan and the Lived Dimension of Assi

The novel outlines two cultural practices intrinsic to the city that were under threat in the early 90s – the consumption of bhaang and the *kavi sammelan* organised on the occasion of Holi at the crossroads of Assi. In a hilarious series of events in the book, when the policemen arrive at a local chai shop to shut it down for selling bhaang without a license, a charismatic Gaya Singh, a local politician with clout, steps up to the challenge and confronts them with bravado. He accuses the police of trying to destroy Kashi's age-old customs and recounts the benefits of bhaang in facilitating "*divya niptaan*" (literally divine disposal) (Singh 19). Similarly, when the self-appointed custodians of culture (the members of right-wing BJP) threaten to kill anyone who would participate in the allegedly vulgar *kavi sammelan*, Gaya Singh fearlessly dares them to shoot him. In

both these cases, Singh highlights practices that few speak of when they refer to Varanasi, and yet they are vital to the city's socio-cultural fabric. Singh does not make any claims on behalf of the people's innocence or assert the virtuousness of the poems read out in these annual *sabhas*. He is forthright when it comes to revealing the themes these poems touch upon – from LTTE to Khalistan to religious extremism to the Ram Mandir-Babri Masjid issue, the most sensitive of political matters are addressed through the choicest of *gaalis*. Unlike writers like Eck and Iyer who refer to Varanasi as relatively politically inert, Singh makes no attempts to whitewash the city's image or force it into existing stereotypes (Eck 5, Iyer). Varanasi, for him, is perhaps the only city that allows the radical possibility for the political to coexist with the comical. As *Kashi ka Assi* plainly demonstrates, the lives of people here have always been mired in the political. Assi, especially, emerges as the hub of intellectual debate with people of different political allegiance at loggerheads in the local tea shops. In articulating this throbbing, animated lived reality of Varanasi, Singh makes visible the deeply political existence of its people. This is a deliberate choice and one that invites further commentary.

Singh's endeavour with *Kashi ka Assi* was to depict a city embroiled in the tides of the time. In the 1990s, as the nation underwent many turbulent changes, including the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the eventual rise of the Right, small towns could no longer evade the trickle-down effects of globalisation. Singh's choice of using Assi as the backdrop of the novel is telling for it was a lesser-known area of the city, frequented mostly by locals and only a few foreign tourists up until the publication of the book. For the inhabitants of the city, Assi is a part of their daily routine. Their mornings start with bathing in the Ganges, practicing yoga at the ghat, followed by drinking chai at Pappu *Chaiwallah* where both greetings and political views are exchanged with equal vigour. It would not be a stretch of imagination to assert that for most Banarasis, this routine has seen little to no variance, come rain or shine. It is these quotidian rituals that make up the lived space of the city, which is hegemonized and homogenised by those in power – the orchestrators of the conceived and perceived spaces. Lefebvre believed that it is the task of the philosopher to reimagine new ways

of inhabiting regimented spaces, to break away from the totalising authority of those who produce space. *Kashi ka Assi* then is an act of resistance that channels the discourse of countervisuality to give back agency to those who are pushed to the margins, and bring to the forefront their networked existence, their ways of meaning making, their feelings and sensations.

Tourists, Toilets and Tenants: Exposing the Moral Conundrum of the Brahmins of Assi

The penultimate story in *Kashi Ka Assi* recounts the story of a pandit's household who is faced with the conundrum of having a female foreigner as a tenant in their home. The prospect, though financially lucrative, is enmeshed in a moral crisis for pandit Dharmnath Shastri and his wife. The foreigner is looking for a room with ensuite facilities. In order to accommodate this request, the pandit would have to remodel the temple in his home into a washroom. Though the proposition sounds blasphemous at first, the pandit is forced to consider the option for the rent offered is almost too good to be true. Singh contextualises the narrative by discussing the increase in influx of tourists in Varanasi around the late 80s and the subsequent rise of paying guest accommodations in the city. Although Brahmins maintained a safe distance from the practice, due to the fear of being polluted by Christian contact, the lower caste apprehended the gap in the market and seized the opportunity with both hands. Slowly but surely, the additional rental income uplifted the living conditions of the lower castes. Though the upper caste—primarily the Brahmins and the Thakurs—continued to disparage the foreigners, calling them dirty and immoral, the truth eventually dawned on them – their self-righteousness had deprived them of an improved lifestyle, while the lower caste had flourished (Singh 116-117). Singh adds a twist to this tale by expounding how initially Shastri appoints himself as the flagbearer of this contrived hatred for renting out to foreign tourists.

Kashi ka Assi deviates sharply from the typical representation of Brahmins by launching an incisive critique of Brahmanical hypocrisy, questioning their disdain for outsiders, and their dubious moral compass. Singh's keen eye spares no one, especially those who

make tall claims of piety. He weaponizes language to overturn the dominant discourse on its head, revealing the failure of the upper caste to uphold their own high standards of purity, even as they exercise authority by classifying others as clean or contaminated. This exposé carried forth by Singh illustrates a countervisual discourse in making, as the domineering image of Brahmanical splendour and sanctitude is shattered and the optics of aestheticization are abandoned in favour of the optics of the real. Thus, Singh forges a “different realism” through the depiction and questioning of “existing realities” (Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look” 485).

Conclusion

Varanasi has been quintessentially identified as an unchanged, Hindu religious centre through the ages. From the Puranas to accounts of British missionaries to those of Indian travellers, writers have time and again stressed upon the city’s Hindu heritage and identity, reinstating its mythical status in the Hindu imaginary. However, the perpetuation of these stereotypes calls for research that pries out the city from these imposing visuals that paint the city as a monolith and would re-frame it in a new light. In this paper, I have briefly traced the emergence of Varanasi’s status as a Hindu sacredpolis before delving into its unframing in Singh’s tour-de-force, *Kashi ka Assi* that blurs the boundaries between sacred and the impure and vouches for their harmonious co-existence.

The cultural practices of Assi’s denizens highlighted by Singh are unusual for they remain invisible from most public discourse on the city. Be it the consumption of bhang or the ‘indecent’ poetry recitation on the occasion of Holi, this is a side of Varanasi that is known only to its own. Singh catalogues the unseen and the deliberately (made) invisible and thus accentuates the lived interstices of the city. The daily rhythms of people, their quotidian encounters and interactions make up the lived experience of commoners, which acts as foil to the dominant visuality of life. His Assi is indecent and brash, eager to argue and castigate, but it is real, raw, and palpable. One cannot help but note that Singh wants little to do with excavating the binaries of religious/secular, sacred/unholy,

Brahmin/outcaste, etc. His project in *Kashi ka Assi* remains singularly focused on retrieving Varanasi as Varanasi, devoid of all labels and aestheticization. Thus, through Singh, we meet the city as is, before it becomes laden with the baggage of a legion of discourses and visuals.

End Notes

1. In an interview between Marquard Smith and Nicholas Mirzoeff, Smith asked the latter whether he regretted beginning the book with that statement. Mirzoeff clarified that he had articulated it in the hopes that readers would engage with it further. However, even he couldn't have anticipated the outcry that his seemingly innocuous statement would provoke, with many levelling accusations of the sort that Visual Culture Studies is "dangerously ahistorical" (Mirzoeff, "Everyday Life" 20).
2. Doris-Bachmann Medick in her essay "The Iconic Turn/Pictorial Turn" notes that the turn comprises the "entire spectrum of visual perception and culture," wherein visual practices and even modes of perception like seeing, observing, remembering are open to analysis and interpretation (245).
3. Irit Rogoff uses the term 'unframing' in her chapter titled "Studying Visual Culture," to speak of the possibilities engendered by the field of Visual Culture. She writes that the arena allows for the unframing of various disciplinary fields from "a set of conventional values" that label them as "*either* highly valued *or* highly marginalized *or* outside the scope of sanctioned vision altogether" (17; emphasis original).
4. In a conversation with a national daily, Kashinath Singh admitted to receiving abuses and death threats from anonymous callers. after the publication of *Kashi ka Assi* (Rashid n.p.).
5. In his paper "Benares as Tirtha," Richard Lannoy refers to the rapid construction and reconstruction of Varanasi and its continuous habitation over three millennia stating that this has led to the city's elevated status as a "myth," a

“metaphysical construct” rather than as “a place physically based in reality” (6).

6. In one of the *mahatamya*, Shiva says for Banaras, “Because I never forsake it, nor do I let it go, this great place is therefore known as Avimukta” (Eck 28).
7. Scholars believe that the *Skanda Purana* is not a continuous piece, but a collection of different pieces found in different parts of the country that was meant to glorify local temples and holy spots. There are fifteen thousand shlokas in the *Kashi Khanda*, which consists of descriptions of Shiva temples in and around Kashi, amongst other details (Debroy 57).
8. A far-reaching consequence of the British articulation of Varanasi was that the Muslim presence in the city was glossed over.
9. Homi K. Bhabha argues that ‘fixity’ is a principal feature of colonial discourse, specifically in the ideological construction of the other, who is portrayed as a curious mix of an unchanging rigidity and a simultaneous degeneracy (370).
10. In her essay “Alexander Von Humboldt and the reinvention of America,” Mary Louise Pratt argues that Humboldt presents South America as a “landscape imbued with social fantasies – of harmony, industry, liberty, unalienated *joie de vivre* – all projected on the non-human world” (428). I borrow the idea of the representation of a land as a product of an individual’s social fantasies from Pratt, although the usage varies in the context of my argument.

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Re-envisioning the Spatial Praxis of Bombay: A Critique of Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Dastak*

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Abstract

The research article explores the concept of space in Rajinder Singh Bedi's film *Dastak* (1970) through the philosophies of heterotopia and utopia. It challenges conventional hierarchies of space by extending reality towards utopia in a place devoid of hegemony. It looks at the city of Bombay as a thirdspace, where negotiations between utopia and dystopia occur. The film follows the struggles of Salma and Hamid as they navigate the boundaries between their intimate home and the public bazaar, symbolizing the clash between their idealized domestic life and the harsh realities of society. The past of the space influences its present, with voyeuristic male gaze and the role of music serving as critiques of modernity. The film highlights the inversion of spatial meanings, where the city becomes a refuge for the couple, reminiscent of similar contours in *Pyaasa* (1957). It examines how the couple's aspirations for dignity and livelihood are undermined by the commodification of their lives in a society driven by the pursuit of modernity. Conclusively, *Dastak* intertwines social issues with human sentiment and offers a critique of capitalism, ultimately presenting a hopeful yet ambiguous portrayal of the complexities of space and society.

Keywords: Space, Cinema, Heterotopia, Bollywood, Utopia, Dystopia

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself,

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a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (Foucault 23)

Micheal Foucault, in his essay, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" challenges the conventions of defining and classifying the concept of Space in hierarchies of "the sacred and the profane, protected places and open, exposed places, urban and rural places" (22) and refers to heterotopia to describe the extension of reality towards utopia in a place where exists no hegemony. This heterotopia, which functions at every level in every culture, is either a physical approximation of the unattained utopia— also occupying mental space, or is a parallel constitution of objectionable elements in a space, the elimination of which makes utopia a possible perception. It departs towards utopia, but never arrives at it, defined by the actions and things and thoughts placed in the space.

The research paper attempts to analyze spatial dynamics of Rajinder Singh Bedi's film *Dastak* (1970) through the body of the Female, and critiques the narrative from the vantage point of its spatial axis. The City, in relation to the 'Other' that the rural is, is usually regarded as a space affixed with the notion of utopia modernity—where dreams are realized and struggles come to a definite end. In "Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory", Edward Soja states, "Thirdspace is a call to creative practice, to finding ways of combining the strengths of spatiality and sociality, of place and politics" (38). This liminal thirdspace, also evoked in the deprived lives of the characters in city-based Bollywood films like *Dastak* and *Pyaasa*, theorizes the nature of heterotopia as a space that can essentially be understood beyond the binaries of utopia and dystopia. The City, then, becomes a kind of thirdspace, where the negotiations, tensions, contestations and resistance between the binaries can be mapped.

The Cityscape

There is a heavy price an individual pays to achieve the privileges that the City offers, a price for extending the reality towards a utopian simulation. These ‘real’ cities with their own share of flawed systems and dangers are presented as sites with the ‘pull factor’ that fulfill the deprived man’s hopes and dreams, specifically Bombay of the independent India, often employed as the idealistic metropolis in Indian Cinema— the city that never sleeps. With post independent economic developments that saw the emerging industries of textiles and construction, Bombay of the 1960s and ‘70s had begun to be increasingly commodified—often trading the integrity, and even claiming the lives of the lowly class, with meager amounts of money, perfectly captured by Majrooh Sultanpuri in the song *Ye Hai Bambai Meri Jaan* from the 1956 film *CID*, as Johnny Walker advises a little boy in a comic demeanor,

*“Kahin building, kahin traame, kahin motor, kahin mill,
Milta hai yahaan sab kuchh, ik milta nahin dil.
Insaan ka nahin koi naam-o-nishaan,
Zaraa hatt ke, zara bach ke, ye hai Bambai meri jaan..”*
(*CID* 27:44-28:00)

Additionally, the opening credits of *Dastak* are backed with the montage of a beach, the Gateway of India, the Churchgate Railway Station, the hustle of daily life and ends with a shot of the high-rise buildings after which the camera moves on to the slum located in the same area. This is perhaps suggestive of the coexistence, if not peaceful, of the various classes that the city of Bombay embraces. The city slum as viewed through the large glass windows of such buildings by the elite constructors looks like a vacant place to construct and directors like Bedi choose to put the elitist and the victims of their own circumstances in a shared frame.

The city of Bombay is regarded to provide for everyone who comes to its bustle from all walks of life and spaces. And as a result, affordable housing is still a dream for many even today. Albeit, feeling fortunate upon finding one, the house that Hamid and Saleem inhabit was once courtesan Shamshad Begum’s abode, and the past of the ‘private’ space of the house continues to permeate in its

present, and the courtesan's past casts its shadows over the couple's marital bliss. Begum's patrons would knock Salma's doors, while also parallelly knocking the doors of the space's past. The constant struggle, the price that Salma and Hamid pay for their *sharaafat* (civility) unfolds with it the nuances of spaces and simultaneously, these spaces consciously and subconsciously conspire to shove the Muslim couple below their uprightness, both at home and in office. The space of the house remains the same, but its meaning changes across the temporal axis. A given space is widely defined by the action that takes place in it. But rather in this locale, the past of the space defines the present of this space, and the action that unwittingly takes place in it. Heterotopia can serve as a paradigm for one to understand 'otherness' of a space they are inhabiting. The film *Dastak* illustrates the tensions and contestation between the utopian home and dystopian bazaar in relation to the same space. While Hamid and Salma desire to make it their home, they are constantly challenged by the values of bazaar, and voyeuristic male gaze is a part of this dynamic.

Permeation of the City in the Home

The door essentially serves as a boundary between the intimate space of the Home and the figurative and metaphorical 'baazaar' that it is located in. The first *dastak* (knock) introduces the viewers to the dynamics of this domestic space and when Salma begins to doubt the meaning that the walls carry with them, Hamid pacifies her with, "*Sab dhulwa lenge Salma, safedi karva lenge. ... Jahaan Allah ka naam lenge aur namaazein padenge, vo jagah paak ho jaayegi*" (*Dastak* 1:02:00-1:04:00), (We will get all the walls white-washed. And where we will take Allah's name and offer him prayers, that place will become pious). But it is the element of public gaze and scopophilia that characters like the Panwala (betel leaf seller), the neighbor and Shamshad Begum in the garb of their '*sharaafat*' eventually, yet forcibly, reduce the *grahast* (household) to a *kothaa* (brothel) for the course of the narrative. Additionally, music plays a fundamental role in the film and the larger context of changing meanings of art—thus serving as a critique on modernity. Salma has a beautiful voice, and unaware that the gazers in the baazaar and the walls of the house have been conditioned to listen to the music of

courtesans that once inhabited this house, she would sing melodiously through the day, and often crave to hold the tanpura in her hands—once regarded as the instrument of the brothel. Upon learning that her singing had further led people to believe that she indeed was a courtesan under the garb of ‘civility’, Hamid forbade her to stop indulging in expressing herself through her music—further imposing the gaze of the outside to lurk in the intimate space of the Home. The song *Baiyaan na Dharo*, sung by a nearby courtesan was earlier sung by Salma’s father Ustaad Dajaan Khan too, a former renowned classical singer, but in a different composition. The courtesan culture of pre and post-independence Bombay affected classical music and art—thus was the ‘*ustaad*’ now reduced to be known as ‘*miyaan*’ and the ‘*bai*’ now regarded as a ‘*gaanewali*.’

Human emotions and misery need space for articulation. And it is music in the narrative, extended from the psychological space of Salma, which becomes a dais for the expression of her concupiscence. Salma struggles through the confines of patriarchy when she sings “*Na tadapne ki ijaazat hai na fariyaad ki hai, ghut ke marr jaaun ye marzi mere saiyaad ki hai..*” (1:48:00-1:49:00). The song *Maaeri* captures Salma’s covert sexual desires extended to Laura Mulvey’s theorization of Male Gaze and Scopophilia, as she sings “*pee ki dagar mein baithe maila hua ri mera aanchra.*” (2:03:20-2:03:24). The fabric of the garment, while waiting for the beloved, has been stained—stained with the gaze of the Unwanted—the Other, by the labeling and the accusation of those wearing stained garments themselves. The song *Maaeri* liberates Salma of her psychological imprisonment for she was curtailed to sing or play the tanpura. The beach, the maze and mounts are open spaces across which Salma runs but never reaches anywhere, to anyone. These open spaces define, in an ironic series of shots, Salma’s claustrophobic state confined in the house. She attempts to break her silence and sings towards the end of it, only to be defined further by the neighborhood as a courtesan, a public property—in her own domestic space. The film’s cinematic genius lies in the *mise-en-scene* that reinforces the spatial opposition between the domestic and the public: close-up shots are employed in the confined space that the home is, and long shots, like the beach and the woods. An individual, more so a family, finds recluse in the bricked ensemble what they call ‘home’

from the dangers of outer space. As Hamid and Salma seek to resolve the intrusion of patrons at their home at odd hours of the day, they step out of the boundaries of the intimate and begin to spend their nights on the roads of the city that never sleeps. It is in the subtext of the film that Bedi employs inversion of the meanings attached to these spaces and the beach and village become escapist routes for the couple to flee from the daily *dastak* and quarrel, like in Guru Dutt starrer *Pyaasa* (1957), where Vijay finds his ultimate recluse not in his home or within his family but at the *kothaa* (brothel) of Gulaab Bai, played by Waheeda Rehman. Both *Pyaasa* and *Dastak* serve as critiques of modernity, and it is with time that Salma and Hamid are put under constant gaze of the police and Zohra respectively. Also, the *mainaa* Salma had released from the cage finds its eventual death back in the house—the *mainaa*, or the character that the bird signifies, may be set free from the ‘cage’ but the freedom is momentary.

This film is not merely a narrative of a couple being pushed to the mercy of courtesanship, but is a major comment on the struggles of the urban poor to retain their dignity and also earn livelihood in a society that flags the idiom of modernity. The film draws a parallel between the struggles of Salma and Hamid, where his submission to corruption after a long battle with his circumstances commodifies him in the same ‘bazaar’ as Salma’s, blurring the line between the struggles of the domestic and the public space. The song “*hum hain mataa-e-kuchaa bazaar ki tarah*” doesn’t only comment on the space of the bazaar of flesh but also on the utopia they had tried to conceptualize through their heterotopia. The song is an addition to (and an extension of) the *nazm* by Sahir Ludhianvi from *Pyaasa*,

“*Ye purapech galiyan, ye badnaam bazar*
Ye gumnaam raahi, ye sikko ki jhankar
Ye ismat ke saude, ye saudo pe takrar
Jinhe naaz hai hind par vo kaha hain...”
 (Pyaasa 2:00:50-2:02:07)

The moment of downfall, when Hamid gets ready to be bribed and Salma agrees to sing as a courtesan, both for money, is juxtaposed with their hope that the child would bring—the space oscillates

between being defined as a brothel and a home. There is hope in resistance, hope in breaking the tambura and in the constant contestation between the social imposition by the economically hungry society and the couple's retaliation against them, concluded by Muzaffar Warsi in the lines, "*Meri tasveer mein rang kisi aur ka toh nahin, gher lein mujh ko sab aake, main tamasha toh nahin..*" (2:57:09-2:57:18).

Consumeristic Gaze and the Female

The very concept of 'woman', Simone de Beauvoir argues as he states "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301), is a concept from the vantage point of the Male: a Woman is always the 'other' because the male is the 'seer': he is the subject and she the object – the *meaning* of what it is to be a woman is also affixed by men. This dichotomy of Otherisation further extends at various levels of the society where the individual gets deceived at every crossroad, where the politics of power is layered with the nuances of resistance. These forces of power are what allow people in a society to put on a mask and play certain roles. Thus, these 'forces of power' are defined and depicted in the realm of the phallocentric world, where a woman's space is restricted, as allotted to her by the male. Even if she chooses to step ahead and cross the boundaries, she still remains in the confines of patriarchal structures. She falls prey to scopophilia, voyeurism, male gaze, power politics and ego gratification of the masculine world. Women are defined in terms of what 'men' are not– stuck in a continuum of interpellation, the female becomes the one who always, and certainly, 'lacks.' *Dastak* gives its viewers the insight to a life lived by a female whose space is defined not alone by her husband but also by the society she lives in. The desolation, desperation and frustration which Salma and Hamid go through are being nuanced by a semi-realistic prism. Salma's claustrophobic condition is depicted by the director through the caged bird, symbolizing the once cheerful bride, running helplessly as the walls closed on her. As acting, singing and dancing were associated only with prostitution and courtesanship, the film is also suggestive of the same through the neighborhood *paanwala*'s dialogue upon hearing Salma's melodies, "*Maine kaha tha na hai to gaane wali hai*" (*Dastak* 1:46:07-1:46:13) (She is a courtesan, I told you so) and her

husband Hamid's apprehension upon seeing her sing, albeit in her home, but its heterotopic approximation in the locality of courtesans, he says, "*Janti ho log iska kya matlab lenge?*" (1:51:08-1:51:11) (Are you aware of what people might say on hearing you sing?)— afraid that the people would consider his wife to be only an inheritor of the abode's legacy— that of Shamshad Begum.

Both Salma and Hamid are entrapped in the hypocritical realm of the society. On one hand, Hamid is portrayed trying to protect Salma by confining her in the boundaries of the house, society, on the other hand, is relentlessly trying to intrude in the boundary. Where Salma is stuck inside those restricted walls, Hamid is equally confined with his naivety in the deviousness of the society. Certain members of the society, specifically the *panvaadi*, Shamshad Begum and others at Hamid's office form rules for the 'Otherised' members of the society— the ones who inhabit Bombay not as an heirloom but as a fruit of aspirations. They circumscribe the Other, thus forming an inherent hierarchy, the continuum of which regulates across the patriarch and its victim. The process of consumerism goes beyond associating the Female as a commodity, and is further epitomized by the character of *panvaadi* who helps Hamid in acquiring the house for his sole selfish motive of fetching an incentive in his business. He, along with the other members of the neighborhood, is constantly seen interfering in their private space and convincing people that Salma and Hamid are disguised as husband and wife, whereas, in reality, Salma is a prostitute with Hamid as her patron. The stain of the property continues; with *panvaadi* realizing that all his attempts of intrusion went in vain he utters in sheer frustration, "*dhanda chaupat ho gaya hai. Shamshad Begum rehti thi to 2-4 paan bik jaya karte the. Makaan ka makaan gaya aur paan bhi nahi bikte.*" (1:56:39-1:56:44) (Business is now ruined. At least with Shamshad Begum around, I would sustain it a little. The house has gone out of my hands and so has the business.)

Not only the male characters, but the females too play a major role in reinforcing a woman's space. The relationship between Salma and her sister Zora evidently displays a woman classifying herself within an intimate space, based on the constraints imposed on her by the patriarchal elements of the society. Nowhere in the narrative does

the character of Salma empathize with her sister , instead, she becomes the one to lay emphasis on getting her married as soon as possible. Zora, in order to expedite her sister getting wed off, says, “*Bachi tumhe dikhai deti hai, meh to abba se kehti hu, ki koi sa bhi ladka dekh k daffa karein*” (2:14:58-2:15:05) (She looks like a child to you, but I have been imploring father to get her married and be done with her at the earliest.) The film is a perpetuity of women defining a space, and the space defining its women. Shamsaad Begum defines the space she lives in. The present and the past of each space that she inhabits becomes a brothel, stained with the patrons’ betel spits on the walls of the space.. Whereas in the case of Salma, spaces (of the house, the dim lanes of Bombay, and the beach in the dream sequence) define her. As the film proceeds through its course, each space attempts to modify her character and mold her into the structured confines of patriarchy and aligns her existence with the discourse of masculinity. The whole journey of Salma’s resistance to follow the rules laid by the society unearths the plight of women subjugated by men in our society. The song *Maaeri* depicts the loneliness of her existence. Salma sings the song to herself to combat the misery of life in the big city:

*Meri tasveer mein rang aur kisi ka toh nahi,
Gher lein mujh ko sab aa ke, main tamasha toh nahi
Zindagi tujh se har ik saans pe samjhauta karun,
Shaunk jeene ka hai mujh ko, magar itna toh nahi.”*
(2:06:55-2:07:38)

Conclusion

In the end, she ultimately fails to sustain her strength and sings for her patrons. Ironically, the space which they thought and hoped to be their rescue from the world eventuated to be the place which hounded them, the moment they stepped into it, as she sings “*Hum hai mataa-e-kuchaa-bazaar ki tarah, uthi hai har nigaah kharidar ki tarah*” (3:18:24-3:18:30). The film is a blatant and despairing comment on the freedom of women in the post-Independence nation, their aspirations, hardships and meek sustenance. It is in the end, that she falls in the feet of her husband and weeps after singing to a former patron of Shamsaad begum, that she truly becomes what society

terms as a ‘woman.’ *Dastak*, a film that closely weaves the social issues of the Indian society of home and capitalism with human sentiment, ends on a rather ambiguous yet hopeful note. “*Ye duniya kitna bhi bada, kaisa bhi randi ka ghar sahi, hum yahin rahenge... ladenge, marenge...*” (3:32:22-3:32:27) (This world may be an enormous brothel, but we will stay here, live here, fight, and die..) says Hamid, which serves as a major critique on capitalism—the city of Bombay, once a reflection of post-Independent idealism, had now been reduced to a brothel—thus its ‘half truth’ unfolded.

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**Makings of a Cosmopolitan Culture of 'Preet': A Case
Study of the Punjabi Little Magazine *Preetlari***

Simrat Khurana *

Abstract

In the present global era, emphasis has been shifted to the philosophy of cosmopolitanism in contrast to the earlier focus on nationalism. In early twentieth-century colonial India, while the project of nationalism was at its peak, there were thinkers like Tagore highlighting the importance of cosmopolitan philosophy. However, a parallel project of cosmopolitanism and a lesser-known one was taking place in the province of Punjab, where Gurbakhsh Singh strived to establish the cosmopolitan philosophy of 'Preet' through his little magazine *Preetlari*. The aim of the present paper is to study and analyse the issues of the earliest decade of the publication of *Preetlari*, from 1933-1943, in order to highlight the makings of the cosmopolitan culture in Punjab represented through the microcosm of Preet Nagar. The paper will do so by reading the available issues and thoughts presented in the magazine in contestations with the then-dominant religious movements and its negotiations with nationalist fervour.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, Socio-religious reforms, *Preetlari*, Punjab, Little Magazines.

While the twentieth century had been no less than the epoch of nationalism, with various new nation-states getting born as an immediate after-effect of the process of decolonisation, the twenty-first century shifted its focus more towards the critique of nationalism and envisioned cosmopolitanism in the global age. The debate between nationalism and cosmopolitanism was, however, not unprecedented, with the traces of its origin being in the Greek Stoic

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philosophy. The formation of India as a nation and imagining a community based on linguistic and religious symbols has been the primary focus of contention in the majority of works written on Hindi Nationalism. Also, the debates between nationalism and cosmopolitanism gained light through critics retrieving a cosmopolitan philosophy out of the works of a prominent Indian thinker Rabindranath Tagore. However, it is essential to see nationalism and cosmopolitanism not in dichotomy but as coexisting. The present paper draws attention to the case of Punjab caught amidst the religious, nationalist and cosmopolitan movements and aims to highlight the conundrums which shaped Punjabi consciousness in the first half of the twentieth century. The paper will attempt this through the example of the little magazine *Preetlari* highlighting the neglected cosmopolitan 'Preet' (Love) philosophy of Gurbakhsh Singh interacting and contesting with the regional, religious and national issues. It is in these interactions and contestations that the cosmopolitan philosophy of 'Preet' framed and forged Punjabi consciousness around the issues of theology, identity and race.

Punjabi Print Culture, Reform Movements and Literary Magazines

The printing press made its appearance in Punjab with the American Presbyterian mission being established in Ludhiana almost two decades before the annexation of the province into British India in 1849. The printing press soon became the medium for propagating ideas by the religious reform movements (Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha, and Ahmadiyah Movement) developing in the colonial Punjab in relation to Christian missionary activities and the reforming of strict religious identities. The print medium was also adapted to publish generations-old Punjabi literature of *Qisse*, religious texts as well as new experiments in the form of journalism and modern literature in the genre of novels, drama as well as poetry. The earliest ventures into journalism and literary magazines came from religious reform movements. *Nirguniara* was started in 1894 by the Khalsa Tract Society. *Dukh Niwaran* was started in 1906 by Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid. Bhai Ditt Singh started *Ditt Singh Magazine* in 1910, and *Punjabi Bhain* started in 1907 from Sikh Kanya Mahavidyala, Ferozepur. It was with the coming of *Preetam* in 1923, however, that

a diversion from reformist magazines took place. *Preetam*, started by Narang Brothers, was the first general-purpose magazine, drawing on the literal meaning of the word magazine, a storehouse. A year after the publication of *Preetam*, *Phulwari* was started by Giani Heera Singh Dard in 1924 being the first Punjabi magazine devoted primarily to literature. The decade between the publication of *Phulwari* and the coming of *Preetlari* then saw the publication of numerous little magazines. *Kirti* was started in 1926; *Mauji* in 1926 by Charan Singh Shaheed; *Phuleran* in 1926 by Heera Singh Dard; *Kavi* in 1927 by Munsha Singh; *Hans* in 1929 by Charan Singh Shaheed; *Motia* in 1930 by Narang Brothers; *Chann* in 1931 by Giani Gurditt Singh; and *Balak* in 1932 by Giani Lal Singh. The tradition of the little magazines was thus set.

***Preetlari*: The ‘Eclectic’ Little Magazine**

The category of little magazines was first used in relation to modernist magazines in the West. From Ezra Pound’s use of the term ‘small magazines’ and T.S. Eliot’s preference for the term ‘literary review’, it was the term ‘little magazines’ on which the question of magazines devoted purely to literature was finally settled. Little Magazines have been defined variously by scholars constituting common features of devotion to literature, limited audience, commitment to experiment, short-life, and in opposition to commercial interests and profit-making (Brooker and Thacker 11). Churchill and Mckible have offered a working definition of little magazines as “non-commercial enterprises founded by individuals or small groups intent upon publishing the experimental works or radical opinions of untried, unpopular, or under-represented writers . . . [and are] diverse in size, agenda, and longevity” (3).

As mentioned above, several literary journals had already made their appearance in the decade before *Preetlari*, with *Phulwari* contesting for the status of the first Punjabi little magazine. But it was only in 1933, with the publication of *Preetlari* something radically shifted in the Punjabi print culture. Also, it was coincidental that modernist little magazines in the West and the earliest little magazines in Punjabi developed around the same time i.e., the early decades of the twentieth century. The Punjabi little magazines,

however, radically differed from their Western counterparts. The experimental, avant-gardist, modernist little magazines in the West had emerged following long developments in print and journalistic ventures. The phenomenon of print and journalism being recent in Punjab, however, resulted in the emergence of little magazines which were yet crude and unrefined in form. These early little magazines in Punjabi, in fact, showed more resemblances with the Western counterparts of general magazines of earlier centuries like *The Spectator*, *The Tatler*, *The Gentleman's Magazine* rather than with their contemporaries *The Egoist*, *Blast*, *Poetry*, *The Dial*, et al. It was, therefore, no surprise that often references to *The Spectator* and American magazines *The Harper's Monthly* and *The Transatlantic Review* were made in the earliest issues of *Preetlari*.

Preetlari, though not fulfilling the criterion of experimental and shocking writings, can still be classified as first of its kind little magazine in Punjabi which clubbed together the elements of popular magazines with literary journals. In order to further establish its status as a little magazine, it can be placed in the category of 'eclectic' little magazines out of the six categories of little magazines proposed by Hoffman. Hoffman defines 'eclectic' as "an attitude which exhibits a smiling generosity to many types of literary novelty but remains discreetly noncommittal about their eventual worth. Finally, there is the magazine which is made in the editor's own image (and often at his own expense), designed to accommodate his own writings and the writings of those select and fortunate few who agree with him sufficiently to supply an appendix and footnote to the text" (190). *Preetlari* produced straight and realistic writings. The magazine was primarily its editor's mouthpiece while also including sufficient writings from other authors that matched the editor's philosophy. *Preetlari* did not produce pure literature alone but also published general articles on varied themes of health, sex, sports, life, love, current affairs, and much more.

Cosmopolitan 'Preet' Philosophy and Preet Nagar

Martha Nussbaum's essay "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" opened the debate about cosmopolitan outlook by contrasting nationalism and cosmopolitanism through Tagore's example, but the

piece was seen as utopian and provoked several responses. Cosmopolitanism, "rather than being a utopian project or, as in Nussbaum's famous essay, a moral postulate, has resonance in a wide range of cultural, social, and political currents throughout the world. Cosmopolitanism has emerged as an important theoretical approach in social sciences in recent years" (Delanty 218). With critics evoking concepts like critical cosmopolitanism to cosmopolitan outlook and banal cosmopolitanisation, the global discourse has moved towards the discussion of cosmopolitan reality in the contemporary global world (Delanty 219, Beck 19). The history of cosmopolitan thought has already been traced to the Stoics in Western thought and the philosophy of cosmopolitanism had resonance in thinkers throughout the world before everyday life became cosmopolitan in banal ways and cosmopolitanism turned into a commodity in the present globalised world (Beck 14, 25). While Nussbaum brought to light the cosmopolitan philosophy of a prominent Indian thinker Tagore, he was, however, not the only thinker along those lines in India. A similar philosophy was taking shape in Punjabi consciousness through the cosmopolitan message of 'Preet' being spread in the little magazine *Preetlari* in the early decades of the twentieth century Punjab.

Gurbakhsh Singh, the man behind *Preetlari*, was stimulated by his American friend Harold Iago, who suggested him to start a journal on the East-West Question. Gurbakhsh Singh, who had started his literary career during his education in America by writing short pieces in English, thought of the idea as a good opportunity to publish his writings. While the idea fascinated him, the thoughts regarding the magazine's theme and content bothered him. He did not want his magazine to be the channel of a particular religion, nature, race or civilisation (*Manzil dis payi* 112). The philosophical idea behind the magazine, in fact, came out of an earlier poem written by him regarding a single chain of love encompassing all humanity. The poem titled "The Divine Cord" was written in English during his stay in America. The first paragraph of the poem, which was published in entirety in the first issue, also found place on the cover page, which presented a heart of beads through which ran the below-mentioned lines with a cupid sitting with his arrow symbolising 'Preet' (Love):

Oft Feel a Throb of the Universal Heart,
Oft Hear Refrain of Love's Melody,
Pointing to the same Divine Cord
That Runs Through All Beads of God's Rosary

In the editorial written for the first issue of Sept. 1933, Gurbakhsh Singh expressed his wish to form a community of love encompassing all humanity. In the second issue, he described *Preetlari's* aim to help recognise the truth lying behind the masks of the sect, race, and country and to discover the actual Man. In declaring his aims, Singh was no less a visionary than Diogenes, the Cynic who had declared himself to be "a citizen of the world" (Warf 276). The title of his magazine *Preetlari* (Love-Link), clearly highlighted his 'Preet' Philosophy (Philosophy of Love). The yet unrecognized 'Preet' philosophy was a cosmopolitan philosophy aiming at shattering the narrow confines of religion, sect, race, and nation to bind universal humanity in the bond of love freeing humanity of illusions of narrow patriotism and liberating them from the ritualistic bonds of religion.

The cosmopolitan philosophy of Preet spanned through every issue of *Preetlari*, declaring the aim of uniting humanity through its editorials, thematic content and various pieces by the editor himself. In the issue of Jan. 1939, Singh, further elaborating on the aims of *Preetlari*, wrote, "I am looking at humanity from a common lens. In my opinion, all humans on the planet are like the beads in a chain. The gains made by one man are profitable for all and the loss of a single man is the defeat for all. No human or no nation can be prosperous alone. The happiness or sorrows of one will affect others" (my trans.; 69). Singh's ideas and philosophy, though often read as idealistic, needs to be re-read in the current light where cosmopolitanism is gaining momentum and cosmopolitan thinkers are being rediscovered. The 'Preet' Philosophy also had its material co-relative in the form of Preet Nagar, established nearby Amritsar in 1938. Preet Nagar was the cosmos/microcosm of universal brotherhood whose gates were open to all irrespective of caste, class, gender, religion, sect or race. It would be no exaggeration to call Preet Nagar the Shanti Niketan of Punjab. The vision of Preet Nagar was voiced in the first Preet-Milni, a gathering of writers and readers of

Preetlari, that was held in Lahore in 1936, followed up by the registration of a society under the name of Sansar Preet Mandal, which ultimately constituted Preet Saina (Community of Love) with its constituent members Preet-Sainiks (Soldiers/Protectors of Love). Within two years, the plan was brought to reality with land being brought from the funds gathered through the Ten-Year Membership Scheme of *Preetlari* and a township being built under the name Preet Nagar (The Town of Love).

Preet Nagar had been resided since its formation by personalities like Nanak Singh and Gurbakhsh Singh, who were later joined by various others like Balraj Sahni and Balwant Gargi. Initially, a *kothi* was shared by two families, followed by individual homes after the rampant growth in the town. In place of separate kitchens in the household, there was a community kitchen for all, where members gathered and ate food together. It was a secular space open to all where no institution of temple, gurudwara or mosque was established. It was also the first planned town in colonial Punjab which had also been progressive in allowing a space free from gender inhibitions and allowing interactions between men and women, believed by the founder to be important in the growth of an individual's personality. Preet Conference was held each year in which various sports events were conducted, and an annual play was performed by the drama club of Preet Nagar. These Preet Conferences were also the events of visits by famous personalities like Jawahar Lal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, and Nora Richards, among others. In 1940 a residency school inaugurated by Sir Abdul Kadar was also opened in Preet Nagar. It was known as Activity School and was established after taking inspiration from the best education models from across the globe. The school focused more on skill enhancement rather than rote learning and admitted students from different parts of India. Students participated in sports and annual plays. They were taught basic life skills like cooking, gardening, mechanics, knitting, and crafts in addition to knowledge of the books. The activity school laid the foundation of co-education for both boys and girls who participated in several events together. The school also resulted in the foundation of the children's magazine *Bal Sandesh* which published writings from the students.

Preetlari documented the minutest developments of Preet Nagar in its pages. From various services available to the advertisements for the sale of plots in Preet Nagar, everything was done in the pages of *Preetlari*. The list of new members was updated in each issue. Preet Nagar was advertised as an idyllic landscape free from the worries of urban life, a hamlet in nature laying down the foundations of a New India on the principles of brotherhood free from racist, sectarian, religious, and gender differences.

Preet Nagar's dissent from the conventional religious society and the lifestyle adopted by its members, as visible from the above descriptions, made it look no less than a subculture. But, the subculture of Preet Nagar was very different from the commonly held notions of subcultures derived from Western examples. Ross Haenfler defined subculture as "a relatively diffuse social network having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects, and a sense of marginalisation from or resistance to a perceived "conventional" society" (16). The most important feature of any subculture is its deviance from the mainstream. Preet Nagar's resistance to conventional norms of religion and its non-confirmative attitude towards gender equality, education, and the lifestyle of its member no doubt made it subcultural. But, there were certain other traits which restricted Preet Nagar from completely fitting into the mould of a subculture and made it different. Ken Gelder outlined the basic characteristics of any subculture, of which 'deviance' is the first one and the one characterising Preet Nagar as well. The other characteristics, however, include a subculture's "negative relation to labour and class, its association with territory rather than property, it's being outside the domestic sphere, and its ties to excess and exaggeration in terms of behaviour, style, dress, and noise," bar out Preet Nagar from the conventional definitions of the concept (Gelder 3, 4).

Preet Nagar had, in fact, developed a space within the domestic sphere where families of its members lived together and worked together. It was not a territory of idle and vagabond people; instead, it was a well-established town allowing proper property ownership to its members. Furthermore, there was no excess or exaggeration, neither in the lifestyle nor in the writings published from there

through the medium of *Preetlari*. Unlike the famous youth subcultures of mods and punks, there was never heard a swear word in Preet Nagar. The use of foul words was not allowed within its premises. Its members followed the principles of simple living. Its defiance of conventional society was portrayed through its presentation as an ideal space and not a hedonistic territory. Its aim was to set up an example of cosmopolitanism in the broader culture rather than establishing a separate subculture.

Preetlari's Contestations with Theology

Preetlari had made its appearance amidst the milieu of religious reform movements in colonial Punjab. It had declared its contestation with the established theology of sectarian nature promoting superstitions and animosities among humanity in the very first issue. The battle of *Preetlari* had been primarily with institutionalized religions and not belief in God per se. It, in fact, challenged the established theology and framed an alternative theology which was porous, open and practical. *Preetlari's* long quarrel with institutionalised religions began with its opening issue itself. *Preetlari* suffered backlash for choosing the image of a naked cupid for its cover page over the Sikh Gurus. The magazine was vehemently criticised by religious authorities, ultimately resulting in the relocation of the editor and the magazine from the site of Smadh Akali Phullan Singh to Model Town, Lahore, within two years of its inception. The magazine was again engulfed in another controversy when Gurbakhsh Singh's article "Guru Nannak Darshan" was misinterpreted, resulting in the boycotting of *Preetlari* by Chief Khalsa Diwan and accusing its editor as an atheist by Sikh religious bodies.

Gurbakhsh Singh declared his belief in "practical religion" rather than the "doctrinal religion" in the second issue of *Preetlari*. In the issue of Oct. 1933, he said, "Our gurudwaras, temples, and mosques are not the testimonies of religion, but our character is. We can extend some benefit by sharing our experiences aiming to improve one's character, and this is the motive of *Preetlari*" (my trans.; 66). In the Jan. 1939 issue, he further declared, "*Preetlari's* aim is to incline his brotherhood towards the religion of humanity instead of doctrinal

religion . . . My competition is not with men; Man is my love. My competition is with creeds, practices, and dogmas, which are refutable. Each word of *Preetlari* is creating a smaller or a larger hole in the dogmatic castle” (51). He refuted the differences created by religions and sects and rebuked the superstitions propagated through the medium of religion and tradition. He was trying to teach the religion of humanity to mankind obliterating all the differences through love. Singh's views were very similar to Tagore, who had also opposed organised religion, saying, “When religion, instead of emancipating mind, fetters it with narrow confinement of creeds, and conventions, then it becomes the greater barrier against a true meeting of races” (qtd. in Quayum 7).

Preetlari provided Singh a space for publishing similar views on religion held by other writers. He showed preference towards writings refuting strict religious codes and challenging dogmatic religion. In the issue of October 1933, he published an article titled “Asal Mazhab Ki Hai?” (What is True Religion?) written by Santokh Singh Vidyarthi condemning communal divisions on religious lines and in the issue of June 1939, a poem written by Darshan Singh ‘Awara’ titled “Jekar Jag Vich Mazhab Na Hunda” (If the World had no Religion), showing a preference for a world without religion, was published. Gurbakhsh Singh was strictly against rigid religious divisions and did not exploit his magazine to promote a single religion like other journals of the time. He was a Sikh and a believer and even the first page of *Preetlari* had the lines from Gurbani “Ik-Onkar, Shri Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh” (hailing the Supreme God) printed at the top. He even published hymns from Gurbani in *Preetlari* from time to time and elucidated the teachings of the Gurus. But, he never presented Sikhism as the only true religion and this irked his contemporaries who were busy in constructing a separate and rigid identity for Sikhs in their journals under the influence of reform movements. *Preetlari* presented religious tolerance and while Singh condemned the superstitions propagated by religion, at the same time, he never missed the chance to praise the liberating ideas found in different religions. He was greatly inspired by Buddhism and also translated Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* in Punjabi and advertised it in the pages of *Preetlari*. The influence of Buddhism also made him append the line “A Philosophical Journal of Life,

Love, and Longing” to *Preetlari* on the cover page of every issue published from 1938 onwards. He was a keen admirer of Buddha and presented him as the ultimate soldier of love in an article titled “Preet Sipahi” (Soldier of Love) published in the issue of May 1939. In that article, he placed Buddha above Guru Nanak, which displeased Sikh religious bodies further. Though he was often labelled an atheist and *Preelari* was shunned by religious authorities, at the same time, he received support from others who were influenced by his philosophy of love. In the first issue of the magazine itself, Sir Joginder Singh wrote that “in our present stage of evolution in India, no one can render a greater service than a publicist who shows the way to unity and makes visible the subtle filaments which unite humanity. To a Sikh, there can be no higher ideal to live upto than the realisation of Unity” (5). Also, in 1939, when *Preetlari* was boycotted by Sikh religious bodies, The Free Thinkers Association, Burma sent a letter to Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee stating *Preetlari* as the “only philosophical journal of Punjab . . . [advocating] independent thinking” (47).

Gurbakhsh Singh, as stated in the editorial of *Preelari*, was attempting to teach “practical religion” to its readers, which was concerned more with the life to be lived than the afterlife. For this, he even designed *Pran-Pustak*, which was like a personal diary to be kept by readers recording their personal growth throughout the year, laying emphasis on the living human character and personality. In the issue of January 1940, Singh wrote, “man has started calling this world a dream, and he is lying wearied to be free of this dream. It is essential to remind him that life is a spectacular event and is meant to be experienced and enjoyed” (my trans.; 8). He stated that man has enslaved himself with the dogmas of God, religion, rituals, traditions, sin, punishment, heaven and hell and is living under a heavy burden. He further said that “God is actually not a heavy weight to be burdened by. He is, in fact, the name of the greatest freedom” (my trans.; 8). He considered institutionalised religion which had burdened man with the fear of sin and punishment, as false religion because true religion, according to him, was supposed to liberate mankind and not to hold man in bondage.

Preetlari's Engagement with Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism

The philosophy of cosmopolitanism is being revisited in the contemporary age resulting in unearthing the cosmopolitan thinkers. The only Indian thinker remembered for his cosmopolitan and universal philosophy criticising narrow nationalism is Tagore. However, there are stark parallels between Tagore and Gurbakhsh Singh when it comes to the critique of institutionalised religion and narrow patriotism and nationalism. Singh was often rebutted by the generation following him as propagating moralistic and idealistic philosophy. However, there is a need to recognise him as a cosmopolitan thinker shaping the Punjabi consciousness in the colonial Punjab. While nationalism and cosmopolitanism have often been studied as dichotomous terms, recent scholarship “seeks to resolve the tensions between nationalism and universal liberal ideas, viewing the two ideologies as complements rather than substitutes” (Warf 281). The engagement and reconciliation between the two ideologies were also visible in the pages of *Preetlari*. Though criticising narrow patriotism, *Preetlari* nonetheless promoted the Indian independence movement. It, in fact, attempted to show through the example of Preet Nagar that the foundation of the independent nation had to be laid on the principle of brotherhood free from all discriminating factors. The reports of the recent progress in independent struggle, the developments within the Congress Party, and other national issues were often reported in *Preetlari*. Though Gurbakhsh Singh often stated his stance to be non-political, *Preetlari* nevertheless published articles on the themes of Indian Nationalism by other authors. In an article titled “Bharat Mata da Mandir” published in May 1939, Inder Chakravarty described the temple of Bharat Mata established in Banaras and requested readers to go and witness the view themselves. *Preetlari* advocated the freedom of individuals from the narrow confines in order to achieve freedom of the nation in the true sense. *Preetlari*, through its articles, also advocated for the freedom of women in the independent nation. In an article titled “Hindustani Istri” written by Amrita Pritam for the issue of Feb. 1940, female education was advocated for the development of the Indian nation. Also, Preet Nagar had established a society where men and women not only co-habited together but also interacted freely, where male and female children attended the first

of its-kind co-ed Activity school, participated in activities and sports as well as performed plays together. The model for an independent nation highlighted in the pages of *Preetlari* was based on humanitarian principles free from the limitations of religion, class, caste and gender.

In another one-act play titled “Desh Pyaar” written by Inder Chakravarty and published in the annual edition of 1940, Muslims were portrayed in solidarity with the Hindus and Sikhs, advocating for a common nation for all in opposition to the movement for a separate Muslim nation that was gaining prominence at the time. However, on the inauguration of the Activity School, when Sir Abdul Kadar was invited, Singh received criticism for inviting the political persona actively involved in the workings of a separate Islamic Nation. He, however, responded that Sir Abdul was invited rather as a Nationalist Muslim because he wanted to engage with those sections of the Muslim population who had complaints with Hindus and the major Nationalist party. Also, the apolitical stance of *Preetlari* and Preet-Sainiks was expressed in the same article.

Preetlari’s pages were full of articles about political and national developments yet remain non-political in its commitment; though seeming strange, however, must be seen in the light of where it worked for reconciliation between nationalism and cosmopolitan outlook. Also, the larger vision of *Preetlari* always aimed to go beyond the national boundaries and to establish ‘*Pooran Bhaichara*’ or Universal Brotherhood (“*Pooran bhaichara*” 1). Therefore, even when *Preetlari* published articles in praise of Gandhi, Khadi, and the Indian National Congress, it at the same time declared its non-political commitment to any of the national movements. Though *Preetlari* promoted the use of Swadeshi through the advertisements of Swadeshi clothes made by Jahaz Marka Company in various issues and highlighted the importance of Swadeshi goods for the economic benefit of Indian Nation in an article titled “*Khadar di Mahatata*” published in Oct. 1939, it never participated formally in nationalist movements promoting narrow patriotism and even the members of Preet-Community were barred from formal participation in any movement stating “Preet-Saina is an institution of Preet and not a political one” (my trans.; “*Ek Nationalist di akh vichon*” 7). In the

editorial of May-June 1940, the editor wrote that “My views are neither nationalist nor socialist and not even religious. I am not possessed by high patriotism which enables oneself to die for his nation. I neither hate Britishers nor do I love national flags or get moved by national songs. I am not a Congressman nor a strong advocator of Congress’ actions. I am neither a lover of Khadi nor an advocator for Swadeshi” (my trans.; 2). He advocated simple living with lesser number of clothes preferably Khadi produced within India but was completely against wasting and burning one’s clothes that were not Swadeshi. His idealism was of a cosmopolitan and not a nationalist. He declared the motto of his community as-“Loyalty and service to mankind is the first human duty” (7). His religion was humanity and not nationalism.

Gurbakhsh Singh was highly in favour of adopting the best values from all the nations and building a society on cosmopolitan grounds. Preetlari often published articles on the best practices from different cultures in various countries. Also, the foundation of Activity School was laid after taking inspiration from the best education models all across the globe. In the Jan. 1939 issue, he wrote “Preetlari da Moanorath” stating

The human world can be divided into units for our better understanding. These units can be formed on the basis of nation-states. But, the manner in which different provinces within a nation coexist; similarly, all the nations should be seen as constituent units of a single world. All the nations are co-existent and co-dependent and progress of one should be considered progress of all. (my trans.; 69)

Gurbakhsh Singh's worldview thus can be viewed as one in which nations did not exist in opposition but in the light of the proposition made by Nussbaum in cosmopolitan theory where the existence is to be understood in terms of concentric circles in which the larger whole circle of humanity surrounds smaller circles like those of nations (9).

Conclusion: Trialectic Convergence of Theology, Nationalism, and Cosmopolitanism in the Composite Culture of Punjab

Preetlari participated in the trialectics of theology, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism through the philosophy of 'Preet' promoted in its page. The engagements with the religious and nationalistic questions of time managing its cosmopolitan stance highlighted the convergence between theological, national and cosmopolitan debates in the shaping of Punjabi consciousness in the early twentieth century. It is, therefore, fallacious to try to understand the shaping of Punjabi consciousness through the isolated axis of either religion or nationalism. Though the two axes often being the predominant points from which Punjabi consciousness has been studied in major scholarly works, there was a third axis developing on the lines of cosmopolitanism contesting as well as negotiating with the other two. However, the cosmopolitan outlook which was emerging primarily from the 'Preet' philosophy was not something unprecedented. The composite culture of Punjab had always been cosmopolitan in its outlook, with major religious communities co-inhabiting based on a shared diverse culture before the construction of rigidities by religious-reform movements. The cosmopolitan philosophy of 'Preet' advocated by Gurbakhsh Singh in *Preetlari*, therefore, can be viewed in continuation with the line of thought of *ishq-ibadat* of Baba Farid, Guru Nanak, Bulle Shah, Waris Shah, and others in the larger composite culture of Punjab.

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Institutionalizing Silence: A Study of Censorship, Power, and Violence in Surendra Verma's *Aathva Sarg*

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Abstract

The idea of power and influence, who wields it, and who can exercise it, is one that runs throughout the text, taking different forms and settling into different spaces of execution. Not only do different institutions assert power over the others, they also have to manage force relations within their own circle of hegemony while establishing their verdicts and interests as the common sense of the larger society while constantly silencing them and manufacturing their consent. This not only determines the idea of the pyramid of power but also actively defends it while those lower down the other are constantly negotiating with the power dynamics, struggling to not just thrive, but to even exist at an institutional level. This paper aims to study Surendra Verma's *Aathva Sarg* as a text deeply entrenched in the dynamics and the corridor of power, and how the ruling classes maintain the idea of hegemony by constantly silencing the masses into their own version of the greater good and common sense.

Keywords: Power, hegemony, consent, coercion, institutions

“See, people with power understand exactly one thing: violence.”

-Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*

Introduction

The aforementioned quote by Noam Chomsky serves as a good starting point in the discourse surrounding power as it can be used to investigate different categories of violence and how they emanate out of the ideas of power, control, and knowledge. The threat of

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physical assault is often preceded by the specter of “linguistic” or “symbolic violence” wherein the oppressor has already established a stronghold where they never need to resort to physical attack in order to dominate or oppress a group or a people. For Pierre Bourdieu, language can function not only as a tool of mere communication, but a weapon designed and designated for “a capacity of verbal violence”, which, through linguistic exchanges, can also allude to “a capacity for physical violence” explicitly or in any tone of implication (*Language and Symbolic power* 103). These exchanges in turn govern how the relationship between two entities operates, who has the agency to speak, verbally or physically assault, how the idea of knowledge is used to subjugate, and how it becomes the power which censors and invisibilizes. To establish and highlight this point further, Michel Foucault notes that, “The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others” (“The Subject and Power” 13).

Keeping these arguments in mind, this paper aims to study Surendra Verma’s *Aathva Sarg* and examine the function of power, knowledge, violence, censorship, agency, hegemony, and related ideas through a close-reading of the text, and analyze their exercise and execution within the play. The play *Aathva Sarg* (Eight Canto), revolves around the poet Kalidasa’s epic poem ‘Kumarasambhavam’ (Birth of Kumar) and the poem’s recently concluded eight canto. The poem centers on the birth of Kartikeya, the son of Lord Shiva and Parvati, with the eight canto focusing on their married life and becoming the focal point of controversy for its alleged obscene description of the same. A renowned poet in the court of King Chandragupta, Kalidasa, upon completing the eight canto, decides to read the aforementioned canto in a meeting with other artists and courtiers where charges of indecency and vulgarity are levied upon the verse. Soon after, the defenders of religion and belief, informed by artists jealous of Kalidasa of the obscenity in his latest work, demand a public apology from Kalidasa for hurting religious sentiments and request the work not be made public lest it “lead the weak-willed masses astray” (“कच्चे मस्तिष्क पर इसका बुरा प्रभाव पड़ेगा”; my trans.; Verma 38). Refusing to get drawn into a conflict with the protectors of faith, King Chandragupta, who also happens

to be Kalidasa's father-in-law, requests Kalidasa to understand the gravity of the situation, the position of the complainant, and to either omit the names of Shiva and Parvati from the text, or to skip the descriptions of their intimate conjugal life altogether. Kalidasa, taking this as an affront to his artistic self and as censorship of his artistic expression, withdraws the work completely, refusing to make it public or sharing it with the masses anywhere in any way, shape, or form, eventually choosing to maintain silence on the topic of "Kumarasambhavam."

Michel Foucault believes that power, which is everywhere, functions on the most basic human levels of social relationships, which in turn inform all institutions, organizations, and all social communication. He further notes that power does not function in binaries or in a top-down structure, but instead, power is always circulating, always dynamic, and always being contested, especially in maintenance of everyday status quo, or what those who produce knowledge believe to be normal (*Discipline and Punish* 93). Thus, power not only constantly shapes and re-shapes what is knowledge, but who has the access to shape it, and who cannot reach it but must abide by it. The play itself is an amalgamation of complex social ties where what Foucault calls 'force relations' are constantly at play to gain an advantage, secure one's position, maintain the idea of influence and strength, or simply exist in the daily scheme of life. These force relations can be any act in one's social settings or communication and are always, once again, in flux, ever-changing, ever-moving, constantly redefining both the force and the relationships they represent. One of the first examples of this in the play is a rather inconspicuous comment by Dindnaga, another artist at Chandragupta's court, who remarks on the impurity of language and linguistic sense in the latest canto by Kalidasa, when the latter recites the verse in front of a select group (Verma 29). Before Kalidasa could answer, Dindnaga is rebuked by Saumitra, another artist whose rebuttal demands a wider space and license for artistic expression and language. Here, Dindnaga is not only trying to question the legitimacy of the foremost artist of his era, but also trying to establish his own critique at the same time, battling the force relations that have put Kalidasa on a social and artistic pedestal. This is proven when it is revealed that he is the one who

informs Dharma Guru, the religious leader of the kingdom, of the eight canto and its supposed obscenity and sacrilegious content, rolling the dice of a power-play which ends with the discontinuation of Kumarasambhavam. Dindnag is not only plying for the downfall of an artistic rival, but also garnering capital for himself at the same time.

This idea of capital, which differs from the concept of economic capital, falls under, what Pierre Bourdieu describes as, social capital. These distinct varieties of capital emerge out of Bourdieu's concept of 'fields', which are numerous social settings where humans communicate and express their different tendencies or outlook while challenging each other for the accumulation and disposal of various kinds of capital (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* 94). The field or the setting of a field can range from social networking sites to a place of work or worship and consists of any relationship which is social, cultural, economic, intellectual, educational, etc., a grid of any social network or relation. Bourdieu contends that humans interact with and experience power differently depending on which field they are in, leading to the creation of different kinds of capital, namely economic, cultural, symbolic, and social (245). Social capital, which is accrued through networking, establishing social relationships, and skillfully operating connections (127), is produced and reproduced aiming to determine one's social status within a particular field. Dindnaga's tendencies, or rather dispositions as Bourdieu calls it, in the field of artistic expression is one of critiquing his rival Kalidasa for an ounce of social capital; an act which is solidified by his conversation with Dharma Guru, establishing his capital in the eyes of a religious leader, his followers, and fellow like-minded artists. Dharma Guru, who is described in the text as a man away from worldly affairs or the idea of political and economic gains, is a man of immense symbolic capital, something he is well aware of even with his ignorance of practical or materialistic matters. Symbolic capital, for Bourdieu is recognition based on one's fame, authority, honor, acts of service etc. and acts as a capital one can hold in a given field, and comes with a vast, even if initially latent, potential for political, cultural, and economic gains, based on one's relation to that field.

In a land where the ideas of God, religion, and worship play central roles in the cultural, social, and political existence of a people, a man like Dharma Guru becomes not only a representative of God on earth, but is elevated to a height of knowledge, power, and pomp that exceed that of even a king. His existence then takes a political turn where he can sway the decisions or the decree of a ruler, based on his own sacred knowledge and the supposed will of the people. If the foremost representative of Shiva in the land of Ujjaini, of Chandragupta, believes Kalidasa's canto to be offensive and vulgar, it must become the common sense of the people for he wills it so, even if the said people have no access to the document in question. Slavoj Žižek notes that, "Social-symbolic violence at its purest appears as its opposite, as the spontaneity of the milieu in which we dwell, of the air we breathe" (Žižek 35), asserting how symbolic language is so embedded in the language humans use that they end up becoming the common truth with their "imposition of a certain universe of meaning" (Žižek 11), while making sure that any other universe of meaning appears unreasonable or unfathomable. When Dharma Guru attends a ceremony to celebrate Kalidasa and his most recent work, followed by his recitation of the text, not only is he deeply offended and hurt by the content, he makes sure to publically deride anyone who stands with the author, proclaiming that, "The creator and consumers of this work are sinners. Anyone who participates in the celebration of such an unethical and unrighteous poet is a sinner. Anyone who stands for his cause is a sinner, anyone who aids him is a sinner" (इसका रचयिता पापी है. ऐसे अधर्मी और अनाचारी कवि के सम्मान में समारोह में जो भाग ले वह पापी है। जो उसका निमित्त बने वह पापी है, जो सहायता दे वह पापी है; my trans., Verma 37). Force relations exercised by Dindnaga have now been furthered and much exaggerated by Dharma Guru, who makes sure that in the wake of his proclamation no one attending the ceremony feels without guilt or blame, and soon follow him in his derision of Kalidasa and his work. This selective outrage of one man, based on his social and symbolic status, soon becomes the consciousness of the collective without even reaching the public which is supposed to be led astray by the work in question.

The play has a very clear conflict of power where at the bottom of the Foucauldian pyramid are the masses whose deed has already been decided for them, without them having a say in that matter. The

artist whose work has raised the question is above the masses for he had the space and the freedom to produce the kind of work he did; but that is the extent of his freedom. Those directly above him in the hierarchical pyramid ensure that his artistic freedom and the freedom of expression is curbed and monitored accordingly. As Foucault notes, “The power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed as a thing, or transferred as a property; it functions like a piece of machinery. And, although it is true that its pyramidal organization gives it a 'head', it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power' and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field” (*Discipline and Punish* 196). The field is permanent because there is no escaping the pyramid, and it is continuous for power is a constant struggle, as is apparent in the tussle between not only the protectors of faith and Kalidasa, but also the cold war between the institute of religion and the office of the king, the institute of monarchy. While the king represents the will of the people, Dharma Guru represents the faith of the people; and in a battle of faith and will, the former triumphs, for the king himself is a representative of god and must abide by the word of those who lay down the path of god for the society. Even under a monarchy, the king must stand aside for the institution of religion lest he lose the people he means to rule over, something Chandragupta does in the play after all efforts at diplomacy and politicking have failed. Not only do different institutions assert power over the others lower down the pyramid, they also have to manage force relations within their own dominant circles, while establishing their verdicts and interests as the common sense of the larger society and constantly silencing them and manufacturing their consent. This censorship only establishes the rule of the dominant classes and consolidates the hegemony of those in power.

When the representatives of the religious institute demand that Kalidasa be punished for producing a text that violates the sacred image of God (Verma 38), they are not only questioning the legitimacy of his representation, but also curbing the freedom and expression afforded to arts and literature to expand and enhance the popular imagination. This brings us to the question of institutionalized silencing and censorship within the play, and how it helps in maintaining the hegemony and status quo of the ruling

classes. Institutionalized silencing here does not refer to the physical detainment in order to suppress a voice or actions, but a subtler, more layered execution of censorship where the very notion of silence becomes common sense and the greater good of the society. The systems at work within the play, especially the institution of faith and religion, and that of the monarchy, work in tandem, even if the latter does so reluctantly, to ensure the suppression of dissenting voice or of voices that deviate from dictated paths, paths that have been laid down by those with access to knowledge and power. Oscar G. Brockett is of the opinion that, "In the arts, we often see it [censorship] as concerned merely with issues about what should be permitted or prohibited. But the arts are secondary; the primary issue always is one of power, a battle over which group's values and standards shall prevail" (Brockett 1). The issues in the play stem not from Kalidasa's alleged obscenity in the canto, but the fact that Kalidasa paints a picture which allows for a different interpretation of the narratives already confirmed by those institutions, leading to the issue becoming an epistemic battle and a battle about holding and hoarding the popular imagination of the masses.

Knowledge, accessibility, and freedom of expression within the realms of the play are governed by the institution of religion, whose 'rule', or rather word, is solidified by the monarchy and implemented and upheld by the classes directly below them. When Kalidasa presents a picture of gods that differs from that of the accepted word, he is in the process of toppling the accepted knowledge, the knowledge that has been deemed the common sense of the people. The silencing of such an expression must begin by restoring the status quo and consolidating the hegemony of the ruling classes, which is achieved by setting up a committee made up of representatives from different upper-class sectors of the society, and only one sole artist in Saumitra, to bend the general perception in the direction of the ruling word (Verma 43). Throughout the play, the ruling classes strived to maintain their rule over the common masses, going so far as censoring a court poet of the reputation of Kalidasa in the garb of maintaining social and religious harmony lest it corrupts the innocent mind of the masses who constantly remain, passive agents, denied a voice. This hegemony is once again maintained through the workings of manufactured consent and the

idea of brutal force. As Antonio Gramsci has noted that these two aspects, "...balance each other reciprocally without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always to ensure that force would appear to be based on the consent of the majority expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion..." (Gramsci 81), where the consent is fabricated from a people who do not have any voice, any agency, within the play, and the power of consensual brutal force is felt when it is implied that the public would either want Kalidasa exiled or imprisoned or worse (Verma 54), effectively leaving no decision in the hands of either the public or Kalidasa, while using one against the other, denying them both freedom and agency.

The confinement of the freedom of expression of the artist and the monitoring of their work begins at a very early stage within the play, specifically where the language used by Kalidasa is subject to questions and remarks by Dindanaga, a peer, who reflects on the apparent impurity of the language used in the poem and the freedom Kalidasa has taken with it (29). Roland Barthes believes that

True censorship, however, consists not in forbidding (in abridging, omitting, starving out) but in excessively nourishing, preserving, keeping, suffocating, and immersing in (intellectual, romantic, erotic) stereotypes, only administering the recognized words of others, the rehashed substance of familiar opinion as the only sustenance. The true instrument of censorship is not the police, it is the commonplaces. In the same way a language defines itself better by way of what it compels one to say (its compulsory rubrics) than by way of what it forbids one to say (its rhetorical rules), societal censorship exists not where one prevents from saying, but instead where one forces to say, so social censorship is not found where speech is hindered, but where it is constrained (Barthes 132).

The same sentiment is echoed by King Chandragupta when he insists Kalidasa remove the name of the gods from a work specifically about those gods to appease the various levels of the society or risk facing the wrath of those he irks (54). This method of

censoring is much more layered and subtle than the usual outright outcry one is subjected to and forces the artist in question to not just conform but also to self-censor to express and become a product of the same environment one set out to reject or correct. Rather than censor himself or reject the advice of the King, Kalidasa chooses to completely abandon the work instead, opting not to make the text public in a bid to affirm his artistic integrity and self-esteem. But the mechanism of censorship and hegemony have already won here when they have successfully made an established artist like Kalidasa retract his much-awaited and acclaimed poem, whose seven cantos had already been made public, and made him question the position of the artist in the society, the relationship of art and religion, and whether the latter is even possible without the support of the former. The entire outcome of the process of censorship and Kalidasa's renunciation of his own work can be surmised by Bourdieu's opinion on self-censorship and how the contents of both form and expressions are chained by the structure of the field when he opines that, "Censorship is the most perfect and the least visible when every social agent has nothing to say except what they are objectively allowed to say: In this case, they do not even have to perform self-censorship, for with the internalized forms of perception and expression asserted in every expression, they are effectively censored once and for all" (qtd. in Bachleitner 3).

The status of knowledge and all the inaccessibility around it is power's way of keeping the masses at bay, in doubt, and in awe of those who do wield all the information and are allowed into this tower of mystery and influence. It is represented as a burden not all can carry so that the masses are not just influenced but also feel indebted to those who do carry the supposed immense weight of these responsibilities. The institutions and the classes in power and domination constantly push and legitimize the narratives of their control in order to maintain the status quo and the idea of normalcy around it; control which must remain guarded from the questions of the common people, while promising to safeguard their interests. Noam Chomsky believes that, "the idea behind royalty was that there's this other species of individuals who are beyond the norm and who the people are not supposed to understand. That's the standard way you cloak and protect power: you make it look

mysterious and secret, above the ordinary person—otherwise why should anybody accept it?” (Chomsky 30). The many institutions and those who solidify their rule must keep knowledge sacred lest it become common not as a means of learning but as a means of elevating one’s position. For the religious institutions of Ujjaini, Kalidasa threatened to supersede their seat and make the knowledge only afforded to them familiar and accessible. What Kalidasa does then is not just express his artistic views and imaginations but create a new language of discourse available to the masses, which leads the arguments of this paper to the concepts of contra-censorship and counter-hegemony.

Kalidasa, for all intents and purposes, is not actively creating or birthing a new language. Instead, his artistic vision helps in realizing the latent subversive potential of his art, which helps in forming a new language in the discourse of religious and cultural matters, extending and expanding the definition how one can view a deity, or how our gods can instead be seen in our image, with the latter notion being viewed as an egregious display of his craft by the powers to be. Roland Barthes believes that, “The ultimate subversion (contra-censorship) does not necessarily consist in saying what shocks public opinion, morality, law, the police, but in inventing a paradoxical discourse: invention (and not provocation) is a revolutionary act: it cannot be accomplished other than in setting up a new language” (Barthes 132). When Kalidasa is making public the intimate conjugal life of gods, he is creating a discourse which opens up the possibilities of viewing them in a more humane, approachable light where the common masses can form a more personal connection with those they worship. The institutions take this as an affront not just to their beliefs about the sacredness of their gods and what they consider to be their “private life”, but also to Kalidasa opening up their lives, and by extension the knowledge held by these institutions, to newer interpretations, challenging the epistemic hold they have over the populace. This creation of a new language, or interpretation of knowledge, presents a tool that potentially has the power to topple the cultural and social capital and supremacy of certain institutes and those who represent them, presenting the opportunity of possibly making them or their need redundant or obsolete. This fear, and the desire to maintain the

epistemic grip over the masses, drives the argument to not just ban and censor the poem in question, but to publically humiliate the creator lest others be tempted to follow suit and challenge those in power in any which way. This fear also moves the ruling classes to eliminate the masses from any decision-making regarding the fate of the poem, not giving them any space to even decide if the work can be harmful for them, simply because it has threatened their own authority and seat, and they cannot risk the public indulging Kalidasa, or having any agency in the matter. Hence, the derision of the artist from all corners of the state which supposedly represent the public interest, and hence the pressure applied on an otherwise sympathetic king, and, as Foucault insists, “It is a question of forming obedient individuals” (*Discipline and Punish* 140).

This pressure created in any hegemonic rule also invites the opportunity to retaliate or rise against it in whatever capacity possible, leaving room for resistance and affording space for possible subversion. Foucault, who believes freedom to be an ongoing, constant, struggle where power is present and exercised in our various every day relations, on differing levels, and resistance to that power being a common feature of that dynamic, noting that, “These struggles are not exactly for or against the ‘individual’ but rather they are struggles against the ‘government of individualization’” (“The Subject and Power” 6). In *Aathva Sarg* Kalidasa faces a similar individualization in the play where the institutions of faith, monarchy, and even certain sectors of art, turn against him and influence, or rather impose, a similar turn in the masses as well. In the play his struggles do not end when he abandons the poem, rather, he continues to combat the institutions with newer art, this time by writing something that will appease the ruling classes and the masses alike, in the shape of the play *Abhigyanshakuntalam*, a tale of love, romance, separation, and eventual union. The play sees a turn in the fortunes of Kalidasa as he once again becomes the revered court poet post *Abhigyanshakuntalam*, who now talks about more acceptable themes after shunning the alleged obscenity and vulgarity of his previous work. This does not imply the compromise of his ideals, rather, this is Kalidasa making a space for himself where he can lay down a stronger foundation for retaliation and protest as hegemony

is inherently unstable with power being in a constant flux with temporary arrangements, leaving room for counter-hegemonic discourse. A counter-hegemonic discourse must pave its way to acceptance and alignment within the local struggle and Kalidasa's attempt through his latest play gets him the support of the masses that he previously lacked, propelling his status to a height where the institutions can't challenge him lest they lose their own support. Gramsci defines hegemony as, "a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria ... between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups ... equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point" (Qtd in Barker and Jane 112), leaving space for the hegemonic control to be constantly acquired and maintained, a struggle Kalidasa partakes in this war of attrition with the ruling institutions.

Conclusion

By the end of *Aathva Sarg* it has been established that neither does Kalidasa require the support of the monarchy, nor does he fear the institution of religion anymore, as his newfound popularity with the masses will ensure stricter scrutiny by them regarding any attempts made at his life or reputation. He asserts that, "At one point in my life I required power and status but not anymore. If the government bans my work, it will be read in a different state. If they imprison me, they will be called evil-minded and shrewd. And if they murder me, the masses will rain down upon them like the first rainfall of the blackest clouds of the monsoon" ("जीवन के इक मोड़ पर सत्ता की सहायता की आवश्यकता थी...अब नहीं है। अगर शासन मेरी रचना पर रोक लगाएगा, तो वो दूसरे राज्य में सुनी जाएगी। मुझे बंदीगृह में डाल दे तो संकिरणबुद्धि और कुटिलमन कहलाएगा। और अगर मेरी हत्या कर देगा, तो लोकमत उसके विरुद्ध आषाढ़ के पहले काले-कजरारे मेघों के समान भड़क उठेगा, my trans.; Verma 71). The tide of power and the dynamic with the masses has most certainly turned by the end of the play, so much so that the play ends with the manuscript of 'Kumarasambhavam' in Kalidasa's hands and him contemplating whether he should complete the unfinished text now that the power and influence is flowing in a different direction and that the institutions can no longer censor or silence him, establishing his effective counter-

hegemonic struggle. Judith Butler asserts that, “Censorship is always the instrument of the weak. Yes, it wields power, but it confesses that matters are already out of the control of those who use it. Censorship is deployed by those who seek to contain or eliminate a point of view they do not want to be heard. It attributes great power to that point of view...” (Butler, “There Can Be No Critique” n.p.). Kalidasa manages to not just carve out his own place post his struggle with those in power, he manages to assert the dominance of his own position and self, subverting the narrative around him and challenging the flow of power. The institution of religion moved against Kalidasa to eliminate his point of view but, in the process, exposed the weakness and insecurity of their own position and handed him the opportunity to launch a counter-hegemonic discourse which could always potentially topple their hold on the masses, which, in due time, it did.

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Spike-lying: From an Ascetic Practice to a Showman's Stunt

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Abstract

Focusing on the Hindu ascetic practice known as *śankuśīl*, this paper reveals how the contemporary West has come to perceive this form of religious self-mortification as a type of showman's stunt. *Śankuśīl*, better known in the West as spike-lying, is one of the many austerities or *tapas* recognized by Hindu traditions. It involves the practitioner lying or sitting on a bed or seat of nails with the aim of accruing religious merits or magical powers through self-mortification. This paper tries to trace the roots of this practice, in an attempt to show how the Hindus themselves have understood it. It then shows how Western colonial writers led a disinformation campaign against Hindu ascetic practices like this in order to defame the practitioners and their culture and religion. The paper reveals how they effectively desacralized this form of austerity and represented it as a type of stunt performed by religious mendicants to impress their patrons. Special attention is paid to the role of the media in spreading disinformation about *śankuśīl*.

Keywords: Spike-lying, asceticism, hinduism, colonialism, desacralization, stunt, showmen

Introduction

"The fakir on a bed of spikes possibly topped the list of interesting fakir sights," writes Rianne Siebenga (445). This was not just true for the colonial period, about which she was writing. One finds that such images are still widely circulated outside South Asia to stereotype Indian ascetics, sometimes negatively. These appear everywhere – in fictions, travelogues, postcards, magic lantern slideshows, movies,

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reality shows, sideshows, editorial cartoons and even in comic books for children and adolescents. But what does spike-lying ascetics as ubiquitous in South Asia as the wide circulation of such images abroad seem to indicate? The anthropologist Kirin Narayan reports that her father wrote to her from India in 1989, “I have not seen a bed of spikes ever since I was six years old, and that was at the Kumbha Mela [a massive gathering for ascetics] in Nasik. I think spike beds are out of fashion” (qtd. in Narayan 502). Writing almost a century earlier, E. Washburn Hopkins announces the same in a note, “the iron spiked-bed ... is now out of fashion” (370).¹ If we consider early Western representations of Indian ascetics, we will find that the ‘bed of spikes’ was not ‘in fashion’ even in the pre-colonial period. Marco Polo, who paid some attention to the Indian *chaugis* (*yogis*), does not mention the ‘bed of spikes’ (see 266 – 268). Neither did seventeenth century French travellers like Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Francois Bernier, though both had elaborately described other types of severe austerities practiced by Hindu ascetics in India (for details see Tavernier, vol. II, 190 – 202; Bernier 234 -239). How could spike-lying ascetics escape the notice of observant travellers like Polo, Tavernier, and Bernier if they were a common sight in India? Why could Kirin and her father not find them in the post-Independence era? Spike-lying ascetics were never as numerous in India as their frequent representations in foreign visual and print media would suggest. What could then account for the wide circulation of their images abroad? This paper tries to suggest an answer.

To account for frequent appearances of spike-lying Indian ascetics in Western visual and print media, this paper delves into the history of Western encounters with this practice. It is necessary to point out at the very beginning that though spike-lying has come to be associated with the *fakirs* in common parlance, it is the Hindu ascetics, called *sadhus* or *sannyasins*, who practice this type of self-mortification. Fakirs, from Arabic *faqir* meaning “poor,” are essentially Muslim ascetics (Narayan 479). However, since the colonial era, the West has frequently used the word *fakir* as an umbrella term for all non-Christian ascetics from South Asia, irrespective of their religious affiliations. The paper begins by trying to trace the roots of this practice to show how the ascetics themselves as well as the ordinary Hindus understood it. In the process, it throws

some light on the Hindu idea of *tapas* which is conceptually different from the Christian idea of penance for sins. It then goes on to show how Western colonial writers led a disinformation campaign against Hindu self-mortifying practices like this. Their aim has been to defame the Hindu ascetics who were perceived as threats to colonial rule in India. Particularly, spike-lying, interpreted as an extreme form of self-mortification, became one of their main targets of attack. Attention is paid to the role played by Western media in spreading disinformation about this practice. The paper finally reveals how spike-lying is currently conceptualized outside India. To do this, it inspects a few popular works - both literary and non-literary. It emerges that the colonial disinformation campaign has so thoroughly desacralized the practice that it has come to acquire a completely different meaning today. What was once understood as a form of religious austerity is now conceptualized as a showman's stunt, particularly outside South Asia. In the process, spike-lying's association with Hinduism has been increasingly ignored abroad - if not entirely forgotten. Ironically, this has weakened the colonial disinformation campaign which sought to defame Hinduism and its followers through the depiction of spike-lying. The paper thus highlights how the understanding of spike-lying outside South Asia transformed through ages. It also reveals how disinformation hinders one's understanding of cultural practices different from one's own.

One may note that despite Western fascination with spike-lying Indian ascetics, no study has exclusively focused on this practice till now. To the colonial writers, it was just one of the many extreme forms of Hindu austerities which they detested. That is why they never made it an exclusive subject of study, though they did depict it time after time in their fiction and non-fictional works. Stranger, perhaps, is the contemporary indifference to this topic. To my knowledge, Kirin Narayan is the only contemporary scholar who pays some serious attention to spike-lying Hindu ascetics. However, her article examines American representations of Hindu holy men in general and does not devote itself solely to spike-lying. Also, the scope of her article prevents her from probing deeper into the origin and rationale of this form of self-mortification. The same must be said for Rianne Siebenga's article, which concentrates more on overall representation of Indian ascetics in the West than on any

specific ascetic practice. Moreover, both studies focus only on Western discourses. These pay very little attention to indigenous conceptualization of Hindu ascetic practices. It cannot be denied that this paper follows the same course in the long run, even though it does foreground the Hindu outlook in greater details. I have not yet discovered any work which studies spike-lying entirely from the Hindu perspective. This is an area which demands more attention in future.

Spike-lying: Historical Background

In order to realize how the colonial disinformation campaign distorted Western comprehension of spike-lying, we first need to understand how the Hindus themselves make sense of this practice. One must note at the very beginning that ‘spike-lying’ is a name given by the British observers. The Hindu ascetics call this type of self-mortification by a different name. They call it either *sāṅkuśī* or *kantaka sajya* (Walker 79; Oman 45). Some even describe it as *sarasajya*, obviously alluding to Bhishma’s bed of arrows in the *Mahabharata*. This is one among the multiple forms of austerities known as *tapas*. A brief introduction to *tapas* is in order here. As pointed out earlier, *tapas* is different from the Christian idea of penance for sin - though the word is often translated into English as ‘penance’ or ‘mortification’. The Sanskrit word *tapas* comes from the root *tap*, which denotes ‘heat’. As Kaelber points out, this heat is “frequently creative and life generating”. The Rig Veda describes it as “the force behind creation itself” (Kaelber 192). The Gods rely on this heat to create or alter reality (Kaelber 192; Narayan 480). However, Kaelber informs that in early Sanskrit texts *tapas* also signified ‘pain’ and ‘suffering’; particularly, undesirable pain generated through destructive bodily heat (198). He believes that with the passage of time these two different meanings of the word coalesced to form the notion of *tapas* as deliberate self-mortification undertaken to burn away impurities (200-211). In other words, the self-imposed pains endured by the performers of austerities generate spiritual heat that destroys evil and impurities inside them. Kaelber explains, “The human body because it is impure must be symbolically consumed through the heat of asceticism in order that a requisite purity – correlated with a divine state – may be attained”

(202-203). Therefore, *tapas* fundamentally differs from penance. Kaelber explains that penance is done for the atonement of one's specific wrongdoings or sins, whereas *tapas* is practiced to purify and elevate oneself above the general human condition (207). By getting rid of the impurities in him through *tapas*, a man is believed to reach a higher state of existence. He acquires spiritual merit, and, through it, attains a blissful existence in here and the afterlife. He is also believed to acquire spiritual or magic powers, sometimes huge enough to awe the Gods themselves. The practitioners of *tapas* are called *tapasvins* (Walker 79). *Tapas* can be both eye-catching and plain. Narayan rightly points out that it is the "spectacular *tapas*" that has "most engaged the Western imagination" (480).

The extreme forms of self-mortifications practiced by the Hindu ascetics have always baffled the foreigners. What they usually find incomprehensible is the fact that these often maim the practitioners. One may think of the austerity known as *ūrdhvaabāhu*, the practitioners of which gradually lose the ability to use one or both arms by keeping these forever held aloft. Foreigners naturally find it difficult to understand why the Hindu ascetics inflict such self-harm, especially when Hindu ascetic traditions offer the practitioners many milder types of austerities to practice. There are several types of austerities which do not involve self-mutilation. Like the vow of perpetual silence observed by some Hindu ascetics (Walker 79). It is necessary to inspect Sanskrit sacred literature in order to comprehend why some Hindu ascetics prefer to injure themselves through their ascetic practices even when milder options are available. Sanskrit texts often depict characters performing severe austerities to gain their desired boon. For example, in the epic the *Ramayana*, sage Viswamitra performs severe austerities for eons to become a Brahmin. Likewise, the demon king Ravana practices severe self-mortifications to gain the boon of invulnerability from the Creator Lord Brahma. In the *Mahabharata* too, several characters undergo severe *tapas* to achieve the desired result (for detailed discussion, see Hopkins 367-374; also, Lanman 138 - 144). Hopkins writes, "the tales are many which show that the Munis [ascetics] either stood, or hung themselves upside down, ... the aim in doing so was attainment not only of power but of highest bliss" (369). These texts seem to give the impression that more the suffering endured, the greater is the

reward obtained. Naturally, such texts inspire some Hindu ascetics to practice extreme self-mortifications. It needs to be pointed out that there exist some sacred texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, 17.5 and 17.6, which do condemn extreme austerities (*Gita* 638-639). Nevertheless, many are lured into self-mutilation by the prospect of attaining a heavenly life and/or gaining enormous powers which such extreme self-mortifications are believed to confer.²

Sāṅkuṣī or spike-lying is one of the more rigorous self-mortifications practiced by Hindu ascetics. Its origin remains shrouded in mystery till now. Hopkins describes it as “a later form of asceticism” (370). However, Lanman points out that Buddhist *Jataka* tales present ascetics who reclined on thorns (144). It seems that spike-lying has developed out of this practice. Some of the *Jataka* tales are very ancient, dating back to the second century BCE. Since these record a practice similar in essence to spike-lying, one may surmise that spike-lying must have had ancient roots. However, it could not have been very popular before the colonial era. As stated earlier, early European visitors did not describe it. Nor does it appear in the list of eighteen austerities provided by the eighteenth century *ūrdhva* ascetic Pran Puri³ to the British administrator Jonathan Duncan (*The European Magazine* 263-264). On the other hand, the practitioners of *sāṅkuṣī* often claim a mythic origin for their practice. The spike-lying ascetic Prakashanand⁴, who became the other informant of Duncan, names three famous mythical predecessors who supposedly practiced this form of *tapas* in the past. They are the sage Agnibarna, the demon king Ravana and the warrior Bhishma (Duncan 51). But Prakashanand’s knowledge of myths was certainly not very accurate. The Agnibarna, whom he mentions, could not be traced despite the best of my efforts. The most famous character bearing this name was a lustful king of the Suryavamsha dynasty⁵ and not a sage. The *Ramayana* does mention Ravana practicing various self-mortifications to gain power. Perhaps, Prakashanand chanced upon one of the many versions of the epic that described the demon king performing spike-lying. However, the ascetic is entirely wrong when he names Bhishma. In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma was not performing any austerity when he was made to lay on the *sarasajya* or the bed of arrows. Rather, during the epic Kurukshetra war, Arjuna’s⁶ arrows so thoroughly pierced Bhishma’s body that it did

not touch the ground. He appeared to lay on a bed of arrows or the *sarasajya* (*sara* = arrows, *sajya* = bed). Prakashanand was no doubt inspired by Bhishma, as he calls his practice *sarasajya* and not *sāṅkuṣī*. But his mistaken understanding of Bhishma's *sarasajya* shows that he had not read the epic carefully.⁷ Duncan himself felt that Prakashanand was not a very intelligent or learned man (46). He is, thus, unreliable as a source. To me, it appears that *sāṅkuṣī* was never as popular among Hindu ascetics as some other kinds of severe austerities were. It was the European colonizers who came to represent it as the quintessential Hindu austerity.

Through the Eyes of European Colonizers: Spike-lying a Sign of Cultural and Religious Backwardness

It was during the colonial era that the West first came to know about spike-lying. Kirin Narayan rightly points out that the “first known man on a bed of nails” was Prakashanand, whose portrait was published along with Duncan's article entitled “An Account of Two Fakeers with their Portraits” in the journal *Asiatick Researches* in 1799 (483).⁸ She claims that while Duncan described the ascetic in a “spirit of non-judgemental interest”, later reproductions of Prakashanand's image served to illustrate “India's moral backwardness” (Narayan 483). Why did the West choose to denigrate ascetic practices like *sāṅkuṣī*? To answer this question, one must consider the history of Western encounters with Hindu ascetics. It needs to be noted that Western prejudice against Hindu ascetics did not originate in the colonial era but dates back to pre-colonial times. Both Tavernier and Bernier abhorred Indian ascetics.⁹ Though Tavernier expressed his wonderment at the suffering that these ascetics voluntarily underwent, he vilified them as fanatic irrational evil libertines (198 – 201). Bernier was even more harsh. He described Indian ascetics as “vegetative rather than rational beings” who are “destitute of piety” and full of “brutality and ignorance” (236). It has already been claimed that the animosity expressed by these early European travellers sprang from both religious prejudice and chauvinistic pride (Chakraborty 157 – 158). As the colonial era dawned in India, animosity towards these ascetics became even more intense. To British colonial authorities, the Indian ascetics were not simply undesirable representatives of rival faiths. Rather, they saw

both Hindu and Muslim ascetics as major threats to colonial rule. The British feared that the peripatetic ascetics from both religions could work as political spies for Indian rulers and spread disaffection against British rule. Also, some groups of Hindu and Muslim ascetics served as mercenary soldiers in the armies of Indian rulers. The colonizers apprehended that hostile Indian rulers could use them against the colonial government during wars. Shuja ud-Daula, the ruler of Avadh, did in fact deploy a troop of six thousand mercenary Hindu ascetics belonging to the Naga sect against the British during the Battle of Buxar in 1764. As William Dalrymple explains, they served as “Shuja’s most feared crack troops” (191). Moreover, both Hindu and Muslim ascetics rose in armed rebellion against the British during the early phase of colonial rule in Bengal (1763 – 1800). This was the so-called Fakir and Sannyasi Rebellion, which was crushed by the British after an intense struggle. The European colonizers in India thus had good reasons to despise the ascetics. Finally, both Hindu and Muslim ascetics were seen as obstacles in the path of eventual acculturation and Europeanization of the Indians, which was the stated goal of colonial rule in India (for more details see Chakraborty 159 – 160). This fear of the ascetics, coupled with pre-existing religious and cultural prejudices, made the colonial authorities launch a disinformation campaign against them. The aim was to attenuate the threat posed by Indian ascetics by creating a gulf between the ascetics and the acculturated Indians. It may be observed in passing that the colonizers were largely successful in this task. Oman observes that, “the alumni of the Indian schools and universities, inoculated with Western ideas, and anxious to do credit to their training, generally affect ...a supercilious unconcern about *sadhus* and *sadhuism*” (280). Coming from a colonial expert on the topic, this leaves little room for doubt.

As a part of their disinformation campaign against the Indian ascetics, the colonizers targeted their ascetic practices. While trying to explain the rationale behind their severe self-mortifications, the colonizing Europeans rarely paid any attention to the ascetics’ explanations. Instead, they boldly proposed their fanciful theories. It was the unequal power relationship between the colonizers and the colonized that allowed the Europeans to suppress the voices of the ascetics. This resulted in the desacralization of the ascetic practices

of Hindu ascetics. Ignoring the religious and spiritual sides of such practices, colonial discourse presented these as stunts performed to impress patrons. Naturally, greater attention was paid to the more severe and eye-catching austerities. What Siebenga observes regarding the magic lantern shows applies to the situation in general: “Why these ascetics have taken these vows, or how their lives are embedded within a religious culture and history is not of interest. The texts appeal solely to our senses ...” (456). It was not just the colonial authorities or casual European visitors who spread disinformation against the ascetics. Even professional European scholars had joined the fray. One may take Oman as an example. John Campbell Oman was a British professor of natural sciences. He was one of the first Western scholars to produce scholarly works on Hindu ascetic practices - what he termed as *sadhuism*. His book *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India* (1903) remains influential even today. But the problem with Oman is that he never consulted the ascetics themselves. Instead of directly asking them about their motivations for carrying out such severe self-mortifications, he chose to invent his own explanations. Oman felt that the lure of an indolent lifestyle and the desire for money and fame are the real factors that motivate Hindu ascetics to perform austerities. He dismisses many of the *tapas* performed by Hindu ascetics as “devoid of sincerity”, practiced merely as “a mere performance or show.” In his opinion, these merely serve “the very practical object of advertising the *sadhu* and attracting admirers and clients” (Oman 45, 49, 50). While he could not dismiss the severer forms of self-mutilations that easily, he suggests throughout the book that the Hindu ascetics are motivated more by greed and vanity than by religious devotion. Similar is the opinion of the American scholar Charles Rockwell Lanman. Though he recognizes that the “unnatural and far-fetched austerities” gained popularity because they promised the attainment of psychic powers, he also felt that the ascetics were really motivated by the desire of “gratified vanity or of reputation or of gifts” (Lanman 139 – 140). It is to be noted that these scholars did not reach such conclusions through any concrete and verifiable procedure. Instead, these are mere opinions presented as facts. Such a subterfuge would have drawn criticism in our age. However, no questions were raised at all by other scholars in the colonial period.

Western conceptualization of spike-lying was largely influenced by the colonial disinformation campaign against Hindu ascetics. Both Narayan and Siebenga point out that images of ascetics lying on spikes were used to convey India's "moral backwardness" (Narayan 483; Siebenga 456, 462). Such images thereby justified the necessity of prolonging British rule in India, the stated aim of which was to 'uplift' the natives by eliminating such 'backwardness'. Interestingly, spike-lying gradually came to acquire a more neutral connotation abroad with the passage of time. Narayan does recognize this when she writes about the application of this image in marketing advertisements in contemporary America (497). However, she does not try to trace how this change came about. I contend that from a sign of India's backwardness spike-lying has come to signify India's exoticness today. It still remains a marker of alterity, but stands for a different kind of alterity. It would be interesting to trace how spike-lying gradually shed off the negative connotations which were earlier associated with it. As Narayan shows, for a while Prakashanand remained the only spike-lying ascetic whose image was circulated abroad. His image, "redrawn to different proportions," was reproduced in Charles Gold's *Oriental Drawings* (1806), Reverend Tennant's *Indian Recreations* (1804), William Butler's *The Land of the Vedas* (1872) and in the journal *Missionary Herald* (1833). Narayan observes that "[I]n all these cases the image is used to illustrate India's moral backwardness" (483). We might add that these works tried to explain away Hindu self-mortifications as arising out of the ascetics' craving for either fame or of an indolent existence. For instance, Charles Gold seems to suggest in the letterpress accompanying the portrait of the Ramlingam-Pandaree that life of "a perfect idleness" often motivates the Hindus to take to asceticism (n.p.). William Butler echoes this opinion in his *The Land of the Vedas*. He further believes that the ascetics who perform extreme self-mortifications are motivated by a "hunger for fame": "[they] are willing to suffer that they may be respected and adored by those who witness in wonder the amazing self-tortures which they will endure" (Butler 196). Butler goes on to cite a poem by one Mr Cambridge satirising spike-lying ascetics. The poem describes an ascetic who is forced by bodily discomfort to give up spike-lying. But he soon begins to miss the attention that he used to receive earlier and resumes his austerity (cited in Butler 197). This poem indicates that Butler

looked upon spike-lying, and other severe austerities like it, as spectacles performed to impress the onlookers. As we shall see, this presentation of spike-lying as a spectacle shaped later understanding of this practice.

It needs to be understood here that the colonizing West's attitude towards spike-lying differed significantly from that of other types of self-mortifications. This is because, to the foreigners, practitioners of *sāṅkuṣī* appeared to exhibit an almost superhuman endurance. We now know that the practice is not as painful as it appears. Joe Nickell explains. "The secret of the bed-of-nails feat is 'simply to have the nails all the same length, and all close together'" (246). The nails do not harm because the weight of the body is evenly distributed, and the pressure does not fall on a single nail. However, the early Western observers did not understand this. Consequently, it appeared a superhuman feat to them. While describing Prakashanand's austerities, Charles Gold observes that the "extreme severity" of his practice appeared "far beyond what the fortitude of man can encounter, or his nervous frame endure." He acknowledges that such mortifications "excite our amazement" (n.p.). Further, as Chakraborty argues in a recent article, unlike other extreme forms of self-mortifications like *ūrdhvaḥāhu*, *sāṅkuṣī* did not visibly maim the practitioners. As a result, it did not appear repulsive to Western eyes (Chakraborty 163 -165). The foreigners could enjoy it as a spectacle, without being disturbed by abhorrence. In Alice Perrin's short story "The Fakir's Island", the only Hindu ascetic who did not shock Mona Selwyn and Officer Kerr is the spike-lying ascetic. "How hard his back must be," Mona approvingly wonders. Though Kerr dehumanizes him by comparing his "hide" to that of a rhinoceros, he too implicitly acknowledges the suprahuman endurance of the ascetic through this comparison (Perrin 136). In contrast, the self-mortifications of other ascetics fill the couple with horror and disgust. This story effectively reveals how ordinary Europeans looked upon *sāṅkuṣī* during the colonial era. It was the only ascetic practice that they could contemplate without disgust.

What popularized spike-lying in the West was the invention of photography. Narayan explains, "with the introduction of photography in India in the 1840s, subjects and conventions already established by British artists were widely adopted for photographic

use, making the man on the bed of nails a popular subject for photographs or postcards, travel books, and stereoscopic cards” (483). Siebenga points out that postcards and magic lantern shows became “the most prominent of the new mass-produced visual media” which spread the images of Indian ascetics, including spike-lying ascetics, widely abroad (446 - 447). The Western newspapers and journals also circulated images of spike-lying ascetics. Writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, Robert Ripley mentions, “Sadhus who sit on beds of sharp spikes have been more or less featured in the Sunday supplements of our country” (cited in Nickell 246). Images of self-torturing Hindu ascetics, including spike-lying ascetics, appeared even in Romanian newspapers. For instance, in the 10 March 1937 issue of *Realitatea ilustrată*, one M. Ahmad wrote a feature on the *fakirs* with images accompanying it. Such representations in mass media usually made a spectacle of Hindu austerities. In the process, these austerities came to acquire a new connotation. Influenced by media representations of Hindu ascetic practices, the people in the West came to regard these as spectacular stunts performed only in India by ascetics. Nowhere else in the world did ascetics perform such stunts. These practices thereby became indicators of India’s strangeness. Thus, to the idea of backwardness was added the idea of exoticness. However, what finally drained spike-lying off all its association with *tapas* or religious austerities was its adaptation as a stunt by professional acrobats and stage magicians in the West. Joe Nickell informs that “The bed of nails was popularized in the United States during vaudeville and became a mainstay in circus and carnival shows” (246). Originally, Western stages advertised it as a penance performed by Indian ascetics. The aim was to attract spectators with a display of exotic tricks. Thus, the Danish performer Tanit Ikao, who performed a version of this feat, was publicized as ‘The Great Indian Woman Fakir’ in the USA (Narayan 487). Likewise, a 1940 performance in America was labelled ‘Torture of India’ (Nickell 246). But, very soon, all references to Hindu austerities drifted out of the picture altogether, as more and more Western performers began to display it on stage. Significantly, the association of spike-lying with moral backwardness became inconsequential once its link with Hindu asceticism was glossed over. Today, the West has desacralized spike-lying. Kirin Narayan informs, “In 20th century America’s culture of

consumption, Hindu practices of *tapas*, originally designed to foster restraint and detachment, have instead been infused with messages emphasizing the need for goods and good items” (500). She shows how the bed of nails is used by contemporary advertising agencies in America to sell their products, without alluding to the “alleged backwardness, cruelty, or spirituality of India” (Narayan 497). Spike-lying is thus drained of most of its religious and cultural connotations to stand only for exoticness.

The Contemporary View: Spike-lying as a Stage Performance

To understand how spike-lying is conceptualized outside South Asia nowadays, one may examine its representations in contemporary literary and non-literary works. To this end, this paper analyses a few such works. These sources are chosen randomly, without considering differences in genre, medium or the times of composition. The only thing that made them worthy of inspection is that they are meant for ordinary people. I argue that it is to this type of works that we must turn to, since these reflect how ordinary men and women perceive spike-lying outside India and South Asia. In Hergé’s (Georges Prosper Remi) *The Blue Lotus* (1936), the young Belgian reporter Tintin meets the fakir Ramacharma in India. The Maharaja of Gaipajama calls upon the fakir to “demonstrate his remarkable powers” (Hergé 2). Ramacharma obliges by performing variations of the spike-lying trick. He dances on broken glasses, gyrates head-downwards on a long sharp nail, and finally foretells Tintin’s future while sitting on a stool of spikes. While the fakir does display extraordinary powers, he is just a performer when everything has been considered. Spike-lying, as Hergé presents it here, becomes simply a stunt performed to please the onlookers. It is not treated as a means to acquire bliss or magic powers, as the Hindu ascetics understood it. In his later work *The Valley of the Cobras* (1951), we come across the villainous fakir Rabindah who is also found seated on a stool of spikes (21). Outwardly, Rabindah behaves more like an ascetic – invoking the Gods time and again. However, Hergé shows that he is just a charlatan whose real interest lies in extorting donations from the believers. While this portrayal of Rabindah conforms to colonial vilifications of Indian ascetics, one may note that the author’s presentation of spike-lying in this work differs from

the colonial ones. It is neither presented as an austerity nor as a form of self-torture, but simply as a practice that distinguishes a ‘fakir’ from others. Spike-lying is further depleted of its original connotation in more recent works. In season 3 episode 9 of the animated television series *Jackie Chan Adventures* (2002-2003), the protagonists visit India in search of a magic snake. During a fight, one of the antagonists is thrown on a bed of spikes. If one looks closely, the bed of spikes is not occupied by any ascetic but by an ordinary Indian wearing a turban. By now, spike-lying has lost all its association with asceticism and has come to be seen only as an exotic trick. The popular reality show *Just for Laughs Gags* features spike-lying in one of its episodes, where an American actor wearing loin cloth and a fantastic cap reclines on a bed of nails. Aside the white loin cloth, there is nothing in the performance that relates it to Hindu ascetics and their performances.

Conclusion

This study of Western representations of spike-lying thus reveals how Western understanding of this practice differs from South Asian. What South Asians understand as an ascetic practice is perceived abroad as a showman’s stunt. Understood as a spectacle, spike-lying is given more media coverage abroad than in its region of origin. The paper also charts the course through which spike-lying came to acquire a different meaning in the West. It transpires that this semantic change was not smooth and continuous. As shown, the primary catalyst was the colonial disinformation campaign which sought to defame Indian ascetics in general. It presented spike-lying as a sign of the depravity of Hindu ascetics. Pretty soon, the practice came to represent the backwardness of the Indians in general. However, the representation of spike-lying as a stunt gradually introduced a further change in meaning. Conceptualized increasingly as a stage performance, spike-lying gradually lost its association with Hindu asceticism abroad. Today, foreigners see it only as an exotic trick which no longer carries any connotation of either depravity or backwardness. It is curious to see that while colonial discourse effectively desacralized spike-lying, it failed to stigmatize the practice in the end. Thus, the original intention of the colonizers

finally became frustrated. The paper thus reveals that signification is a complex process that often takes unexpected routes.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Hopkins mentions that he had seen only two beds of spikes, though both were probably unused by their owners (370).
- ² Hopkins points out that the attainment of supernatural powers was not thought to be an end in itself. The epics presented this as merely a stage in the path of spiritual progress (Hopkins 337).
- ³ Spelt as ‘Praun Poory’ by Duncan.
- ⁴ Spelt both ‘Perkasanund’ and ‘Purkasanund’ by Duncan.
- ⁵ The famous solar dynasty to which Lord Rama belonged to. Being the descendant of Lord Rama, this Aginbarna was of course born much later. He could not have been the Agnibarna mentioned by Prakashanand, who was born before Lord Rama and Ravana.
- ⁶ Arjuna is one of the five Pandava brothers, who are the heroes of the *Mahabharata*. During the Kurukshetra war, the Pandavas had to fight their kinsmen including their ancestor, Bhishma. The Pandavas won in the end.
- ⁷ William Crookes believed that this practice may have indeed been influenced by the story of Bhishma (Oman 45). But this was just a speculation on his part.
- ⁸ Narayan mistakenly gives the date as 1798.
- ⁹ Here the words ‘Indian ascetics’ have been deliberately used instead of ‘Hindu ascetics.’ Though Tavernier and Bernier had mainly the Hindu ascetics in mind, early European visitors usually detested all non-Christian ascetics they encountered. The same was true for the British colonizers in India, though for a more complex reason as explained.



Capturing the Conflict: A Study of Bourke-White's coverage of Calcutta Killings, 1946.

Rishiraj Sen*, Shweta Jha**

Abstract

This study intends to contribute to three particular gaps in scholarship of Partition studies: (1) Direct Action Day and the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946 is a neglected area of study within the literary discourse of partition studies (2) prior research is conducted on literature and films but analysing communal riots in East India through photographic medium is largely unexplored, and (3) the work of eminent photo-journalist Margaret Bourke-White on 'Direct Action Day' is comparatively undiscussed within the scholarship on Partition and communal violence. Her work is critical because her status as a white person gives her access to spaces that an Indian might not have, and her gender positionality as a woman provides a different gaze to the entire conflict. In this article, we will analyse the different themes that emerged from the communal riots during Partition, the specific graphical representation unique to the context as well as the politics of the photographer.

Keywords: *Communal Riots, Partition of India, Direct Action Day, Calcutta Killings, Margaret Bourke-White*

Introduction

The Calcutta Killings in August 1946 marked the onset of a wave of communal violence that gripped the country for over a year. The heightened communal fervour witnessed in then Calcutta was intertwined with the institutional politics centred on the creation of

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Pakistan. The city saw the first outbreak of riots related to Partition, which further swept to Noakhali and Bihar before culminating in Punjab Carnage (Das 161). The present study becomes pertinent considering the fact that the chain of communal violence marked with the onset of Partition riots didn't end up with the creation of the present states of Pakistan or Bangladesh, but have plagued the country on a regular basis (Brass 6). Hence, the Calcutta Killings changed the socio-political landscape not only in Bengal but throughout the country. The picture of the damage caused during the Calcutta Killings was captured by the prominent photojournalist of Life Magazine – Margaret Bourke-White. In this study, we are focussing on her photographic documentation and coverage of the riot because her work is comparatively undiscussed within the scholarship on 'Partition Riots'. It is critical to consider her work within the larger scheme of scholarship because her status as a white person gives her access to spaces that an Indian might not have, and her gender positionality as a woman provides a different gaze to the entire conflict. In this article, we will analyse the different themes that emerged from the communal riots during Partition, the specific graphical representation unique to the context as well as the politics of the photographer.

Themes in Coverage

The violent conflicts of the partition era in India can be divided into “extraordinary” and “routine” violence (Pandey 12) as riots caused “moments of rupture” which were either “trivialised or normalised” (Dubey 284). White’s photographs were a portrayal of the first kind where two parties had “incompatible goals” (Mitchell 7 ; Jacoby 19) which was perceived to be unresolvable without violent measures. These measures often erupt from “rituals of provocation” (Gaborieau 9) where both parties perform certain actions or deliver speeches that provoke the other. Though the photographs of White don't cover the rituals or the act of violence, it does cover the aftermath of the rituals.



Photograph 1

White documented the intensity of the violence in the most unfiltered manner. The bloodshed, torn flesh, and stripped bones on the streets (photograph 2), the dead bodies being carried to the cemetery in the carts and vehicles (photograph 1) all come alive in her work. The photographs become 'one' with victims. As it does so, the violence of the reality transcends into the photographs, bringing a violent sensibility to the entire documentation, providing it with a voice. In the photographs, each element had a voice of its own yet they all came together like an orchestra. The horrors of the violent conflict, the stories of the dead as well as of the alive, the presence of the non-human (vultures in photograph 2), all found a home in her photographs. Observing Photograph 1, there are different elements that have stories of their own. The body and the surrounding depicts the destruction that violent conflicts cause. Men picking up the body shows the prevailing constant humanity despite the violence as well as the work of sanitation or cleaning the city which in Indian context is a caste-based job. It is the lower caste who is allotted the task of cleaning. The British officer with a cigarette and a pale blank face portrays the disregard and indignity of Indian lives in the eyes of the British Raj. These stories- interweaved yet individual in their own rights- open the doors to multiple interpretations within one frame.



Photograph 2

In photograph 3, the dead child lying on top of the man with open eyes demonstrated the true nature of the riot where bodies became sights of domestication and exemplification regardless of age . Through her compassionate yet direct approach of capturing the aftermath, she was able to mediate the monotony of violence and replace it with individual characters in a scene that were not merely victims but human beings with a life of their own. There is no romanticism in her picture as it left the naked displays of conflict for us to see - devoid of moralistic censorship which sometimes become a way to hide the true magnitude of the action. In her photographs, violence itself becomes an emotion that causes unrest in the ones who witness the riots through her photographs. Another important theme that emerges in her works is that of waiting. Waiting is not the intermediary state between 'resting' and 'doing'. Rather, waiting in itself is an act, an expectation of a promise that will be fulfilled. Gasparini finds waiting to be " at the crossroads not only of the present and future, but also of certainty and uncertainty" (31). That space between certainty and uncertainty is explored in the photographs of White where groups of people wait for their rescue or for basic amenities to be provided. For someone to perform waiting, there has to be an element of hope existent within the collective or the individual. Waiting in itself means staying "out of sync with time, that is, outside of the moral and economic community of those whose

time is synchronised and who act predictably and in unison” (Schweizer 799). This sometimes provides two sets of timelines to the people who are waiting – one, the timeline in which the world is functioning and two, the timeline in which they are waiting. Waiting, for the ones who are collectively living in the second timeline, forms a bond of solidarity and support if the waiting is forced by an emergency or exception. The collective goal then becomes to escape the emergency or to reach a normal state which doesn’t follow the laws of exception.



Photograph 3

White’s photographs reflect on this idea of waiting which is central to a state of exception. In Photograph 4, one can see how waiting becomes an action in itself where individuals are participating. The people symbolise the wait for rescue where they just keep staring into oblivion, counting the minutes and hours they have spent waiting. The boy who stared right into the camera brings the element of hope that comes with a new person arriving at the scene. Capturing a platform of a railway station where people are carrying their belongings and waiting for the train to arrive makes the train an object that is emitting hope. The platform provides a sort of certainty to the people to carry on with the act of waiting. Photograph 5, with women waiting for food, demonstrates waiting as also the redistribution of the politics of time. For Ayab, waiting “entails

power structures” (424) which determines who will wait and for how long. The politics of waiting in a conflict situation determines what one will wait for. The basic amenities take longer to arrive if you don’t belong higher up in the hierarchies of power. Therefore, time becomes a privilege and determines the course of other actions. Waiting for food for hours will determine how many hours you have in your hand to spend on other activities. Thus, declassifying waiting from the category of action is a political action against the vulnerable. White’s photographs collectively highlight the act of waiting as an action in itself and doesn’t try to depoliticize it.



Photograph 4

The portrayal of trauma in her photograph captured the realities of the riot. Making distinction between the event and the experience, Caruth writes –“the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs” (8). The violence of an event can continue to occur even after the physical violence has stopped. Photograph 5 captures the circumstances resulting from conflict, as one can see the effects of the continuing violence (event) where women and children are forced to leave their homes to be saved from the further violence. They are required to sacrifice their freedom in order to live. Some of them might have had their relatives or parents die in the violence. This points us towards the aspect of experiencing trauma beyond when it exactly occurred. The traumatic event in that process becomes a part of their memory. It stays with the people who have

suffered or witnessed it. Beyond the immediate witnesses or survivors, trauma can become an essential identification for the generations born after the event. While theorising postmemory, Hirsch writes “postmemory characterises the experience of those who, like me, have grown up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the powerful stories of the previous generation, shaped by monumental traumatic events that resist understanding and integration”(12). For her, photographs then become a crucial component of how the next generation forms their identity and how they will relate to the trauma experienced by their ancestors. She quotes Sontag’s experience of looking at the photographs of the Holocaust to discuss the element of “rupture”-

they were only photographs—of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead, something is still crying. (5)

White’s photograph and the anxious eyes waiting for rescue (photograph 6) document the trauma that people went through. Furthermore, all the photographs collectively attempt to provide the holistic picture of what might have happened. By doing so, it becomes an important element for postmemory research where her work sets the narrative of the traumatic event and is responsible for how people might relate to the event in the future. Her photographs intervene in the traumatic event to secure the experiences so that they aren’t lost in the forest of time. It takes on the role of transcending meaning and transmitting the horrors across generations.

Context in Coverage

The eye-witness narrative of the American Journalist Philip Talbot is reproduced by Debjani Sengupta. He refers to riot-torn Calcutta as a city “resolutely set at work to cannibalise itself” (42). The expression

of his state of delusion is followed by the representation of deceased as follow, “Most overwhelming, however, were the neglected human casualties: fresh bodies, bodies grotesquely bloated in the tropical heat, slashed bodies, bodies bludgeoned to death, bodies piled on push carts, bodies caught in drains, bodies stacked high in vacant lots, bodies, bodies (41).” The two witness accounts – Talbot’s verbal narrative and Bourke-White’s photographic records are entirely consistent with one another. Moreover, the disfigured, unrecognisable state of human corpses (Photograph 1 & 2) indicates that it has been days since the authorities took any move to properly cremate the dead. Janam Mukherjee About the treatment of the deceased by the society and government, Janam Mukherjee states that it is crucial to understand the value placed on that society’s live members (239). Thus, bodies in all states of decay, being devoured by the vultures (photograph 2) raises the question of the value of Indian lives in the pre-independence state of Calcutta. Reflecting on the different values attached with the lives of living subjects captured in the photographs, we want to underline that apart from the organisational apparatus formed by high- rank state administrators who were assigned with the task, ‘the dirty work, the actual lifting, shifting, and handling of bodies was done by several hundred *doms*’ (241). Hence, photograph 1 demonstrates the additional acts of violence committed on the underprivileged groups after the riots.



Photograph 5

Additionally, these dispersed dead bodies (photograph 2) demonstrate the dehumanisation that residents of Calcutta went through in 1946. One of the prominent reasons for this is stated by Das as the Famine of 1943. -

The 'man made famine' of 1943 was another devastating experience for the Calcuttans, as thousands of hungry people from all parts of the province moved to Calcutta, begging even for gruel when they lost hope of being given rice. Great numbers starved to death on open streets, precipitating some of Calcutta's worst ever epidemics of cholera, malaria and smallpox. Destitutes collected from the city streets almost doubled between March and June 1946, and the months preceding the August outbreak witnessed a steady rise in Calcutta's mortality rate. In popular perception these developments reduced the value of human lives. There was a brutalization of consciousness on a mass scale, as if the people were being prepared for the inhuman episode of August 1946. (162)

Hence, White's account of the dead bodies being torn-apart by vultures (Photograph 2) captured as an aftermath of riot was not something that people of Calcutta were unaccustomed to. , Mukherjee highlights that "Bengal was confronted with many millions of excess corpses" since the Famine's peak of 1943 (239). Due to this continuous accumulation of corpses, an apathy to the plight of the deceased developed among the mass consciousness. He adds that, "dies in all states of decay and putrification—and even in the last stages of life—were also torn apart by vultures where they had fallen, or dragged through the lanes of abandoned villages by hungry jackals." (240). Along with the pile of dead bodies, the bodies of the subjects (alive) in the photographs too bear testament to the consequences of this continuous food shortage and malnutrition. The protruded backbone of the last girl in the row of women waiting for food , the lean forearms of the girls (Photograph 5) indicate prolonged poverty and thus bear witness to the impacts of the famine-hit Bengal. Consequently, Calcutta developed numbness towards mass murder and death due to the effects of the famine. Further, within the binary of the Home and the World, the latter is associated

with the perils, and home represents the safe space to which people flee. The photographs of individuals waiting at a train station following the horrific riots (Refer to Photograph 4,6) indicates that for a particular section of the people, Calcutta was always an alienated space, a space of contestation to which they never felt belonged, as they took off to another region from the city in the face of danger. Thus, it is admissible to raise specific questions for interrogation, such as – the regional identity of the people in the aforementioned photographs, the section they belonged to, and how they were related to Calcutta of 1946.

Sengupta in her work maintains that the people of adjacent states made up the city's working class population. The newly arrived group of 'labouring poor' tried to find housing close to their acquaintances. This housing pattern played a pivotal role in the development of a strong notion of 'communal identity based on language, religion, and habitat' (38). She further adds that during the riots, the residential colonies of the migrant workers served as both – easy targets as well as source of perpetrators. Moreover, this demographic pressure was further intensified with more migrants pouring in from impoverished countryside due to famine. One of the measures opted for famine relief included forceful removal of famine victims from the city to the rehabilitation camps located on the outskirts. The use of force to purge the city of those who did not belong there was justified in the eyes of the general populace as a result of this government action. (Mukherjee 214). This measure of forceful removal was used in the riots to decide who belongs to the city and who does not. The different methods used to demonstrate this violent removal were – killing (photograph 1,2,3), destroying residential colonies (photograph 2), destroying resources necessary to fulfil bare minimum for themselves, such as two meals a day (photograph 5), depriving those who survived of choice other than leave the city (photograph 4, 6). The right to occupy a key public area was not granted to impoverished sections by the administration. The restrictions were imposed throughout the years of World War II and the Great Famine (Mukherjee 215). The official demonstration of the Direct Action Day was supported by Muslim slum-dwellers as the act of occupying the city's central civic space – Ochterlony Monument. The call for a Muslim homeland ultimately led to acts of violence

intended to drive out other religious communities from Calcutta. Although this distinction between 'them and us' was solely based on religious identification, other aspects such as economic depravity, the class of migrant workers, administrative constraints, among others all played a role in the contestation over Calcutta's territory. Among the many aftermaths of riots, administrative collapse was one of the effects faced by riot-victims. Long lines of women awaiting food supplies show that the city's rationing system failed, as do the piled-up human bodies, suggesting that sanitation services ceased operating (Mukherjee 238). The spatial element, that is the train platform that doubles as a waiting area depicts a static Calcutta and hence is the subject of the study.



Photograph 6

Politics of the Photographer

Brass, described the three phases of riot-production as- 1) Preparation/ Rehearsal, 2) Activation/ Enactment, 3) and Explanation/ Interpretation and highlights the involvement of broader societal elements including journalists, legislators, and formation of public opinion at the third stage (15). He further mentions that the interpretation and explanation of violence at this point is crucial as it may end up ensuring its continuation in the future. Aligning with this study, here we will analyse the essential role played by journalists, in this case Maragaret Bourke-White, through her interpretation of

violence. Interpreting violence is a political act which is closely related to the domain of ideology. Adorno defines ideology as “an organisation of opinions, attitudes, and values - a way of thinking about men and society. We may speak of an individual's total ideology or of his ideology with respect to different areas of social life: politics, economics, religion, minority groups, and so forth” (2). That organisation of opinions, attitudes, and values shape how we live our lives and how we perceive the world around us. In terms of her ideology, Margaret Bourke White “underwent a major shift in her political consciousness in the mid-1930s, however, and soon was producing documentary photography for countless left-wing political groups” (Vials 94). For that, she was the target of the American anti-communists who questioned her Americanness. Mason elaborates on this aspect of her life –

Having long been associated with the political left, Bourke-White was vulnerable to attacks that labelled her un-American and a communist sympathiser. In the early 1940s, for instance, the Federal Bureau of Investigation put her under surveillance as a security risk and potential subversive. She faced condemnation from politicians in Congress as well. In 1944, the House Un-American Activities Committee accused her of being close to groups that promoted anti-American propaganda. (175)

Her ideological leanings and her politics hence cannot be and should not be separated from her works as it provides us with a window to understand how she was looking at the people she is clicking pictures of. In almost all the photographs in this series, the focus is on the common people and their suffering. This might be a result of her left politics. Left fundamentally is pro-poor, anti-racial as well as progressive (comparatively) in nature. Hence, her coverage of poverty and helplessness didn't seem to have a bourgeoisie gaze. What we mean by it is that through her photographs, she didn't look down upon the people. There was a working class sensibility to it. Being a woman gave her access to places like relief stations designated for women and children, which made it possible for her to provide the space to both the adult genders as well as children in her photographs. This brings a different dimension to her photography

that can be linked to her politics. It shows us how important it was for her to accommodate everyone so that no one affected was left behind. Furthermore, the way she has captured the draconianism of the British imperialist officers (refer to photograph 1), it positions her stance against colonial forces capturing the lands of Indian people. There was a metaphorical element of disgust associated with the officer that she captured in her photographs.

Another important element of her photo-series is the absence of identifiable religious symbols. In all the photographs, there is no particular religious place or religious markers that have been explicitly shown or anyone in the act of performing religion. This might be purely coincidental but considering her politics, it might have been a conscious choice of separating religion from the riot. Moreover, the blindness towards religion may also rise from her own beliefs associated with it or her doubts regarding the importance of it. Though we don't know her religious position, we do know that her mother was an 'ardent atheist' and a progressive feminist (Gaylor). This separation of religion from the riot through the invisibility of religious symbols is questionable as the core of the conflict was religious. The parties involved in violence, were motivated by their religious identities. Therefore, the coverage of the riot without contextualising it within the parameters of religious identity in the photographs alters the reading of the event. It is this absence that creates a void in the comprehensive understanding of the society of Bengal and the role that religion played within the society. The photographs were clicked for Life Magazine whose primary readership was located in America and Europe. If, in our paper, we don't consider this to be an important fact, it will be a half-baked analysis of her work. Though, the motive here is not to question her intention, it is important to highlight that the pictures did conform to the 'orientalist' biases of the East being uncivilised, violent and poor. As she was covering the marginalised victims of the riots, it might not have occurred to her to cover the elites of Calcutta but as the photographs were published in a country where black and brown bodies were looked at in a certain way, it becomes pertinent to question the lack of nuance in her coverage. There was also an absence of activists and administration (leadership) involved in riot-management in the photographs. In this context, she reinforced the

racialised, capitalist economic ideology of the Life magazine as she captured the Orient in the same way Orient was thought of. Her account of riots is devoid of a key aspect, namely territorial conflict between adherents of two religious communities. Additionally, her coverage of the Great Killings is unidirectional as it asserts the image of Indian society, specifically Calcutta at that time, as a dehumanised society. Her coverage does not consider the efforts undertaken by the common people of the two communities to uphold humanity. Some of such initiatives, as stated by Asok Mitra, are as follows:

Then there were the numerous cases where a colony of one community intrepidly protected small pockets of the other community within it. Instances of the rescue of marooned families, particularly of women and children, of one community by members of the other, building up protective corridors for passage and depositing families into safe areas were quite common. Above all were the heartwarming instances of sharing whatever food that was available, during the days of curfew and unavailability, among the two communities, rescuing and rescued, protecting and protected. (284)

Her reporting falls short of capturing the social fabric of Indian society in its entirety. And since awareness about this cultural context can be produced by experiencing or witnessing the grassroots populace within a diachronic frame, it might be a possibility that she was oblivious of such subtleties. Moreover, such omissions from riot narratives reduce the likelihood that polarisation will be reduced, and may instead lead to its intensification over a longer period of time.

Conclusion

More than 5000 people died during the four-day-long Great Calcutta Killings of 1946, which took place between August 16 and August 20, 1946 (Markovits 2). In our analysis of her work, we firstly identified the themes that captured the essence of the riot. After that, we looked at the elements in the photographs critically to locate it within the spatio-temporal context of Calcutta. At last, we tried to distance the person, that is Bourke White from the photographs in

order to understand the layered meanings and the politics of presence and absence. The photographs, in our perspective, attempt to document the riot in a neutral manner but the overemphasis on neutrality devoids the photographs from presenting a comprehensive reflection of the incident.

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Fear and Anxiety: Representation of Women's Suffering Emotions in Select Texts

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Abstract

In the paper, I have examined how the select texts namely *So Many Hungers!* (1947), *Dawor Aru Nai* (1955) and *Mari* (2010) build a dimension of “emotional communities” among the women of the war-affected societies. Emotions such as fear and anxiety as employed in the paper attempt to delimit and map certain patterns and/or methods to negotiate the war-affected social environment and the affective dimensions of war (WW2) on the social bodies and the language used among the different typologies of relationships. Attempts have also been made to see how those emotions or their embodiment can also trouble the dominant narrative of war and invest a layer of meaning to its narratorial/generic functions of the texts. The paper attempts to analyze critically the emotions embodied in the characters of the select war novels by employing the empirical views on emotions and recent trends in emotions studies.

Keywords: emotion, fear, anxiety, cognitive, non-cognitive, causative

Introduction

“Emotions continue to play a role after one has chosen a book and begun to read, with characters and situations eliciting affect in several ways, including the evocation of personal, emotion-filled, memories. These emotions, once evoked, in turn, influence engagement with the text” (Mar et al. 818). However, instead of looking at emotions as affecting the reader, the paper looks at the

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elicitation of emotions in the narrative as an embodiment of the collective emotions of women during wartime. The study of emotions has turned into an entity which continues to baffle and attract scholars of different disciplines with its continuous application and development in theoretical methods as well as receptivity and scopes for multidisciplinary scholarships. The three World War 2 novels selected for emotion studies are *So Many Hungers!* (1947) by Bhabani Bhattacharya, *Dawor Aru Nai* (1955) meaning “clouds are gone” by Jogesh Das and *Mari* (2010) by Easterine Kire. While the novels by Bhattacharya and Kire are written in English, Das’s is written in Assamese. In the paper, I have chosen two different emotions namely fear and anxiety and their constructions; and the resultant emotional affect on a range of interpersonal relationships in the select war novels. Examining how these two emotions interact in the select novels allows a cohesive argument for the causative relation of war-induced or propelled political judgments and the human emotions, the responses of the civilians in the given societies. While the two emotions, fear and anxiety are correlatively and pre-eminently found in all war zones, the emotions in question are taken into consideration from civilian experiences to understand the language of the war’s affective dimension and the resultant transformation and/or non-changeability in human emotions. Emotions are ways that can bear a tag of both a method and an object. As a method, emotions allow us to probe deeper into the areas of negotiation where formal or traditional negotiation may not be possible in the specific discipline. Thus within emotion studies, social constructivism is a highly valued theoretical tendency for many scholars to explore a dimension of history in areas hitherto sidelined or lacking in an alternative perspective. Regarding the relationship between political judgment and historical change, William M. Reddy observes in his article “Emotional Liberty: Politics and History in the Anthropology of Emotions,”

One cannot endow human agency its place in history without simultaneously discovering that its operation has been both universal and good, both inspired by a sense of its own necessity and desirous of liberty cut to its measure. We must work to display that necessity and to second that

desire. To those who would reject any such conception of agency and history as folly or worse, I would simply reply, What else is there worth searching for? Why else study social existence? Knowledge without agents to employ it is a contradiction in terms. Oppression from which one cannot be freed is no oppression, only determination devoid of selfhood. (Reddy "Emotional Liberty," 263)

Emotions such as love, fear and anxiety as found in the texts are highly triggered and somewhat transformed by the war environment. The war has an unmistakable bearing upon the social determinism of both individual and collective emotions and resultant reactions embodied in the characters of three war novels. The theoretical anchoring in an emotional understanding of the civilians and their reactionary emotions during WW2 endows our vision with a possibility to map and reconstruct our understanding of the changes and traditions in the given societies from both historical and literary perspectives.

Notional and Real Emotions

Literary emotions as understood by the critics of literature insert language in a performative sense. Patrick Colm Hogan talks of "expressivism" (85) in emotions studies by relating it to the role of the implied author and the implied reader, and the actual recipient of emotions in the text. Hogan argues, "A normatively sad work or passage would be one that in some sense should produce a feeling akin to sadness in the recipient. Put differently, one could say that a normatively sad work is a work with a sad implied reader or implied recipient. Then there is the issue of what emotion is fostered in real recipients" (Hogan 83). Hogan argues that normative emotions "normative in intent" and "normative in actuality" in a particular text are exemplified by what he calls "notional" and "real" norms. "Notional" norms, according to Hogan, can create norms of producing certain emotions such as fear, whereas "real" norms help "identify" emotional responses as "misguided" or "insensitive" (Hogan 83). Keeping in consideration Hogan's notion of normative emotions in a text, the three novels *So Many Hungers!*, *Dawor Aru*

Nai and *Mari* open up an engaging theoretical negotiation to understand wartime emotions.

Situating the emotional embodiment of Mari in the eponymous novel will allow us to differentiate and foreground different sets of emotions of personal and collective experiences alongside the authorial interventions. Strikingly, *Mari*'s textual strategy is highly curtailed to simulate an experience of war that seeks to underpin an authoritative voice of the Naga people through a fictional imagination. Thus, fear and anxiety embodied in Mari are sanctioned by authorial intervention, which here in the case of emotions studies, one can choose to call the implied author. This implied author is focused on constructing a voice, that is suggestive of the processes of truth intimation linked highly with the genres such as docu-fiction. The novel of Kire, unlike Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!* and Jogesh Das's *Dawor Aru Nai* conflates collective experience with fictive personal voices to simulate the intimation of knowledge production. This is where the balancing of emotions is overturned, unlike the other two novels by Das and Bhattacharya. Here, in the case of *Mari*'s emotions, appropriating Hogan's concept of "notional" and "real" norms will fortify the theoretical underpinning of emotional reactions/interactions as having roots in personal experiences. While negotiating the notional and real emotions, it would be relevant to ground our theoretical anchoring of emotions as something related to both the bodily responses and the reactionary emotions of both cognitive and non-cognitive nature. The paper though does not extensively dwell upon the emotions constructed by bodily reactions and brushes against this concept to filter and accentuate the emotional reactions as being channelled with, if not distanced from bodily ones. Mari, the protagonist of the eponymous novel in the first part describes her emotional state after her first encounter with the British soldier Victor, "... it was so unexpected that I blushed and cried out in surprise and held up my hands to cover my face. They both laughed. But he moved away until I calmed down. We didn't stay very long after that. I was so embarrassed I begged to be taken home" (Kire 27). Her first emotional upsurge in the novel is registered through her experience of love with Victor. When Mari meets Victor for the first time, the

embodiment of her emotion in the text suggests the bodily reactions and the resultant emotions of a young girl of sixteen when meeting a strange man. In this context her experience of fear and shame are conflated into the display of bodily emotions, the physiological one. The subsequent pages devoted to their meetups fall heavily under the trajectory of bodily and cultural reactions. William Lyons argues in his book *Emotion*,

An emotional state, then, is labelled as ‘fear’ rather than ‘love’ or ‘grief’ because the feelings, physiological changes and desires — and the ensuing behaviour if any - which form the state are believed to be the result of an evaluation that something is dangerous rather than that it is appealing (or good in the eyes of me, the lover), which would be the evaluation typical of love, or that it is a grave loss or misfortune, which would be the evaluation typical of grief. (100)

However, the subsequent images of fear and anxiety, and her uneasiness transcend bodily reactions and fall into the trajectories of environmental and social conditioning of emotions. *Mari* describes the emotional torment of both the collective experience and personal experiences of the eponymous protagonist. Mari’s emotions are projected through the implied author’s interventionist construction of a range of “objects” of fear emotions. Mari laments after she leaves Victor, her lover,

After fleeing Kohima, we were always on the verge of tears. We were so overcome by the hardships we had recently endured and the uncertainty of meeting our parents and brother again, the uncertainty of life itself now. But the incident with the bee was the final straw for me. All my fears for Mother and Vic came rushing in and I was certain that something terrible had happened to Vic. (Kire 79)

When Mari is consoled by Marina, Mari’s reply to her shares a sense of complicit emotion which seems to arise from her objective fear of the bee which in turn leads to the process of experiencing a “quasi-fear” (Hyslop 294). However, the presentation of Mari’s emotions is to be understood through the dynamics of how emotions

have been filtered through the perspective of a young girl of sixteen who has had the bitter experiences of war. This is where two different complications crop up in our examination of emotions in *Mari*. Firstly, the fact that she was a young girl of seventeen at the time of Victor's death, her experiences of fear become vulnerable to what Walton calls "quasi-emotions" (qtd. in Hyslop 294). Mari's experience of fear and anxiety over Victor's going missing is a projection of emotional reaction, the embodiment of which has its direct connection to the implied author's creation of "notional" fear, a fear that may not haunt at once or a fear, the norm of which is not of the degree as is described by the receiver, but the construction of that emotion nonetheless helps the implied author to form the subsequent events beforehand, that of Victor's death. This "notional" fear (Hogan 83) or "quasi-fear" (Hyslop 294) or quasi-anxiety may be termed as the foregrounding body of emotions that are yet to open up in full scale. Here in this context, the news of Victor's death may be put under our scrutiny to locate how affect is being handled by the implied author. The bee that catches the attention of Mari makes her feel that something ominous is going to take place and she starts thinking about it vehemently.

I suddenly felt alarmed and frightened. Was this bee trying to tell me something? Bringing me a message, perhaps? Our people say that if a bee does not stop bothering a person for a long time, it is because it has a message for the person. My heart went out to Mother and Vic – had something happened to them? Was the bee trying to tell me that Mother had been killed? And Vic? Where was he now? Still at Garrison Hill or had he moved away to Dimapur? Tears streamed down my face and I tried hard to fight them. I could not understand why I was weeping so uncontrollably, and I rushed to the back of the shed and tried to calm down. I was still sobbing when my sisters found me. (Kire 78)

Thus, when the actual news of Victor is conveyed to Mari, the reactionary emotion of fear in Mari does not seem to be tantamount to the degree of its former emotions. This is where the "quasi-

emotions” and “real” emotions come into play alongside different objects of wartime emotions.

Vic didn't feel any pain, Mari. There are terrible ways of dying on the battlefield, with your legs shot off or your stomach shot through. Vic had the most painless death of all. I am telling you this because you should draw comfort from it. The night before he died, he was telling me about his childhood. I know that after he met you, he was so happy and his life was fuller with you in it. He really loved you, Mari.'

Bob's voice was sad as he came to the last word. I was grateful to hear what he had told me and felt peaceful for the first time since I had found out that Vic was dead. (Kire 98-99)

The description rather than an experience of the notional emotion of fear touches on the embodiment of real norms of fear and anxiety. These anxieties at the most may strike as emotions propelled by a not-so-mature or somewhat gullible Naga village girl. However, under no circumstances, does Kire seem to be inserting the protagonist as a non-mature voice in narrating the war, rather she situates the figure of Mari as an agency that equips her to reconsider and reconstruct the historical and personal emotions at her best by cementing the same with intentionality of an implied author. *Mari* narrates, “I feared for Vic, where was he? Was he in the midst of those burning shells? When the firing died down, we returned to the house and others went back to sleep but I remained awake, sitting in the downstairs room. I sat there for a long time, half praying and half crying for Vic to be safe” (Kire 50-51). Mari's constant anxieties over Victor's safety renders her cognitive emotional reaction almost disjunctive to reality. The intensity of her suffering of separation keeps growing until the news of his death. This process of emotional handling in the narrative of *Mari*, follows a pattern of emotions transference from individual to the community, from subjective to the collective. Emotional vulnerability in Mari extends the parameters of emotional negotiation of the author herself to fit in the larger contexts of war's psychological effects on human emotions. “Emotions, in other

words, are partly culturally constructed, and this is where historical factors can be fundamental. Some emotions, like shame or guilt, have an intrinsic social component as well – they involve a real or imagined audience – which adds another potential historical dimension” (Barclay et al. 5). Kire shifts Mari’s reactionary emotions from her “family” space to the social space of war zones with a corresponding simultaneous shift to the construction of “real” emotions of fear from the notional ones. One such example of reactionary emotions which borders on real fear can be found in her encounter with blood-soaked bodies of soldiers. “Human life seemed so meaningless in the face of war. I felt nauseated at the sight of fresh blood on wounded men, their bandages soaked through. We had seen so much in such little time” (Kire 81). The description of Mari’s reactionary emotion on the sight of injured soldiers also hints at the physiological construction of emotion received through the human face, that is, ear, nose, eyes and mouth. Her receptivity to sight sensation would be different from that of her non-cognitive emotions about impending danger and her resultant fear emotion. Similarly, in *Dawor Aru Nai*, Anupama’s constant worries and anxieties arise from her constant stimulation of sensory emotion. Her dissatisfaction with Bakhar is a form of triggered emotion of both cognitive and non-cognitive nature that accrues to the visual reactions she experienced at the sight of luxurious materials at Giriwala’s home.

Social Conditioning of Emotions: Causative Emotions

Historical factors are fundamentally related to the operation and causation of different kinds of emotional responses among both the sexes. The social environment is another space that suffered along with the geographical landscape during the WW2. The cultural register of emotions points to the intimate relations between the norms of the social environment and individual responses. Easterine Kire’s *Mari* attempts to conflate that upsurge of emotions triggered during the WW2. The emotions of different norms are put into play to address bigger issues of historical, political, and cultural importance. A novel such as *Dawor Aru Nai* by Jogesh Das is highly focussed on the accentuation of war-induced values and their affect on the emotional communications in families and

relationships. Relationships are spaces in fictional negotiation of wartime emotions where the affective dimension finds its prime value in reciprocating/reactionary emotions embodied in conversations and individual thoughts. In *Mari*, “peace” (Kire 99) experienced by Mari after the news of Victor’s death through Bob’s voice is both a release of painful emotions as well as an outcome of reactionary emotions created and conveyed through a language of emotions that have an effect of consolation.

Similarly, in *So Many Hungers!* Rahoul’s emotional transformation is worth examining to understand the triggered emotional upsurge in his mother. Rahoul who himself was not considerate about the participation in the war was somewhat initially propelled by his non-cognitive emotions without any trace of reactionary objective emotions to the war efforts. In the novel, Rahoul’s desire to participate in war is a result of the causative emotion he experiences during his talk with his mother. The conversation between Rahoul and his mother about the conversation between mother and Kunal demonstrates the affect of “interactional regulation of emotion” (Anssi and Johanna 66). That mother’s emotion affects Rahoul is clearly visible in Rahoul. The mother narrates the entire conversation to his elder son,

And then he says, “Mother, I have something to tell you.” And his face is hot as if he has done some wrong and he takes me to his room and hands me a chair and he sits down on the floor at my feet, his head in my lap, and he says, “Mother, I am going to War. You mustn’t say, No.” I feel stunned. “Kunal,” I tell him, “when I am dead you can go anywhere, I shall not be here to forbid you. Wait, till then.” He lifts his face, he says, “Mother, you want to keep me stuffed up with cotton-wool? You will only break my heart.” I ask him, “What have they done to you, the German people?” And he says, “I have no high-sounding ideals to serve, Mother. I am going to War to serve myself, for my spirit, as it were” And he springs to his feet and paces the room, restive, and his heart seems to shine on his face, and then I know I must not be in his way, I know I must not hurt him within, so I tell him, “Kunal, do the right

thing. You have my blessing, my son.” (Bhattacharya 14-15)

Here, the mother’s reactionary emotion is one of specific judgement-sanctioned responses where the context affects the display of personal emotion. Later on, Rahoul’s intention to join the Army for the sake of revenging fascist rebels in Spain only becomes an excuse to join the Army whereas his past emotion was highly triggered by Kunal’s decision to join the Army and above all the emotive language of his mother. Rahoul’s subsequent emotions of restlessness and his anxiety about joining the British Army achieve a heightened intensity affecting his daily performance in conducting himself around. His restlessness affects his wife and mother vehemently. His wife, Monju dissuades Rahoul from any probable participation in the war.

‘All men are not made alike,’ she spoke with a joyous sigh because of her relief from shock. ‘Your true place is with your books, your mathematics, your strange instruments in the college room where you took me once. You have the stars. You belong to them. They belong to you. The stars and the unseen lights. You are not earthy.’ Her voice mellowed caressingly. ‘You are no more earthy than this little one we have.’

He was dumb for a time and then he said, dubious, ‘I must talk it over....’ (Bhattacharya 19, ellipsis in original)

Conversations however should not be taken as the only source of emotional appraisals. The individual thoughts have a profound agency alongside the embodied emotions between couples. The trails of thoughts manifested in the narrative of *Dawor Aru Nai* are intertwined with the social constructions of emotions. Values associated with the conceptions of justice and rightful living away from corruption and the war-induced emotions of desire for more money, for a luxurious livelihood are thrust into the same narrative to create a dialectical model of negotiation with the war’s psychological dimension. In the article, “Emotions are Social,” Parkinson regards emotions as highly social constructions. He argues, “... the specific manner of our interpersonal negotiations of

emotional significance depends partly on a background of socialized practices of interaction. Thus, cultural as well as interpersonal considerations make an important contribution to the social determination of emotion” (Parkinson 665).

William Lyons argues about the object of emotions having its implication in “dangerous” and “disagreeably so” (101-103). He talks about the nature of the evaluative model to the approach of the object of emotions (103). The evaluative nature of formal objects, such as objects of fear, according to Lyons, underpin formal grounding (Lyons 103). Lyons argues that a material object can determine an emotional state which a formal object cannot (Lyons 102). In *So Many Hungers!* Kunal’s argument for joining the British Indian army signals a same trajectory of emotional experience. Kunal utters, “‘Live. We do not fear to live—dangerously’” (Bhattacharya 57). It is possible to surmise that Bakhar’s inability or his deep-rooted beliefs in his ideology of just and upright living carries a dimension of formal nature to one’s emotion apart from displaying the emotion as constructed in social determinism underpinned in Parkinson’s article. The outcome of emotional response towards the wartime developments and huge opportunities for money making is not given prime importance by Bakhar unlike his father and wife Anupama. The typology of emotions in the family, in this case, falls into a formal and objective model of emotions. The ideology of just and honest living away from any operative agencies of corruption is inspired from Bakhar’s innate adherence to the norms of one’s responses to desire, greed and money. In other words, Bakhar’s emotions can be underpinned by moral emotions as well. That Bakhar could not make up his mind to do war contracts regardless of how many times he had to hear from his business-minded father to earn wealth during war suggests a lot about his moral and “notional” fear towards war. What is crucial in *Dawor Aru Nai* is not Bakhar’s emotional state but rather the outcomes of his interpersonal emotions with his wife Anupama. Bakhar’s idealism becomes a barrier to Anupama’s fulfilment of physiological emotions, her love for luxurious life.

Sitting alone in the darkness he thinks, that this war has invited chaos in the world. Not only has this chaos operated

on the outside, it has also caused an agitation inside people's minds. The people are no longer the ordinary daily wage earner. Everyone else has turned unconcerned. Enchantments of two rupees, and scratching of a few notes have made them all mad. Will they be able to return to where they were? Can Bodhan return to his school? (Das, my trans.; 61)

The frequent mental conflicts embodied in the narrative perspective of Bakhar's thoughts result from a conflict between cognitive (Bakhar) and non-cognitive (Anupama) emotions. Even though there is no direct reference or even insinuation of the experience or apprehension of fear in Bakhar, there are moments that can be put under scrutiny to trace the mapping of fear in *Dawor Aru Nai*. Emotions of fear are related to the social construction of emotions which can be displayed by recognising its traces within the narrative framework, particularly in the implied author. Jogesh Das's novel incorporates an omniscient narrator which under scrutiny provides us with scopes for the appraisals of the characters' emotional states. Parkinson's ("Emotions are social") conception of emotions as rooted in social bodies can be jettisoned with our probing tools for examining the source of emotions. As said earlier, Das's novel does not foreground enough conversations to initiate discussions on the emotions of fear and anxiety. In such scenarios, the examination of the language and the narratorial positions of the implied author in response to the implied reader can offer us insights into the performative dimensions of embodied emotions.

Das's novel describes, "The society Bheem was born in, the society which had made a deep impression on him, does not allow people to be at ease with having patience. In that society, everyone knows that people work with their bodies and spend with their hands. There is no need to think over, no time for it. People need to only work out orders" (Das, my trans.; 50). This description suggests a lot about the reactionary emotions in Bheem in the text which will open up in the subsequent pages. Bheem is a character besides Bakhar who does not completely lose himself to the environmental circumstances during the war. The implied author bears consideration to locate Bakhar's emotional crisis just before

the shifting of the narratorial gaze to his love relationship with Gauri. Bakhar's emotions of love and grief cannot be discounted as having a direct connection to war as his ideals are something that precedes the coming of the British Indian Army in Assam. The localization of Bakhar's emotions, then, is the only way to construct an appraisal of his conflicting emotions of love and frustration if not grief, fear and courage. Bakhar's fear does not have an objective norm in causative emotions. In other words, his reactionary emotions maintain a connection rather than the pre-war cultivation of value judgments. Judgments in this context can be regarded as methods in the cognitive level of Bakhar's wartime thoughts that enable him to take a stand and remain unchanged unlike his wife Anupama.

Social Environment and Emotion

To accentuate the affect of foregroundingly constructed Bakhar's mental states, the implied author inserts contrasting images of the social environment. At a time when war meant for many a source of wealth and fame, many grabbed and yielded to the opportunities of the war including Bakhar's father in *Dawor Aru Nai* and Rahoul's father in *So Many Hungers!*. They are quite similar in holding opinions about war and making the most out of the war. In both the novels, though different in geographical localities, their responses to the war share the same interest of earning money during the war to the detestation of their sons.

The emotional states in the relationships of husband-wife, and father-son immediately change, after being exposed to the war's excitements with money and wealth. The emotional typology to a great extent can be exemplified through the married couples of Bheem and Gauri, and then Bakhar and Anupama (Kuki). After marriage, Gauri goes to work in the construction field of war. The working zone can be regarded as a space of emotional changes that foreground the psychic dimensions of war and its affect on the emotions of the characters.

In *Dawor Aru Nai*, unlike Gauri who happens to see the thrill of easy money in the construction field, Anupama's emotional states are triggered particularly by her coming into contact with the riches

of war earned through war contracts. Her emotional sufferings of unfulfilment are not solely related to the riches of war alone, nor with Bakhar's non-engagement in war-contracts, rather it has more to do with the affective emotions she encounters during her frequent ride with Giritwala. Giritwala often comes to Anupama's home in cars and takes her for rides in places such as Dibrugarh, Tinisukia is a turning point in her life and emotional experience with her husband (Das 59). Anupama's contact with Giritwala triggered certain innate human sensitivities to the luxuries of life. Her dissatisfaction becomes a reaction of physiological emotions which furthermore creates more conflicts within the inter-personal relationship between husband (Bakhar) and wife (Anupama). In this context, Anupama's emotional responses can be conflated with the "non-cognitive emotional responses related to innate sensitivities and emotional memories, plus cognitive monitoring, which includes simulation" (Hogan 82). Centred around the trajectory of emotions in *Dawor Aru Nai* are the dimensions of both cognitive and non-cognitive emotions which weave the experiences of emotional environment in the two familial relationships of Bakhar and Anupama; and Bheem and Gauri in ways that are both transformative and resilient.

Distinguishing the different emotions of both sexes leads to the possibilities of underpinning the negotiation with notional and real emotions with different norms, environmental and socio-cultural, personal and collective etc. Bhabani Bhattacharya, Jogesh Das and Easterine Kire straddle both the familial and cultural experiences of the war, which is why their authorships locate agencies of cultural registration of different emotions in their central figures. Experience of subjective emotions experienced by Mari in the eponymous novel and the hungry woman with the child in *So Many Hungers!* can be seen as extensions of their individual selves which communicate with the larger bodies of the shared communities leading to the build-up of emotional communities, or a sense of the collective history of the processed memories. In this context, the emotions of the characters become overlapped with the reconstruction of the historical emotions. Thus, the hungry mother in Bhabani Bhattacharya is a testament to the sensitive emotional memory of the famine that struck the Bengali people. Her emotion becomes a

miniature embodiment of the collective sufferings of the famished Bengalis in the 1940s.

Conclusion

To conclude, the range of emotions displayed and embodied in characters of both men and women are staged in ways that bear a larger negotiation with the historical, collective emotions where the fictive emotions are staged to signal a political spectrum and thereby a social commentary. Historical emotions, or past emotions manifested in female bodies of the three war novels have the potential to address the contemporary debates regarding the postcolonial negotiation with the historical emotions of the war years. While the emotional norms in men have been formed conservatively, compared to the women, the ordinariness or vulnerabilities of women's anxieties and fear form a potentially socio-cultural affective gesture to draw the attention of the general public or the recipients of the texts to the past experiences through vulnerable/varying emotions of fear and anxiety.

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Spooking the Real and Patriarchal: Reading *Bulbbul* and *Qala* as Female Fantastic Cinema

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Abstract

The issue of representation of women in Hindi drama and its horror counterpart has attracted much debate. Confined to passive roles following the dictates of patriarchy, a transformation in women's representation has been slow to manifest, notwithstanding the arrival of the so-called 'New Woman' on the screen. The fantastical Hindi horror, like other popular genres, has faithfully reflected and naturalised dominant social norms. The present study aims to understand how some recent fantastic films, namely *Bulbbul* and *Qala*, subvert the patriarchal gaze and narrative domination prevalent in Fantastic. In doing so, the paper tries to look at the manner in which these films reshape the male-centred narratives of the fantasticas they forge an alternate space where a new female subjectivity can be foregrounded.

Keywords: Hindi cinema, horror, *Bulbbul*, *Qala*, fantastic, female

Women's representation in popular Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, has been gaining attention for some time, though in most readings, film criticism usually takes one of the two routes. The first is the good old feminist critique which unwraps the unconscious, hidden mother/whore binary in the typical construction of women in Hindi films. In such critiques, the film(s) in question is/are read to create the *sanskari* or rooted heroine by

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projecting the atypical woman as immoral, often as a vamp. Given the popular film's natural and obvious allegiance to or connivance with patriarchy, the cultural function of the generic realist and horror film has been to naturalise the oppressive patriarchal social order as normative. Critiques draw our attention to these hidden status-quoist political dimensions of Hindi films. The other route in feminist film criticism is the unravelling of a visual narrative tradition which creates representational space for alternative flexible imaginations of the good woman while limiting themselves to social dictates. This constitutes the seizing of forgotten films that challenge normative social order by constructing heroines within the borders drawn by patriarchy that contest received ideas of the good and the bad. In the reading that follows our analysis is propelled by the idea that the representation of women in cinema has undergone a transformation, wherein the representations can be examined as "negotiating a strategic resolution of the contradictions that women experience in their lives as a result of the contrary pulls of the ideological categories of 'tradition' and 'modernity'" (Rajan 127).

When we think of the growth and development of Hindi cinema from the 1920s onwards, the portrayal of women was largely as passive creatures. Nandakumar defines this phenomenon, as he states, "There was a stigma associated with Indian women acting... and in order to conform to social norms (directors) might have been pressured to portray Indian women leads as characters who live within the confines of society even in the films" (22). This stereotypical depiction of women witnessed a slight change with the transformative depiction of women in the 1960s to 80s, who were gradually getting educated, bold and outgoing. But despite the metamorphosis, the representation of women never really challenged the conservative social ethos. Butalia iterates how the problem in women's depiction was not one of irreverence but that it lacked agency, as seen in *Mother India* (1957). The woman depicted in the cinema of the period is never really liberated; she is thoroughly bound to her home and family, and is a husband-worshipping, self-sacrificing, sexually chaste woman. Rajan comments on these depictions in cinema as she states that women "are made to serve as harmonious symbols of historical continuity

rather than as conflictual subjects and sites of conflict" (129). Gokulsing and Dissanayake further observe this depiction of women in films, "Their need to preserve honour is expressed through elaborate codified behaviour patterns that require the women to remain secluded, confined to the domestic domain and dependent on the husband" (79). With the women's movement gaining strength in the 1980s, women filmmakers like Aparna Sen, Sai Paranjape, and Arun Raje attempted to make women and their issues visible, and bring female subjectivity to the forefront with women characters firmly rooted in specific socio-historical periods (Dutta 73). But these cinemas remained in the margins, in terms of popular viewership, with the dominant cinema with a male lead swallowing up the women-centric cinemas. Commenting on the narrative handicap that marred the portrayal of women characters, Dutta states, "It is a disconcerting observation that a language of cinematic violence appropriates women filmmakers and disallows any alternate subjective vision to underpin the narrative" (75). The cinema post-liberalisation in the 1990s attempted to portray women differently with women sharing significant chunk of cinematic space and propelling the plot ahead with their roles. Films like *Dushman* employing the avenging women genre though, tried to provide women with more agency, yet as Lalitha Gopalan points out, the avenging women is a masculine invention where the woman, generally a victim of rape, never upsets the social imaginary. Despite several efforts, women's representation has failed to garner a major change. Quoting the example of *Dil Toh Pagal Hai*, and its failure to challenge the voyeuristic male gaze that forces the depiction of women in a particular manner, Dutta opines, "the two female personae do not articulate a new subjectivity but remain limited as the filmmaker's imaginary feminine" (76). The film makers' complicity with the patriarchal structures of society in which men are bestowed with the power of gaze, and women become the object of gaze has been heavily criticized by Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking 1975 essay titled, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" where Mulvey states, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (19).

The female continues to be the vassal of desire of men post the liberalisation of India in 1990s. Women continue to be the object on which the male could project their fantasies and fulfil it through them. Women's portrayal, in the dominant modes of representations in India, has mostly shied away from what Rajan had termed the "sites of conflict" with the demand for the rights of women always being at odds with the society that champions the traditional. Within the nationalist discourse of Hindi cinema that bound the depiction of women to the family paradigm, the points of resistance were limited and did not have the ability to subvert the existing formula of representation of women completely. In such a scenario, when the depiction of women's interests is subservient to the demands and wishes of the traditional patriarchal societal structure that holds family values to be the primary objective of a woman, it becomes an emergent need to create an alternate space for women's rights to flourish. The female fantastic in cinema attempts to provide that alternate space to create a discourse specific for women that subverts and challenges the normative patriarchal discourse ruling the roost in traditional cinema. The paper intends to understand how the problematic representation of women finds a vent through the use of the female fantastic in two Hindi cinemas, *Bulbbul* and *Qala*. The study, in doing so, not only questions the traditional misrepresentation/absences of women from Indian cinema but also highlights the absence of agency for women depicted in the reel. The paper will further look into the fantastic in cinema in light of the historical, cultural, and social determinants that shape it, and attempt to assert how the female fantastic provides women in cinema with the much-needed agency to act upon the absent/secondary characters of women, while helping them recover the reel spaces that has for so long been denied to them.

Fantasy has always been an alluring subject area in all areas be it art, literature or cinema. Its association with what is often termed the subconscious expression of desire has made the genre elusive and difficult to theorise upon. The genre of fantasy has always stood in opposition to realistic writings, subverting what we term 'normal' in realistic writings. Fantasy writings have refuted the laws of traditional characterisation, chronology, and the laws of unity. Rosemary Jackson in her book, *Fantasy: The Literature of*

Subversion, dubs fantasy as “the literature of desire” (2). As a mode, fantasy is best defined by its relationality, the relation that fantasy has to the real, not in antithesis to it, but is “the inverse side of reason’s orthodoxy. It reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinises the category of the ‘real’” (Jackson 12). The genesis of the fantastical can be found in the Gothic writings as it has been time and again theorised that the fantastic has links or often coincides with the uncanny (Roas np; Boccuti np) and emerged with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Published in a high era of rationality and reason, the novel made inroads into the fortress of stability, coherence, pushing towards an incoherent world, where meanings and certainties are dissolved. Most critical renditions of these writings have been liberal humanist in character, dubbing them as “escapist” and “transcendental,” which have been attempting to move away from the mundane realities that surround the lives of the time to create an alternate superior life. However, most of these criticisms attempt to develop a reading of this genre in isolation of the social, cultural, historical, and gendered factors that play a significant role in helping understand the significance of fantasy. David Punter’s *The Literature of Terror* (1980) attempts to provide a corrective as it states, “Gothic fiction demonstrates the potential of revolution by daring to speak the socially unspeakable, but the very act of speaking it is an ambiguous gesture” (417).

The gothic tradition gradually underwent changes, with the trope of terror, horror and supernaturalism mingled in the early Gothic, which aimed more at social justice, giving way later to more radical changes in the narrative where the larger issues of social transformation are taken up. In the nineteenth century, the Gothic, witnessed an uneasy blending in the realistic novels. In novels like *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *Wuthering Heights*, the Gothic penetrates the realistic in order to challenge/rant at the bourgeois patriarchal order of the society, giving birth to the idea of the fantastic that tended to reproduce and challenge prohibited desires within the accepted structures of the society like family and marriage only to return to the accepted norms of patriarchal society. Jackson comments, “Fantasy, as a literature of the ‘uncanny’ in this period, brought to the surface unconscious desire and threatened to dissolve

those taboos” (76). The more clearly “Fantastic” writers of the nineteenth century present a strictly topsy-turvy world which has no connection with reality. These fantastical writings, however, have almost always been dominated by men, and even if women employed the fantastic in any manner in their literary works (as we see above), it would still remain subservient to the existing order of the society, shying from challenging or creating a novel space altogether. Men's way of thinking, writing, and imagining have largely shaped the fantastic. Women have been marginalised figures in this portrayal of the fantastic, an aberration whose very existence was defined as a passive victim or as an embodiment of evil, seducing the innocent and condemning them to death. The fantastic element got a feminist makeover when women took to creating the fantastic in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which is often termed neo-fantastic literature. Natalie M. Rosinsky, in her book *Feminist Futures*, comments on the feminist turn in the fantastic as she opines, “the fluid reconfiguration of perceived physical reality, validating temporal simultaneity and spatial relativity, is redolent of the “feminist consciousness” (106).

It is the existence/assertion of this feminist consciousness subverting/feminising the temporality and spatial unity in the fantastical of the post-modern age that the study is located. Though the concept of the fantastic existed since the time of the Gothic, the idea of the female fantastic first appeared when the Belgian writer and Critic, Anne Richter, coined the term in her anthology. Richter proposes a rather essentialist view of the female fantastic featuring the primordial woman who, through this writing, finds a suitable vent through it, while it also acts as a medium of assertion and celebration as she states:

the feminine imaginary expresses a persistent nostalgia, its connivance with elementary nature, which is now underestimated. (...) The revelations of current fantastic literature bring us back to the path of life and wisdom. For the demands of nature that she embodies are not only material but also spiritual. The exacerbation of the intellect has completely cut off the so-called civilised man from intuitive discernment. In the face of the disasters with

which this excess threatens us, does not salvation rest on the restoration of feminine values? (195)

The essentialist definition of the female fantastic received some flak at the hands of critics like Gloria Alpini and Danielle Hipkins who espoused the view that the celebration of the woman as an irrational subject might "involve the risk of perpetuating the male habit of reducing the feminine to the expression of the irrational/Eros as opposed to the masculine/rational/Logos" (261). However, despite the criticism, the concept received some support from later critics like Monika Farnetti, who believed that the definition of the female fantastic through its championing of the irrational transgresses the symbolic patriarchal control through Western language and thought that was made and controlled by man. Two other seminal works make use of this essentialist view of the female fantastic, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (2000) by Lucie Armitt and Zoé Jiménez Corretjer's *El Fantástico Femenino en España y América* (2001). Both the writers depict how through their fantastic writings and creation of fantastic women characters, the traditional systems of logic and rationality established by men are subverted. The female fantastic then creates a parallel discursive arena where patriarchal ideals and criticism can be challenged and often subverted. The female fantastic is essentially centred around women, portraying their status in society, often pointing to adultery, incest, and lesbianism, among other things that challenge the male hegemonic status in society, while depicting everything from a feminine perspective. Reading a fantastic cinema allows us to metaphorically look beyond the signification system established by the patriarchal society, to look for hidden meanings beyond the surface layer that enables an understanding of the familiar things in a novel context. Through the female fantastic, an alternate space is created where the female can define and assert herself, where the patriarchal norms take a backseat even if temporarily. While a lot of scholarship already exists on the female fantastic in literature, the space is largely unexplored when it comes to the depiction and use of the female fantastic in Hindi cinema. Cinema with strong women leads have always been a part of Hindi cinema, *Mother India* (1957), *Bandit Queen* (1994), *Fire* (1996) , *15 Park Avenue* (2001), along with a

spate of recent films like *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2013), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Mary Kom* (2014) and *Mimi* (2021) have ventured to challenge the stereotypical plot structures of conventional Hindi cinema that worship the male lead. These films have attempted to create an alternate narrative that allows women characters to drive the plot ahead and rule over a universe that is still male-centric. However, despite their best attempts the films fall short of actually liberating the women characters from the gender norms of society, and hence cannot be dubbed as a female fantastic. Though the fantastic element in women centred films have been slow to enter the picture, there have been some films who have attempted to experiment with this form, an aspect that the study will focus upon. The paper attempts to theorise upon the rise of the female fantastic in Hindi cinema through a study of two Hindi cinemas, *Bulbbul* (2020) and *Qala* (2022), as the representation of the female fantastic.

The fantastic in Indian cinema has largely been cast in the form of horror cinema which have acted as a medium where the normative can be upended, opening up spaces for the alternative portrayals. However, even in these films, the women characters have, at best, been second fiddle to the male protagonists. The women characters, when represented, would be the demoness or the seducer whose mindless and purposeless existence is only to seek revenge. The women in such fantastic cinemas occupy the binary of the witch/damsel in distress, both of whom are at the mercy of the male protagonist. Often these women, young and attractive, are projected as the wish fulfilment of male fantasies. Never does the representation of any of the categories of women characters provide space to question the values of a traditional patriarchal society. Though a popular way of the analysis of horror has been through the popular idea of Kristeva's 'abject', yet the depiction of women in Hindi cinema also does not comply strictly with Kristeva's notion of the 'abject'. This relationship between woman and the abject can be discerned from Kristeva's comments on the representation of women in horror fantastic as she opines, "woman is specifically related to polluting objects, which fall into two categories: excremental and menstrual. This, in turn, gives woman a special relationship to the abject" (10). In Hindi horror-fantastic cinema, we

visualise the other woman/witch as the abject, while the woman acts as a foil, where "traditional gendered perspectives are reinforced, normative femininity is deified and the monstrous other feminine, commanding sovereign female desire and controlling gaze, is annihilated" (Mubarak 382). The body of the woman becomes the site where the battle between the monstrous and normative feminine is played out, and the normative feminine wins the battle upholding the patriarchal norms once again.

The present study explores how the films in question, *Qala* and *Bulbbul*, problematise Kristeva's notion of the abject, and Mubarak's "MonstrousOther Feminine" by subverting the patriarchal notion of normative feminine and overturn their subjugation to an established order. The films in question also upend the atypical tropes of Indian horror cinema followed right from the 1940s with films like *Mahal*, *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964), *Poonam ki Raat* (1965), *Ye Raat Phir na Ayegi* (1966), *Sau Saal Baad* (1966), *Anita* (1967), the Ramsay Films of the 1970s and 1980s along with the new age low-budget horror of Ram Gopal Verma and Vikram Bhatt till the early years of the twenty-first century. Though the horror fantastic cinema in the twenty-first century had tried to take into purview the changing gender equations in Indian society and has attempted to depict women in a more favourable light, it still had its shortcomings. Hindi cinema has attempted to examine horror fantastic through psychological lens in films like *Bees Saal Baad* (1958), *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964), *Bhool Bhulaiya* (2004); these films have tried to bring in mental illness to justify the presence of horror, but the result was a failed experiment and ultimately, it is the subjugation to the male commands that cures the protagonists of their mental illness, thereby conforming to the established gender norms with women being cast in witch/ honourable women binary. It was *Stree* which broke the horror-fantastic mould by unsettling the fixed gender identities that shape the fantastic cinemas. With *Bulbbul* (2020), the genre moves a step ahead, sheds the horror element and takes the form of the fantastic. *Qala* (2022) has a mild brush with horror elements, shapes itself and enters completely in the fantastic genre. In the process, both films rewrite the manner in which horror-fantastic cinema depicts women. They unshackle the women

characters from the burden of the binary representation of witch/honourable women while also liberating, substantially, if not completely, the Hindi fantastic cinema from being reliant on the trope of horror. Both feature films transgress the boundaries laid down by the patriarchal horror-fantastic codes, and surge ahead while breaking the masculine rational and logical code of conduct laid down by a society governed by male norms. The study intends to analyse how the feature films in question are also instrumental in bringing about a revolutionary depiction of female characters that establish a world of their own, run and dictated by their choices and commands.

The Foregrounding of the Fantastic in *Bulbbul*

Bulbbul (2020), set in nineteenth-century Bengal, is the story of its eponymous heroine, Bulbbul, who married at a very young age and develops an attraction for her brother-in-law, leading to violent retribution from her husband, the landlord. The film, on the surface level, comprises all tropes of horror, witch, murders by a witch, witch-hunting and an all-encompassing eeriness. The society depicted in this horror film is strongly patriarchal, and no deviation from the patriarchy-dictated normative behaviour goes unnoticed and unpunished. Following the traditions set by a conservatively patriarchal society in Bengal Presidency, Bulbbul, at a tender age, is married off to a much older man, Indranil, the landlord of a massive estate. The male-dominated society becomes apparent to the viewers when the partisanship of a deeply hypocritical society that holds different standards of morality for a man and women come to the forefront. While Indranil has an illicit physical relationship with his twin mentally deranged brother's wife, Bulbbul is not allowed to cultivate a friendly bond with her brother-in-law, Indranil's younger brother, Satya. 'Putting women in place', a dominant cultural practice associated with the establishment of male supremacy and hegemony, finds its outlet in Mahendra violently indulging in wife-beating, so much so that Bulbbul suffers a grave injury (her feet turn inside out). Following the incident, she is also raped by her husband's twin.

It is after this violent episode of patriarchal retribution that we see the element of the female fantastic manifest in the film through the character of Bulbbul. The colour of the moon in the film changes to red, signifying the loss of innocence of Bulbbul, an innocence that predominated in the first half of the film, and referring to the fantastic element in the film. The world is bathed in red whenever Bulbbul is out to avenge all those women who suffer the same fate as her. The fantastic depicted here "denounces female cultural models imposed by patriarchal power" (Roas 8). Bulbbul metamorphoses into a non-conformist woman who subverts the power structures established by a conservative society. For one, Bulbbul befriends the doctor who had cured her when she had suffered violent physical abuse. She sheds the patriarchal dictates of purdah and develops a deep bond with the doctor, who apparently did not share the moral dictates of the patriarchal society. Satya, fulfilling his patriarchal duties, reprimands her, "*purdah bhinahi kara aapne!*" (You didn't cover your face in a veil!) Bulbbul also acts like the lord of the house so when Satya returns after his education in London, he comments on her boldness, "*Thakur, thakur khel rahe h boudi!*" (Are you pretending to be the landlord or sister-in-law!) From a sweet, docile, gentle girl, Bulbbul metamorphoses into a superwoman who has to take on the garb of a witch to scare the dominating, torturous males in society.

The episodes of men lording over their wives are showcased throughout the feature film. The harmless-looking Master Dinkar, Satya's wagoner are all part of the same tribe that believes that the wife's body is the site for performing patriarchy by physical violence. Bulbbul takes on the task of avenging the wrongs meted out to the women in her society because she knows that the patriarchal males will never find faults with their own behaviour. The film challenges the rational/patriarchal approach to the understanding/viewing of women like Bulbbul/women in general as a witch/evil force as it rationalises/champions the irrationality often attributed to women. The film employs "a humanisation of the image of the witch, now somebody who has been battered by patriarchy and is out there to save the other women from its evils" (Mukherjee and Gunwant 45). The witch in the film subverts the cultural logic and order that society expects from its women, and in

the subversion, the film establishes a novel manner in which to view the actions of women in society. The way in which the trope of witch has been used by the film speaks amply about how it aims to subvert the received notions of witchcraft by a patriarchal society. The association of witchery with women is strongly challenged by the film, which takes place on two planes: First, the film challenges the existence of witches, and second, the film tries to establish that witches are the product of the evils of society, not a supernatural manifestation. The film demonstrates that witches do not exist; it is the violence perpetrated upon her, physically and emotionally, by the male trio that results in her transformation into a character who avenges the wrongs of the other women of the village. In the dark of the night and the dense parts of the jungle, Bulbbul puts into employment her adeptness in climbing trees (earlier in the film, she displayed great skill at it) and her pent-up anger against the male privileges and insensitivity, and her inside-out feet caused by the severe physical torture at the hands of her husband to fight against the injustices meted out to women giving rise to the rumour that a *chudail* (witch) lives in the jungle.

The film goes a long way towards dispensing any superstitions associated with witchcraft and putting in place a feminist explanation of the existence of such beliefs. The episode of Bulbbul being physically abused by her husband to the extent that she is bedridden with crushed bones in her feet over the suspicion of having an affair with her brother-in-law Satya is interconnected with one of the most significant scenes where Bulbbul reveals herself as the witch with her feet inside out, thus challenging the popular beliefs of people that associate witches with such characteristics. The scenes also challenge the popular belief associated with witches by portraying that it is not inherent evil, but being exposed to evil forces that may lead to physical deformities in them, like in the film, Bulbbul's feet is turned inside out. Also the film debunks the popular myths that witches hunt humans without any provocation, as the film depicts to the viewers that bulbul, the witch, was only avenging the women being ill-treated by their husbands by murdering those men in the dark of night. The woman committing murders in the dark of the night inhabits the domestic spaces of a normative woman quite safely. The ordinariness of the

woman confined to the domestic spaces by the patriarchal forces ironically upends those very norms and dictates and confines her. Bulbbul encapsulates the stereotypical binary employed in the depiction of women. She moves from the submissive female to the female as a monster, and in doing so, upsets the balance and structure of the society dictated by patriarchal norms. The red colour frame used whenever Bulbbul is out to subvert and challenge patriarchy becomes synonymous with the horror that the film-makers want to create in the minds of the audience only to break the illusion later when it is revealed that the horror faced by the audience is an extension of the horror that Bulbbul goes through when she is physically abused by her husband and later raped by her brother-in-law. The scenes shift between the red and white colours symbolically shifting between rationality and subversion of it. Living the life of a normal woman in the day and taking on the form of an avenging woman by the night, Bulbbul's body becomes the site where the abject and the desirable peacefully reside, with the abject trouncing and defeating the normatively desirable woman of patriarchy. In upending the established patriarchal normativity, creating spaces for alternate norms and order, inhabiting the liminal space between reason and unreason, challenging the societal dictates of a docile woman by taking on the form of an avenging woman, using the tropes of conventional horror films to denounce the oppression of women and fighting against the marginalised status that was ascribed to these women, the film in question transcends the boundaries of an ordinary horror to become a female fantastic.

The Hidden Fantastic in *Qala*

Qala (2022), a story set in pre-independent India, revolves around the life journey of its eponymous heroine *Qala*. A coming-of-the-age film, it takes the reader on a journey of a gothic tale of the fight for motherly love turning into violent ambition and resulting in life-long guilt. Though the story does not fit into the typical model of horror cinema (without witches and ghosts), the film abounds in gothic elements, in fact walking the thin line between gothic and realistic, and would undoubtedly fit the mould of a female fantastic. The female and the fantastic are found aplenty in the depiction of

the film. The fantastic can be discerned in the setting of the house where *Qala* lived with her mother as it has a strong Gothic feel; the architecture of the house is Victorian Gothic, with a surreal location in the middle of a snow-capped no (wo)man's land. The appearance and clothes of her mother have an old-world charm; the chunky jewellery, the heavy clothes, and the bearing of the mother all inspire a feeling of the surreal. The way the film plays with the light and dark inside the house reminds one of Walpole's awe-inspiring Gothic settings. Brightness eludes the viewers, and the long silences are accompanied by dull candle light; daylight serves only as a harsh reminder of bitter truths. The scenes of Qala's childhood also overlap with her period of innocence and is characterized dominantly by rich black and white frames evoking the gothic. Though the house is no match for the mansions commonly found in gothic films, the interiors of the house smacks of a grandness that old Hindi horror films like *Kohraa* (1964) reflect; the curved staircase, the spluttering candles to ward off the darkness, rocking chairs, windows with curtains overlooking swamps, mist and snow. Films like *Mahal* (1949), *Bees Saal Baad* (1962), and to an extent *Madhumati* (1958) depict such Gothic elements. However, the horror films mentioned above comprises a male hero, hapless and caught in the web of mystifying elements, *Qala*, depicts a woman fighting her own demons. While the old hindi films use the template of *punar janam* (reincarnation) to a large extent, in *Qala* the guilt gives way to hallucinations and psychological imbalance in the protagonist sparking elements of horror in the film. A film with an absent father figure and populated with women characters who are not passive material beings but drive the story forward becomes a crucial element in the film. *Qala*'s mother, *Qala* and her secretary are the three personas around whom the story revolves. The film also employs other women characters in order to break the stereotype and prejudices associated with certain professions.

As in the case of protagonists of fantastic literature in general, *Qala*'s life is brimming with solitude and alienation: "She sank into utter solitude, surrounding herself with a rampart of silence" (Richter 132). The solitude of *Qala* is depicted through minimal use of dialogue, silence punctuated by classical music and *taranna*. The solitude is further accentuated through the darkness and gloom that

characterizes the first section of the film. The house situated in the middle of a snow-covered field bereft of people symbolically refers to the alienation that she faces in her life. The loneliness that surrounds her life as a young woman persistently defines even when she succeeds as a singer in a music industry dominated by men. The darkness predominant in the house is reflective of the darkness within the mother's heart caused due to the loss of the male offspring at childbirth. Her only hope and aim in life appeared to be to please her mother, which she seemed to be unable to. Her mother, Urmila, a perfectionist, when it comes to music, is unable to deal with the mediocrity that Qala seems to exhibit. The twin brother of Qala, who unfortunately died at childbirth because he was the weaker one in comparison to Qala, seems almost like an invisible spirit hovering over the entire house. His loss at times appears to trump any efforts made by Qala to enliven the spirits of her mother. This phantom brother of Qala has transformed into the brooding silence and mournful stillness that is apparent in the house. Throughout the film, it seems Urmila displays a coldness and indifference towards her daughter, venting the anger that she was strong enough to take away all the nutrition and cause her twin brother to die. In one instance, in a display of anger, she also attempts to smother Qala with a pillow. And this absent son makes a return through the character of Jagan who exhibits all the characteristic traits that Urmila would have desired her son to possess. Conveniently an orphan, Jagan is easily absorbed into the household, and the creepiness gives way to mind-numbing patriarchy. Urmila, now that she had a son she could not keep alive, puts all her energy into making him a singing star; Qala's ambition is smothered. What she had been instructed in her childhood to limit her musical learning to the confines of the home now materialises for Qala. She is forced to act as a loving sister and is taken to meet appropriate boys for marriage. Qala, however, is disdainful of both roles and is more bent on receiving public recognition for her singing. And so, the unimaginable happens. Jagan loses his voice in a very public performance that was meant to bring him huge accolades and a promising career in the music industry of Hindi cinema. Unable to bear the loss of his voice, Jagan is pushed to do the extreme when he chooses to take his own life.

Despite this, Qala seduces a music director and grabs an offer of singing for a Hindi film. The patriarchal society reaps its dividend by sexually exploiting Qala. Overcoming all obstacles, Qala succeeds in making a name for herself in the music industry. But her mother seems unable to forgive Qala for her transgressions and for murdering her brother(s), twice. The film also showcases how women were subjugated in the film industry. The courtesans would be the only female singers, and women from reputed households could not be a part of the industry. However, no such rules applied to the menfolk. The film also depicts the attitude that the film harboured towards the female singers, and as a viewer, one is repeatedly reminded of Urmila Devi's admonishment to Qala, "Remember! Don't become a courtesan!". The dehumanisation of women entering the public sphere is quite telling. Qala's action in deciding to put her musical ambitions over her sexual innocence, which the patriarchal society would not like her to do, unravels the patriarchal dictates of society. In choosing a musical career, Qala subverts the conventional norms of society and foregrounds her identity and wishes, prioritising her life over societal dictates. She freely mingles with the infamous courtesan singers of the music industry and throws the gauntlet to the domineering males who would like to control and show Qala her place as an inferior creature in society. Qala establishes herself as a reputed singer who also wins a prestigious award for her singing; in doing so, Qala challenges the conventional and rational decisions made by women in their lives and ventures into the unknown. Her adventure into the unknown is the biggest upends the established order of a male-dominated society. And the continuous pressure that this position puts on Qala can be estimated from the delusions that she suffers from. Her life seems to be a storehouse of sadness, a melancholy that causes her to "lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself" (Kristeva 5). At the same time, however, her breakdown and separation from reality is her obvious choice, glaring and inescapable (5). Qala earns a lot of accolades from society, and yet she is ignored by her mother, and that seems to become the centre of her delusions. While her boldness in choosing her career path might have been a celebration of the irrational over the male-sanctioned rationality, in her mother's estimation, she was a ruinous woman, and her irrationality was never accepted by her mother. She

was, in her mother's eyes, an abject who could never become a normal, subversive woman. In taking the less chosen path, in subverting the conventional dictates of a heteronormative patriarchal society, the film brings the female subversive role combined with the fantastic to the foreground. As Rosemary Jackson puts it, the fantastic becomes an excellent form of subversive social opposition that counters the ideology of the moment in history in which it arises:

It is possible to discern it [the fantastic] as a desire for something excluded from cultural order -more specifically, for all that is in opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in Western society over the last two centuries. As literature of desire, the fantastic can be seen as providing a point of departure. (176)

Redefining the Fantastic

The characters in both feature films refuse to be abject; in fact, they are both very desirable nor do they metamorphose into normative gendered beings toeing the patriarchal line where they are the subjugated ones. *Bulbbul* transforms into a so-called witch to avenge the wrongs meted out to women in general, and Qala is indeed a witch as someone who has decided to go against the heteronormative society. In doing so, both of the films attempt to manifest as a female fantastic. Armitt states "[the fantastic text], endlessly open and thus non-containable...therefore pose as a dangerous threat to establish notions of fixity and conformity, a characteristic that obviously makes the fantastic a particularly appealing form for the exploration of socio-political marginality and ex-centricity" (11). Armitt seems to point out that marginality becomes a chief point of exploration for all of these films, which works to show how females are marginalised with respect to a deeply patriarchal society. In exploring the marginalised positions of women and then subverting the marginalised to bring it to the centre, the films in question fit the mould of the female fantastic. The irrational, in terms of the subversion of patriarchy, in these two films comes to the limelight and urges the viewers to question what has been unconsciously accepted as normal. The fixed, normative

and rational is taken for a toss, while the female-driven norm rules the roost. Both films depict very strong women characters who very bravely stand up to a male-dominated society and challenge their confinement to the domestic sphere of the household, though films that break the conventional patriarchal narrative of cinema to create new narratives of identity and establish new codes of social conduct is still wanting. While *Bulbbul* sheds the purdah and turns into a witch warrior, *Qala* breaks the confines of the music industry to establish a name in music. The horror depicted in *Bulbbul*, and the Gothic horror in *Qala* then serve the purpose of these women in defeating the reductionist forces that would limit their lives and reduce it to nothingness. The films depict women eager to venture into the public sphere and upset the hierarchy that has been created by a patriarchal society. *Bulbbul* located in nineteenth-century 19th-century Bengal and *Qala* in the early 20th-century attempt to break the code of passive, innocent women established by the cinema of those times. The films in question then also undertake a revisionist depiction of the women of the colonial society opening up gaps and questioning their monolithic depiction, and looking for gaps in that history that talks of the assertion of women. Hindi cinema is yet to be liberated from the clutches of monotonous patriarchal depiction that would allow women characters to be at the centre of power, challenging and defeating the conventional.

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A Plaything in its Plurality: Toys at the Borders of the Real and Unreal, the Temporal and Spatial

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Abstract

Toys have a dual nature: they apparently seem trivial, but they also happen to become objects of serious concern for adults too. This paper seeks to understand the dynamic of the bonding between a child and its plaything, taking into consideration Baudelaire's essay "The Philosophy of Toys". Toys have surfaced as important motifs and metaphors in several texts. The study seeks to uncover some of the contexts which have made 'toys' or a child's plaything a matter of perennial concern in the world of adults. Taking cue from Baudelaire's essay it looks at the dialectic between real and imaginary, in the perspective of a child as it begins to play with the miniature 'simulacra' of reality- presented through the characters of the Rabbit and the Skin Horse in the novella *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams.

Keywords: simulacra, emergent toys, good toys, bad toys, scientific toys

The word "toy" almost immediately associates itself with a feeling of something being light, trivial and out of context for the adult, real world of crisis and complication. Etymologically speaking, in the Middle Ages the word toy was used to denote an amorous plaything (c.1300) and later, a thing of little value, a trifle (1520s) before it came to define a thing for a child to play with in the 1580s. Regardless of the narrowly built concepts of the word, toys have never ceased to conjure up a phantasmagoria in our minds, both emotional and intellectual. The ever enchanting, ever alluring world of toys often becomes a timeless and space-less paradigm where the rationality and imagination of the adults and the children blend and

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clash. While narrating his experience in the toy chamber of Madame Panckoucke's house, in a 1983 essay, "A Philosophy of Toys", Charles Baudelaire explains how the intrusion of adult rationality upsets the fantastic world of children and their toys. Being asked to choose from an elaborate plethora of toys, as a gift from Madame Panckoucke, little Charles chose the most magnificent toy that his eyes could find, however, only to be discouraged by his mother for his "impertinent" choice. Consequently he had to settle down for the most ordinary object present in that room, with an endless fascination for the toys he could not choose, and "resigned . . . to a fair compromise" (Baudelaire 198).

Combined with the tripartite sensations of fantasy, pleasure and imitation, the toys stand in the threshold of being a child's need and luxury. Often perceived as trifles by many, toys still manage to attract the interest of adults, desire of a collector and curiosity of a historian. They are companions, far removed from the solemnity of existence. Yet, the pristine world of children and their toys are never bereft of adult interference. We may recall Louise de Vilmorin's¹ story from the Chapter, "The Nature of Toys", in *A History of Toys* about her little doll Lili in this context, where she ruminates on how she could not mourn the loss of her favourite doll Lili because of being restricted to do so by the insensible inhabitants of the grown up world. She calls the incident "the sort of dreadful infant tragedy" arising out of a conflict between "the involved passion of the child and the unthinking indifference of the adult" (Fraser 8). On the other hand we are also to keep in mind, those overprotective parents who do not let their children play with the new toy with the fear of it getting damaged in the unskilful hands of their children and consider toys to be objects of "mute adoration" (Baudelaire 202). Baudelaire is caustic about such parents and calls them "savage and parsimonious" (Baudelaire 202). This leads us to a paradox, if the loss of a doll is so trivial an issue that it needs not be mourned of, then why such precariousness to preserve such a thing that hardly makes a significant difference in our lives? Perhaps the adults intend to preserve the playthings as mementos of their children's growing years. Toys are companions, they represent life in full splendour to the little hearts with their "blinding flashes of colour . . . violence in gesture and decision of contour"

(Baudelaire 198). Attachment to a toy or a doll has always been a common aspect of growing up. Such attachment at times can be seen to have got extended till the youth or even beyond for many. There have been ample instances that talk about such involved attachment between the owner and the plaything across years and ages. The story of “Franz Kafka and the Doll”² has been interpreted and reinterpreted in so many ways that it had almost taken the shape of a legend with different meanings for different readers. The little girl’s grief, on losing her doll speaks volumes about the kind of camaraderie that she shared with her plaything, and despite the numerous interpretations, Kafka’s sincerity and response towards this apparently trivial incident remains most intriguing. Franz Kafka is known for his unique understanding and projection of the ideas of ‘absurdism’ and existential angst through his stories and novels. His sensitive mind provoked him to respond to the girl’s plight and comfort her. The letters that Kafka wrote on behalf of the lost doll who was apparently on a world tour, give a glimpse into the imaginative world of children surrounding their playthings. The toys are no less than companions to them who are capable of doing everything their human companions perform. Hence, for children a toy does not just remain as trivial and replaceable as it is thought of to be. The doll continued to remain a canvas through which the girl came to terms with certain truths of life.

According to Baudelaire, the “whole of life” is “to be found in miniature” (198) in toys. So, they also have this quality of make-believe, due to which children prefer to dwell in a world that is real yet preferable. According to Antonia Fraser in *The History of Toys*, “it is the importance of make-believe in toys which bridges the gap between the element of fantasy and imitation”. The semblance of reality in the better world of games and playthings perhaps provokes them to achieve a blending of fantasy and imitation in their act of playing. Thus, the child learns to come to terms with his immediate surrounding, and the toys become to him/her , as Baudelaire comments in his celebrated essay, “A Philosophy of Toys”, “actors in the great drama of life, reduced in size by the ‘camera obscura’ of their little brains” (198). Imitation becomes more meaningful to children when they deal with mechanical toys , because the child learns and starts expecting analogous experiences

when dealing with similar objects. Toys like mechanical cars, robots and trains thus become for a child the miniature models representing the real vehicles and scientific inventions of larger world. . Whatever he observes in his surroundings, he is able to reproduce that in his mechanical toys like cars, trains and boats. The child gets pleasantly surprised when he finds that he no longer has to drag a car across the floor, but it can move on its own and starts to learn demanding engines in every car because real cars have engines, “the desire, deliberation and action” working as a “single faculty” in his mind. The way a child plays with his toy gives “evidence of their great capacity for abstraction and high imaginative power” (198), according to Baudelaire. In the world of games sometimes the child creates a self sufficient universe where the toys no longer have roles to play even though their imagination has been catalysed by the toys to begin with. Baudelaire differentiates between the games borne out of the rich imagination of children and the games that are mere imitation by the child of the adult world. He categorically disapproves of such imitative games in which the child only seems to repeat the gestures and comments that they have seen their elders to perform. According to Baudelaire, by imitating the actions and behaviour of the adult, “the poor little things . . . are already giving a forecast of their immortal future puerility” (198). He marvels at the intensity of imagination of a child at play which makes the surrounding artefacts transcend their shape, size and organic unity. The furniture in rooms, become characters in the world of the child’s games. It is remarkable, how many roles a single chair can play continuously and repetitively in children’s games when they do not have any toy to match the requirement of the imagined game. In this sense the ‘plaything’ of a child continues to extend its meaning and significance continuously liberating the entities from their constricting existence. More than imitation, fantasy plays a crucial role in a child’s play.

Baudelaire states that toy is a child’s “earliest initiation to art, or rather for him it is the first concrete example of art” (199), which perhaps fails to evoke the same feelings of warmth , enthusiasm and conviction, as they grow up. In the course of playing the child continues a complex process of imitation and imagination. This is seen as their “great capacity for abstraction” (198) by Baudelaire,

by virtue of which they even develop the capacity of playing without any plaything at hand. Various great fictive narratives are created by the child as he/she starts imagining, and they not only create but live in those narratives while playing. Soon the immobile toy car covers huge distances with great speed, putting those audience to shame who demand a “physical and mechanical perfection” being unable to realise that the “plays of Shakespeare can remain beautiful with an apparatus of barbaric simplicity” (Baudelaire 199). Thus the toys become entities beyond the confinements of time and space. In the story “The Rocking Horse Winner” by D.H. Lawrence, the little boy is seen ferociously riding his rocking horse and imaginatively travelling to the race courses. The rocking horse might have been just a mute and stationed object, however, for the boy it becomes an essential agent – a companion in this fantastic journey to the race course. Other than the determination of a son to fulfil the wishes of his mother, what remains noteworthy in the story is the tremendous conviction the horse lends the child. The rocking horse not only inspires but aggravates the connection of telepathy between the child and his frequently visited race course. The rocking horse was an inseparable part of his intuition, as he says in the end, “I never told you, mother, that if I can ride my horse, and ‘get there’, then I’m absolutely sure – oh, absolutely!” (Lawrence 804).

There is a sensory appeal in toys that augment the imagination in children, soon they tend to look for an inner life force in them. While philosophising on toys and the act of playing, Baudelaire explains how there is the “overriding desire of most children to get at and ‘see the soul’ of their toys”, some after playing with it to the fullest and some right away after getting a toy in their hands. Question may arise, what constitutes the soul of a toy which the children are eager to witness? In other words, what is that which makes the toys so real to a child? Margery Williams in her story “The Velveteen Rabbit” tries to trace an answer to these questions through the narrative voice of a Velvet Rabbit and a Skin Horse; when the Rabbit asks the Skin Horse “What is REAL?”, the Skin Horse replies: “‘Real isn’t how you are made’, said the Skin Horse. ‘It’s a thing that happens to you. \When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you

become Real''' (Williams 4). In the course of elucidating the dynamics of becoming 'real', the Skin Horse explains how becoming real does not happen all at once:

You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. (5)

The explanation of the Skin Horse brings into our attention another important factor about toys, i.e. nostalgia, which works in tandem with imitation and fantasy. The charm and nostalgia surrounding it, keeps the worn out toy in the same place of significance to its owner however matured he might be. A neat illustration of such feelings is to be found in the extract from *Summoned By Bells*³ by John Betjeman who writes about his teddy bear Archibald Ormsbygore:

Archibald my safe old bear
Whose woollen eyes looked sad or glad at me.
Whose ample forehead I could wet with tears,
Whose half moon ears received my confidence,
Who made me laugh, who never let me down.
(Betjeman 4)

However, old and mended toys be, they become companions to a child. So the fantasy revolving around them never fade away, they remain as strong as ever.

Toys and playthings have found consistent attention in genre of Gothic fiction where we find the exploration of this relationship between a child and his/her favourite plaything. Toys with all their aesthetic appeal, and endearing, attractive appearance can still seem to evoke a sense of uneasiness upon the onlooker. The camaraderie between a plaything and its player has been much explored in the plots of many movies and stories that involve horror and the supernatural. The act of 'soul- searching' by a child into the

plaything as noted by Baudelaire perhaps finds an extension in such contexts of the horror movies. More often than not, the playthings are shown as conduits of supernatural power in the stories - who either return to avenge some wrong done towards them, or act as the agents of evil. It is very interesting to note how such movies have repetitively gained enough attention of the people to turn the individual storylines into series of movies, e.g.: *Poltergeist* (1982), *Child's Play* (1988), *Annabelle* (2014), *The Boy* (2016) to name a few.

According to Baudelaire, toys are the first emblems of art to a child. However primitive and simplistic a toy may be, it never fails to initiate imagination. Baudelaire asserts that there is no reason to think that the simpler toys create a lesser reality to children when compared to the elaborate toys they receive as New Year's gifts from their rich guests, who only attempt to impress their parents. The poor child's toy, Baudelaire argues is taken from life itself, because their parents cannot afford to spend money on toys. Citing an anecdote of a rich child ignoring his expensive doll only to marvel at the caged live rat kept as a toy by a poor child; he explains the fluid nature of toys that blur the fine lines between rich and poor, high and low: "But the child had no eyes for his toy; this is what he was looking at: on the other side of the grille . . . there was another child, dirty, somewhat puny . . . showing his toy to the rich child . . . teasing, rattling and shaking in a box with bars . . . a live rat! To save money his parents had taken the toy from life itself" (Baudelaire 200). Although Baudelaire's observation solely talks of the rat as a humble substitute for an expensive and richly designed doll, the creature certainly attracts the attention of the rich kid across the street for reasons more than this. As Baudelaire comments, it is a toy taken "from life itself", rather than a toy perhaps the rat is more attractive as a possible pet. Whatever the reason might be of the rich boy's greedy examination of the poor child's toy following the rejection of his "splendid doll", it is important to note how the playthings obliterate the class differences opening up the possibilities of a free exchange. Antonia Fraser in the book *A History of Toys*, talks about the study of Councillor Patrick Murray, The Museum of Childhood, Edinburgh- who had made a study of 'emergent toys', i.e. "the toys of poor children

which they have made themselves out of the material available”; one example of an emergent toy being a ‘shoe doll’ (Fraser 13). These toys bear testimony of the imagination and creativity of a child who creates them and plays with them. The humble and minimalist nature of such toys do not indicate that only the poor children like to play with these, but children of all class and background might find interest in these toys. Also such toys have a flexible nature, they have the freedom to get transformed into different forms and shapes owing to their simplistic nature of appearance.

Such investigation into the nature of toys and their effects on children prompts us to recall Dr. Harts’ explanation on good toys and bad toys, i.e. Good toys being those which stimulates the child’s imagination, augments his psychical development and makes him/her creative and the Bad toys being those which mainly satisfy the eyes and stand as a luxury in the child’s life. Such studies have already been made by great educationists like Friedrich Froebel, and Maria Montessori. Examples of ‘good toys’ might be building blocks, since they provoke children to create something new out of the pieces, but toys like a Victorian Doll’s house or a splendidly designed doll might not always inspire creativity in a child. They are complete and pleasing in one sense. Baudelaire in his essay makes a special mention of the scientific toys, like the Phenakistoscope, the Stereoscope etc which according to him, “develop in the childish brain a taste for the marvellous and unexpected effects” (201). Baudelaire calls these toys to be neither good, nor bad. However, the only defect that these toys have according to him, is that “they are expensive” (Baudelaire 201). Since not only do children dominate their toys but are often dominated by them for the toys are influential in shaping their dreams and fantasies; such distinctions become an important part of the discussion. Another crucial factor about toys is their universal nature. Toys are the artefacts that transcend the physical boundaries of countries and nations. According to Antonia Fraser in *A History of Toys*, “Again and again, the same basic pattern of toy emerges from among races which could not possibly have been in touch with each other’s cultures” (15). An example of a universal toy might be that of a rattle that is popular in all civilisations and cultures. Made

in a globular shape like that of a nut or a gourd, the rattle has been successful to fascinate infants and children across time and space. Fraser also discusses how certain toys disappear for some years and then are seen again in the old or a newer version. Despite the apparent dissimilarity between cultures and their symbolic representation reflected in the toys, there seems to be a pattern that unites the diverse nations in the framework of a plaything. Toys, are artefacts much humble in nature; each toy starts its journey with the stigma of being unimportant and trivial but in the course of their lives they fascinate, marvel and contribute to the cultural history along with performing the task of blurring boundaries. They are timeless, their nature being ever elusive.

End Notes

1. Louise de Vilморin was a French novelist, poet and journalist. Her reputation as a writer rests on the delicate yet sarcastic tales she had written. In the Chapter “The Nature of Toys” (*A History of Toys*), Antonia Fraser mentions Madame Vilморin’s anecdote to underline the extent to which toys remained important to their owners, despite all the aura of triviality surrounding it.
2. Borrowed from the blog, www.huffpost.com, “Kafka and the Doll: The Pervasiveness of Loss”, highlights the sensitive nature of Kafka and conveys some truths about life with simplicity. The story has been told and retold in various contexts and there is more than one version of it. The reference found in this source narrates that Kafka had continued to write letters to the girl whom he found in the park, on behalf of her lost doll. Then finally Kafka gifted a new doll to the girl which inadvertently looked different from her own doll that she had lost. She found a note with the doll that said that the world tour had changed her. Years later when the girl had grown up, she found another note in one of the hidden crevices of the doll that said that the objects of love always return to us, although changed or in a different form.

3. *Summoned by Bells* by John Betjeman is an autobiography in blank verse. The author describes his memories of his home in London to his departure to Oxford. The autobiography mentions his Teddy Bear whom he called by the name Archibald Ormsbygore. Archibald remained a companion to Betjeman till his old age. Antonia Fraser mentions him in *A History of Toys* to talk about the relationship that Betjeman shared with his favourite toy.

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On the Possible Outcomes of ‘Coming Out’: Exploring the Troubling Narratives of Homophobia in Football’s Spectator-Culture

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Abstract

This paper aims to situate the notion of ‘coming out’ in both men’s and women’s football (soccer in the US) within the complex discursive field of gender-sexuality- masculinity in order to explore how the construct of ‘identity’ almost always remains at play historically with the dominant factor of heterosexual masculinity associated with the sport, especially in its spectator culture. In the process it also tries to find out whether a difference is perceivable in the treatment towards a homosexual player through a relative comparison between men’s and women’s football. The paper engages and analyses two select memoirs— former USMNT player Robbie Rogers’ *Coming out to Play* and USWNT player Megan Rapinoe’s *One Life* but does not limit its discussion to personal recollections only; rather places them against the historical narratives of homophobia and violence associated with football.

Keywords: homophobia, heterosexual masculinity, spectator, coming out

The discourse concerning gender and sexuality in the arena of sports produces a contested ground. Especially in a global mass sport like football (soccer in the US) where a large number of spectators are involved, a sportsperson’s identity along with his/her performance in the field always remains in the process of being recognized. The scope of the present paper limits itself within the purview of top tier professional football where the players and the

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spectators draw mainstream media attention. ‘Coming out’ in the public is a largely discussed issue in contemporary football. The popular mainstream version of the sport in the Twenty First century has become a highly mediatized entity that is able to capture the attention of a large number of spectators from all over the world. The issue of coming out of the players in both men’s and women’s football is thus to be studied in reference to the gender relations historically associated with the idea of the sport along with the history of the sporting culture involving the spectators and media.

Football, Heterosexual Masculinity and Homophobia

Organised sport has often been observed as a phenomenon serving a “mechanism of masculinization” (Adams et al. 279). In football the sense of ‘orthodoxy’ often adheres to the traditional male values that engender a strictly heteronormative atmosphere. Andrew Parker comments, “[v]iewed either in terms of its occupational or social characteristics, professional football is a strictly gendered affair. Its relational dynamics, its working practices, its commercial ventures, its promotional interests, are replete with images of maleness” (691). Any deviation from such standards of ‘maleness’ has been met with adverse reactions. Reiteration of such a judgmental narrative of masculinity in football historically has given rise to the condition of a ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (McCarl Nielsen et al. 283-296) and such obligatory notion leads to a clearly homophobic football culture. The construct of such a discourse of masculinity is essentially heterosexual by nature and it endows the dominant narrative a form of hegemony. Such trace of “hegemonic masculinity” along with its constituent “toughness” and “competitiveness” (Connell 63-64) should be investigated in the functional terrain of professional football. While defining hegemonic masculinity, Donaldson mentions two of its elemental components—heterosexuality and homophobia (645). A comparatively recent work further elaborates it, “[h]egemonic masculinity reinforces androcentric privilege, subjugating women, while also discriminating against gay men, who by their sexual orientation alone fail to exhibit the most desirable masculine trait, heterosexuality” (Kian et al. 681).

However, the game of football has certain space for allowing emotional gestures that might be termed non-masculine but that can happen within the affiliated space the spectators grant as long as it does not go against heterosexual gender/sexuality conventions:

Hugging, kissing and embracing are common, both on the playing field and in the stands. Within the context of soccer, various patterns of behaviour are entirely permissible without any hint of their being classified as unmasculine. On the background of denial of non-heterosexuality, it is possible for men to display emotions that they would never dare show openly outside the safe confines of the stadium. This behaviour is acceptable among men only as long as no player or fan seeks physical contact with men privately. (Paul 129)

Coming Out in Public: A History of “Taboo” in Men’s Football?

Although researches in the past decade indicate that there have been changes in perception among spectators in top tier professional men’s football the dominant narrative prevails. Coming out as gay while playing is really challenging for a top level professional footballer; statistically there has been no active homosexual player in the most popular top flight men’s competitions like the English Premier League (England), Serie A (Italy), La Liga (Spain), and Ligue 1 (France). Male footballers refrain from coming out because of a number of factors– mostly out of fear of a fan backlash and consequences of media breaking news. Although the intensity of the factors at work varies in different cultures the output is almost the same. Adam Brenton of *UCFB* identifies some pattern that shapes the narratives of masculinity and determines the environment where the notion of coming out is challenged: 1) “fan’s impact on other fans” where “tolerance of homophobic abuse” is tested, 2) “fan’s impact on players” where “using sexuality as an insult in game situations” affect the footballer, and 3) media and social media’s pressure and abuse. All these affect a footballer or a fan’s decision to assert one’s sexual identity in “football spaces” (Brenton).

Justin Fashanu, the first ever male footballer to come out publicly as gay in 1990 while playing professional football received a chain of hostile reactions from the homophobic community—from the players to the fans, from his family members to media. Fashanu in an interview to BBC in 1992 records: “There was a lot of backlash. I could not get a job . . . So, I think it affected me quite badly” (Gaston et al. 306). The consequences of coming out in public were grave. His “career stalled as he drifted from team to team, facing openly homophobic jeers from crowds (and teammates) as he moved from England to the United States, then Canada, bouncing between teams and leagues” (Sloop and West 2). In an interview, his younger brother John Fashanu suggested the presence of such a homophobic society at large—about remembering contemporary “public’s perception of homosexuality” as a “taboo” (Alwakeel). However, such a disapproving stand from his brother is largely influenced by the general perception of the fans towards the issue of homosexuality on the field since John himself was an footballer at that time. John’s rejection of his brother’s sexual orientation might have been structured by a rigid sense of hegemonic masculinity associated with the game. *Pink News* records the following:

I was worried that people would think it was me. John Fashanu, Justin Fashanu, J and J . . . I was the hard man, we were hard men, Vinnie Jones, John Fashanu, Dennis Wise, we were the hard team with a macho, strong image, we had a massive following of people who loved the way we played, and suddenly my brother’s coming out and saying this? (Burman)

The fear concerning the fans’ disapproval of a player’s identity largely deviated from the strict norms of hegemonic masculinity is real and it always remains at play with the narrative of football spectators’ recognition.

Fans and Homophobia: Doubts on Overcoming the Fear

Robbie Rogers, the former United States Men’s National Team representative after retiring from his professional career in English football decided to come out in 2013. In his autobiography *Coming*

Out to Play Rogers elaborately describes the predominant homophobia of the English football fans. Rogers despite being an admirer of the ‘tradition’ of English football fans’ impassioned activities meant for demoralizing the opposition, is critical of the violent part of it and their homophobic chants—

What shocked me most about the anti-gay stuff I encountered in England was what came from the fans In general, fans in the UK would say whatever awful thing they could think of to try to intimidate the opposing team. I loved the tradition and history and passion around football in Great Britain, but I could never understand why a packed stadium in Leeds would chant homophobic slurs when the team from Brighton came to town. It felt like when the pack mentality took over, all humanity flew out the door. It was nothing for fans to boo an opposing team and yell “faggot” this and “faggot” that. At away games, when the fans screamed, “faggot” at us I knew they weren’t speaking directly to me, so it didn’t much bother me because they didn’t know I was gay. And even if they’d known I was gay I’m not sure it would have bothered me to have fans from an opposing team curse me. (ch. 9)

Homophobic chants in football stadiums are common and often have been normalized. Rory Magrath while analysing homophobic themed chants in the football stadium initially resorts to the theoretical positions of early researchers—

As Giulianotti acknowledged, ‘[s]upporters aim epithets such as “poofster,” “fanny” and “nonce” at the allegedly weak masculinity of players and officials’. Pearson’s (2012) ethnography of the various identities of British football fandom observes the commonality of terms such as ‘gay’, ‘queer’ and ‘sausage jockey’ to insult other teams’ fans and players. Such terms or chants, according to Caudwell (126), “suggest male heterosexuality as the highly prestigious norm and gay men’s sexuality as the trivialised ‘other’.” (712)

Generally, football chants in the stadium can be categorized into two types: 1) chants for the team the spectators support and 2) chants against the opposition team's players to demoralize them. Homosexually themed chants often function as "sporting technique" used during the matches as perceived by the fans (Adams et al. 293; Magrath 720). It is a popular perception that the supporters prioritize their team's success (Magrath 721) over anything else and any such method can be employed. However, such a narrative appeals along the lines of dominant masculinity, where homosexuality is associated with all the negative things (Magrath 721). This factor can be really problematic for an on-field player who is homosexual. Rogers' narrative gives a hint of how it feels to be at the receiving end of such chants:

What scared me was what it would feel like if the Leeds fans turned on me. I saw that happen one time to one of our goalies who had let the ball get past him at a critical moment in a game. The fans went crazy. They were so furious and disruptive that our coach pulled him from the game because he was worried the fans were being so hard on him that it would affect his play, and the team's as well. So whenever I thought about what it would be like to play for Leeds if they knew I was gay, I'd think of that and I couldn't imagine that I could take it. It really scared me to think what they'd say—or do—if they ever found out. (ch. 9)

Rogers has been well aware of the sensitizing campaigns inside and around football spaces. However, the toxic masculine culture that prevails in such spaces makes him think that the sport has failed to create a safe and progressive atmosphere—

I'm not saying that there weren't attempts by the management to tamp down the anti-gay rhetoric, because there were. For example, at Elland Road there are signs posted throughout the public areas of the stadium asking fans to "refrain from using abusive language" and stating management's "zero tolerance" for "racial, homophobic, or discriminatory abuse." But it wasn't nearly enough, because sometimes it felt like football was so far behind

where the rest of society had progressed in its views about gay people and homophobia that it was still living in the Stone Age. (ch. 9)

These are the factors that could bar a player from coming out even in apparently liberal nations because the football spaces in the men's sport are hostile in general. Also, media plays another important role. Anxiety regarding the representation affects a footballer as Rogers feared about the consequences of being misquoted; he had his trust issue with the media's fabricated narratives (ch. 12). As a precaution he asked the reporters to share his words at first "off the record" so that he could trust them in order to avoid being part of any agenda driven narrative. (ch. 12). Unlike Fashanu, Rogers received a welcoming reception in general from the world around him but the critical process that he went through before coming out is evocative of the homophobic atmosphere of the sport.

Women's Football/Soccer and Masculinity/Femininity

Any discussion concerning masculinity/femininity in the arena of women's football is a complex one. The initial approach to investigate the area is troubled by the almost obligatory narrative of masculinity associated with the game itself where the sporting culture is synonymous to a masculine culture. Therefore, the first stereotypical impression regarding women's football is that it enters the domain where masculinity is performed (Kaelberer 6). Also, this concept essentially strips off the 'real' woman image of the participating footballers by questioning their deviation from ideal notions of femininity and initiates an associative discourse involving homosexuality (6).

Women's football has always been a phenomenon with contested ground as Engh argues— "Women's participation in sports can be theorised as embedded in cultural norms around 'womanhood', but it should also be understood as shaped and regulated according to heteronormative ideas of femininity that render the female body as distinctly different from the (male) athletic body" (137). On one hand, the domain of women's football functions by breaking the stereotypical gender attributes and

challenging the very masculine construct of the sport itself; on the other, when perceived from the heterosexual and masculine benchmarks of the sport it breeds a new form of sexism as women footballers are often tagged as homosexuals. Cox and Thompson observe:

Female athletes, who deviate from the ‘norms’ of femininity by having short hair and athletic bodies, are challenged overtly or covertly about their sexuality. Homophobia in sport reflects not only a fear of women’s sexuality, but also a fear of the loss of male control of that sexuality, thus endangering the balance of power in gender relationships. (8)

Women’s Football and Inclusivity

Interestingly, women’s football provides a relatively safer space for the LGBTQIA2S+ people as they can assert their sexual identity at least in the top tiers of European and US football (soccer). The 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup observes 95 members out of the LGBTQ+ community as reported by *AP News* (in 2023 by Ralph); another report by *Pink News* (in 2023 by Billson) records the number to be 88—whatever the figure is it clearly shows an increase in comparison to the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup. This is significant as the men’s edition of 2022 FIFA World Cup reportedly didn’t involve any out sportsperson. *Sports Illustrated* quotes USWNT soccer star Megan Rapinoe, a gay footballer, from her interview to *Sky Sports* in 2022 regarding this visible difference—

Why aren’t there any out male athletes in the elite sports? Well, it’s not safe. They don’t feel safe. They either feel that they’re going to be abused from fans, they’re going to be kicked off teams, have slurs thrown at them, whatever it is...So it’s not safe, and until it is safe we won’t see any male players. I think it’s safer on the women’s side, and I think we have a lot of camaraderie just between ourselves and a lot more people coming out, which makes it easier for everyone, but I would say from the sporting directors to the club owners to the fans, to all the players, it’s your responsibility also.

The perceived superior inclusivity (relating to gender and sexuality) in Women's football has evolved out of complex scenarios. Engh comments:

Women soccer players, through engaging in a sport that is deemed by many to be a masculine sport, are constantly engaged in challenging notions of female appropriateness and female athleticism. Through their participation they are destabilising notions about gender roles, as well as notions about the physical and natural difference between men and women, masculinity and femininity. (149)

Skogvang and Fasting hold quite similar views as Women's football not only challenges hegemonic masculinity but also disturbs the narrative of any "hegemonic femininity" by producing 'multiple identities' (875; Cleland et al. 462). While researching on Norwegian women's football Skogvang and Fasting identify "less homonegativity" in comparison to men's football (877). The more visibility of LGBTQ players in Women's football supports such findings even at a global level.

In comparison to Robbie Rogers' account of coming out, the autobiography of Megan Rapinoe offers a much more relaxed narrative. The fear of the reactions of the society—the fans or media appears to be less operative in guiding her decision; instead it is her individual and political awareness of the need to come out that prompts her to take the decision. Rapinoe recollects in her autobiography *One Life*—

We had been talking about the way athletes never come out, particularly when the spotlight is on them. I'd never been in the spotlight before. The team hadn't been popular enough. Now, as we flew back into the eye of a media storm, we were popular and I didn't feel right . . . All year I'd been reading about gay rights and the law, and it had made me much more politically aware. Coming out, I understood now, was not a zero sum game, but more of a process. I wasn't in the closet, but no one in the press knew I was gay and that aspect of my life wasn't part of the conversation. Saying something now might be impactful—I

don't think I used those kinds of words yet, but I was making my way toward that conclusion. "Clearly this is a public issue and we're public figures," I said to Lori, but it wasn't only that. Not talking about my sexuality felt intuitively bad, like I was operating a policy of don't ask, don't tell, or flying deliberately under the radar. "I'm gay, and an athlete, and I just want to be out," I said. I looked down the aircraft at all the other gay players, most of them older than me. Why am I not out? I thought, impatiently. Why are we all not out? (ch. 8)

Unlike Rogers, regarding public reception Rapinoe didn't have any concerns—

Once a decision feels right, I don't agonize or have reservations. I felt similar to the way I had when I came out to my parents, which was that (a) people were not going to be surprised to find out I was gay. And (b) if this was going to be a super big deal to people, then that's wack, and they're not going to be in my life anyway. But the way the world was going, I didn't think this was going to be a problem. (ch. 8)

The only concern that her mother shares, is regarding the sponsorship issue that might hamper her career. So the fear of reception is there, largely influenced by the preconceived notions. However, Rapinoe's decision to come out cannot be not restrained by the fear of consequences affecting her football career—

I'd been talking to my mom, who went through another round of jitters. She was fearful that, right at the moment when the team and I had made such a splash, coming out might mess things up for me. "Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" she asked, and mentioned my sponsorship deals. She wanted me to consider all the angles before I made my decision, but I told her it was already made. I'd always felt soccer wasn't the beginning and end of my life, which was something my parents had taught me, and now I knew for sure. Coming out was bigger, more important,

and more integral to who I was than anything that happened in sports. (ch. 8)

Rapinoe is well aware of the fact that the sport in general is itself “homophobic” by observing the less number of people coming out. However, she evaluates her untroubled event of coming out as a part of a social movement (ch. 8).

Problematizing the Narrative of Inclusivity and the Dominant Heteronormative Perspective

Although women’s football has been branded a champion where members from LGBTQ+ community can express their sexuality in a safer football space its scope is still limited especially outside the liberal zone. Women’s football appearing as a unique phenomenon differentiates itself from the sport called ‘football’ which is universally thought to be men’s game. Such “gender marking” makes the women’s sport somewhat “inferior” (Kaelberer 5). It has been often employed as a tool of sexism in women’s football spaces. Liberal media’s search for out sportspersons in women’s football often endangers the narrative of inclusivity in football spaces. While writing an insightful article for *The Guardian* Ghanaian researcher Adjepong shares her concerns regarding starkly contrasting scenarios in women’s football in Ghana– women footballers are often portrayed as ‘lesbians’ by the newspapers, coaches and football fans (“With all eyes”). According to her findings, a good number of retired Ghanaian National team footballers revealed that they had been asked to give in to the demand of “sexual favours” demanded by the coaches to ensure their place in the team; refusal to such demands directly affected their selection process (“With all eyes”). Adjepong shares a former captain’s statement where it is claimed that an act of turning down of such proposals eventually would have been considered as a proof for their ‘lesbianism’ (“With all eyes”).

Following the same lines of the dominant masculinity in association with football, homosexuality is referred repeatedly to have negative connotations. Kaelberer too in her research has shown the problems of celebration of femininity of the women footballers by the popular media houses; that in turn effectively

becomes an acknowledging tool of the dominant narrative of the hegemonic masculinity associated with football (8).

Conclusion

Recent researches have suggested that a more inclusive atmosphere can be traced in different football spaces both in men's and women's football. Through the eyes of 'Inclusive Masculinity Theory' in football (Cashmore and Cleland 370-387; Magrath *Inclusive Masculinities in Contemporary Football*; Gaston et al. 301-312) a shift from the hegemonic masculinity has been detected. Women's football contributes largely to the inclusive atmosphere as a significant number of players feel safe to come out publicly; also the fans from the LGBTQIA2S+ community have been able to claim some football spaces, especially in top tiers. Further research needs to be made on the scope of coming out of male footballers while playing in search of a bright future.

Endnote

1. Terms like spectators, supporters and fans have been used interchangeably without following the strict taxonomy of Giulianotti (25-46).

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Postfashion and Diasporic Designs: A Study of Selected Texts

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Abstract

Postfashion, according to Barbara Vinken, is characterized by self-distancing, self-irony (43), and a predominant theme centered on "the economy of meanings invested in fashion" (50). She also notes its inclination to "épater le bourgeois" (43), suggesting a deliberate intent to shock or provoke conventional sensibilities by experimenting with existing fashion norms, presenting designs that appear strange and absurd. In the technological age, fashion is rapidly advancing in various dimensions, exemplified by innovations such as Bella Hadid's spray dress in the Coperni Spring/Summer 2023 collection. By delving into diasporic fashion and scrutinizing the parameters defining postfashion, this paper seeks to explore whether diasporic fashion qualifies as a phenomenon within the realm of postfashion. The study focuses on selected designers and artists, where the core impetus is the diasporic sentiment. Additionally, the paper will briefly investigate the proximity of postfashion to postmodernism and deconstruction, exploring the nuanced intersections between these conceptual frameworks.

Keywords: fashion, postfashion, diaspora, diasporic fashion, culture, postmodern, deconstruction

Introduction

Precursory corpus of fashion criticism broadly encompasses three key categories: examination of gender roles intertwined with fashion, analysis of class dynamics within the realm of fashion, and consumerism and capitalism in fashion. Established fashion theories, including classical perspectives from sociologists such as Herbert

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Spencer, Ferdinand Tonnies, Thorstein Veblen, and George Simmel, delve into one or all of these thematic categories. A notable exploration of class in fashion can be found in Spencer's 1854 essay, "On Manners and Fashion." The essay also explores the imitative nature of fashion, categorizing it into reverential imitation (stemming from admiration for the upper class) and competitive imitation (an effort to mirror the upper class). Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* adds to this discourse by labeling fashion as "conspicuous consumption" (33)—a display of wealth—and introducing the concept of "pecuniary emulation," (12) wherein the middle and lower classes strive to emulate the lifestyle of the upper class. George Simmel, on the other hand, links fashion with identity in his essay "Fashion." He analyzes the sociological aspects of fashion, asserting that it embodies two opposing tendencies: generalization and specialization, arising from the human need for both conformity and differentiation, hence "union and segregation are the two fundamental functions which are here inseparably united" (544). Ferdinand Tonnies, in "Community and Society," aligns with the perspectives mentioned above, and underscores the role of distinction in the fashion system. His essay "Custom" defines both custom and fashion as forms of "social will", and claims the notion that something, in order to be noticed and pleasing, must be new and strange or different is the essence of fashion.

Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System* scrutinizes fashion magazines through a semiological lens, revealing his skepticism towards the phenomenon, and "his theory of fashion is based entirely on the idea of irrationality" (Wilson 24). Barthes contends that fashion not only embodies irrationality but also significantly contributes to the promotion of consumerism. While critiques of fashion within the realms of consumerism and capitalism already form substantial portions of fashion theory, there is a new imperative to delve into intricacies of the interplay between fashion and culture. Within emerging academic discussions on fashion, postfashion stands out as the most recent conceptual framework. Since fashion criticism currently delves into an exploration of its defining characteristics and relevant examples, the paper aims to comprehend diasporic fashion as a facet of postfashion. However, before delving

into this exploration, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of postfashion and diasporic fashion.

Explicating Postfashion

In contemporary times, technology has become an indispensable force across various domains, and the fashion industry is no exception. Illustrating the transformative role of technology in fashion, designers Sébastien Meyer and Arnaud Vaillant, the creative minds behind the label Coperni Femme, introduced a groundbreaking concept during the Paris fashion week. In their Spring/Summer 2023 collection show, model Bella Hadid adorned a dress created from a white substance (which was sprayed on the model) known as Fabrican. Another notable instance is Gary James McQueen's digital fashion show, "Guiding Light," released in April 2021. Presented as a 10-minute animated film, the show offers a 360-degree view of the designs, a feat not achievable in traditional physical fashion spaces. McQueen envisions that digital displays will pave the way for new and diverse avenues in designing and presenting fashion, marking a paradigm shift in the industry's traditional norms.

Nevertheless, the first critic to introduce the term "postfashion," Barbara Vinken, does not refer to the incorporation of science and technology on the runway or in the production of clothing as a distinctive feature of postfashion. For her, postfashion comes after the great "hundred-year" period of *haute couture*. (35). "Hundred-year" fashion here refers to the dominant fashion of 20th century, it hints at the dominance of fashion standards set by Chanel and *haute couture* of other hefty labels of the last century. "Postfashion is after and against Chanel" (83) which, under Karl Lagerfeld was majorly about the *Griffe* (fashion brand, or a signature), and not about peculiarity of designs. As Vinken says, "Postfashion is more than merely an anti-fashion: the rebellion against fashion is just the starting point of something different. The century of fashion is over: the very idea of Paris fashion is at an end" (63), postfashion is not the destructive discourse against fashion or a movement to castigate fashion practices, instead it subverts the authority of mainstream fashion world by dismantling it and creating new forms of fashion that are not in alliance with the already established fashion standards,

such as the monopoly or dominating influence of Paris fashion throughout the world. Barbara Vinken considers the work of Martin Margiela as a great example of postfashion who “applies his deconstructive talent to the subversion of the strategies of the present-day fashion scene” (140). Margiela is a complete paradox of Chanel under Lagerfeld since he doesn’t sign his creations, hence not concerned with the *griffe*. Moreover, he frequently stages his 'shows' in unconventional locations like Barbès, one of the deprived areas in Paris primarily inhabited by Africans and Arabs. These venues include vacant Metro shafts, abandoned parking lots, and disused railway stations. His creations are frequently presented by individuals who are not professional models.

One distinguishing feature of postfashion is that it is antithetical to the traditional “trickle down” theory of fashion, according to which a trend is initially introduced and embraced by the elite or upper class before gradually being adopted by the lower class. In the realm of postfashion, there is a notable “reversal of the relationship between fashion-creator and imitator” (Vinken 63), it no longer emanates from the aristocracy; instead, it ascends “upwards,” originating from the streets and permeating the esteemed salons of haute couture, where they undergo adaptation and imitation. Amid recent discussions within the fashion landscape, the element of “comfort” is hailed as essential, revolutionary, and superior to other considerations. However, it's crucial to note that postfashion doesn't necessarily align with the emphasis on “comfort” or the concept of “comfortable sportiness.” “Postfashion opposes itself to quiet elegance, but also to comfortable sportiness... ” (65). As the acceptance of unattractive, the grotesque, and the absurd increases, postfashion goes beyond its avant-garde origins. It adopts a self-aware and self-ironic stance, occasionally resorting to shocking the conventional sensibilities in its less robust moments. This departure from traditional avant-garde fashion is marked by references to unconventional or 'perverse' forms of sexuality. However, postfashion may still resort to a tendency to *épater le bourgeois*, meaning it may deliberately shock or provoke conventional, middle-class sensibilities.

Elucidating Diasporic Fashion

Arjun Appadurai suggests that “there is an urgent need to focus on the cultural dynamics of what is now called deterritorialization”, fashion system at present cannot be studied in alienation from globalisation (“Disjuncture” 192). In the same essay, he introduces the idea of global cultural flows and one of its dimensions “ethnoscapes”, which he defines as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons” (297). It is evident that “ethnoscapes” are becoming a basis for novel creations that may be considered as texts of diaspora. Diasporic expression has garnered significant acclaim in literature, giving rise to a distinct genre known as Diasporic Literature. However, this sentiment extends beyond the realms of literature and cinema; it finds profound expression in the work of emerging fashion designers and artists worldwide. Their creations serve as a canvas for diasporic experiences, encapsulating a sense of nostalgia and longing for what is lost or distant. In *Global Diasporas*, William Safran proposes the characteristics of diasporas and one of them is that “they continue in various ways to relate to (that) homeland and their ethnocommunal consciousness” (6). The designers (whom I call “diasporic designers”) constantly refer to their homeland through their designs by incorporating elements such as motifs, fabrics, specific embellishments, accompanying accessories, colors, structures, patterns, or designs traditionally associated with their homeland into the clothing prevalent in their hostland. While discourse on diaspora is well-established in literature and cultural studies, its exploration within the realm of fashion dynamics remains relatively understudied.

Influenced by Arjun Appadurai’s idea of “scapes”, Birgit Haehnel introduces the term “fashionscapes”, which refer to “multi-sited fashion flows within the overall global economy” (“Fashionscapes” 171). The paper refers to the concept I coin as ‘diasporic fashionscapes,’ which will be used to denote a space of multi-sited diasporic fashion flows which gives rise to a fashion (sartorial, make-up/accessories and mise-en-scène) that exhibits the diasporic encounters of the designers. Diasporic fashion refers to everything that exhibits its sentiments, be it the ensemble, the verbal

description of the ensemble by the designer or even the mise-en-scene. Diasporic fashionscapes refer to the space which gives rise to such creations. It is a way to look at fashion flows centred majorly around diasporic experiences and their expression in clothing. It also includes the traditional clothing practices of common people living abroad, since traditional clothing in an abroad setting involves the sentiment of expressing a national and cultural identity and belongingness. Hence, the term is a classification of “fashionscapes” and denotes the occurrence of fashion practices influenced by diasporic sentiments and experiences. Fashion encompasses more than just the runway; it serves as a means of expressing ideas and identity through clothing. This paper delves into the designs of emerging designers who may not be widely recognized in the mainstream fashion scene. Diasporic fashion, in particular, introduces a unique form of hybrid fashion, where diasporic sentiment is fundamental. The diasporic space becomes crucial in the creation of fashion/designs. The “environments mitigate, control, inform and enhance how fashion is experienced, performed, consumed, seen, exhibited, purchased, appreciated, desired, and, of course, displayed” (Potvin 2), the physical diasporic space and diasporic fashion are not independent of each other and their symbiosis is essential for the experience of diasporic sentiments, and eventually the creation and consumption of diasporic fashion. It is crucial to note that there is no such extant category as “diasporic designs” in fashion studies and the paper uses the term diaspora since it refers to everything that is based on the idea of homeland and the core element of the history of the term is “the loss of home and the ongoing link to some notion of it” (Sigona et al. xix). The chosen texts for elucidating diasporic fashion comprise images featuring the creations of selected designers and the accompanying narratives they provide to articulate the essence of their designs. The presence of diasporic sentiment in the designs is substantiated by the accompanying narratives. Given the pivotal role of textual captions in shaping our interpretation of images, there is a deliberate effort to explore the intricate dynamics between text and image, unraveling the mechanisms through which they jointly construct and disseminate meanings. Gillian Rose astutely questions the rationale behind segregating the examination, “Why split things apart when they are almost always found in such persistent spatial proximity?” (70).

Therefore the paper explores the symbiotic relationship between visual and verbal components, emphasizing the culturally specific meanings inherent in the amalgamation of pictures and words.

The term ‘diasporic designers ’will be employed in this context to describe individuals who, as a shared characteristic, incorporate references to their homeland in their designs. Their creative endeavors are often inspired by and allude to their respective homelands. First example of “diasporic fashion” is a design by Natasha Sumant, founder of the label "gundistudios", an Art Director and Inter-disciplinary Designer based in Brooklyn.



Example 1 - (Picture source- Instagram, @gundistudios)

Her work presents an intersection of fashion and visual design in which she never misses to add a glimpse of her cultural roots. She calls this dress “The Azaadi Dress” describing it as “made from khadi as an homage to the Swadeshi movement of 1947 [sic], which promoted the spinning of khadi as a means of development in rural India.” It can be interpreted as a means of preserving national consciousness within oneself, and reflecting the diasporic emotion of not abandoning either culture. The choice of a dress, as opposed to a saree or another Indian garment, subtly suggests an equal connection to both cultures among those in the diaspora. The fabric of the dress relates to the deep-seated sentiments tied to one's cultural and

national roots, capturing the social and historical realities of a specific period in a nation's history. The inclusion of traditional Indian nose pin, specifically the Peshwa Nath from Maharashtra, serves to emphasize the Indianness of the ensemble. Choosing this particular type of nose pin (Nath) may aim to underscore the wearer's regional background, symbolizing a stronger connection to regional consciousness rather than a broader national identity. Furthermore, the label name on the dress, presented in both Hindi and English, subtly suggests an inclination towards embracing both cultures.





Example 2 (Picture source- Instagram, @gundistudios)

Second example serves as an articulation of the designer's personal memories and a nostalgic reflection on her childhood spent with her grandmother. The skilled women involved in crafting this dress, as noted by the designer, acquired their expertise through observational learning from their mothers. In addition to showcasing the Champi tradition prevalent in South Asian culture, emphasized in the picture to underscore the deep bond between mothers and daughters, the braids also symbolize the intricate interplay between hair and weaving. This alludes to the interconnectedness of both the woven hair and the knitted dress. The knitted midi dress, coupled with a draped element evoking the essence of a saree, further underscores the fusion of the designer's homeland and hostland cultures. The choice of earrings, resembling a belcher chain or link chain, creates an impression reminiscent of various forms of weaving. In this creative endeavour, the two distinct geographical spaces play a significant role in shaping the fashion narrative.

Example in picture 3 is by Neha Kapil, a Los Angeles - based Indian -American designer, founder of label *Agni*, and also a visual artist who experiments with make-up by creating facial art with colours and cosmetics. Given that "postfashion is very much dependent on populist myths and their motives" (Vinken 66), Neha

Kapil's creation, named the "Devi Lehenga Skirt" in example 3, encapsulates the portrayal of a formidable goddess wielding a weapon (depicted in the print) and is accentuated by a dagger-shaped pendant. This print depicting a fierce goddess and the accompanying pendant evoke the rich myths surrounding goddesses or devi prevalent in Indian cultural beliefs. The prevalent use of the colour red in both the ensemble and the mise-en-scène suggests a pertinence to Hindu temples in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, what defines it as a diasporic design is the fusion of two elements- the dress's structure (tube top and skirt, paired with ankle boots) and the intricate interplay of the print, jewellery, and makeup (which involves the reference to the designers Indian cultural roots).



Example 3 (Picture source- Instagram, @agnistyle)

Diasporic fashion as a facet of Postfashion

“Along with the reversal of high and low, the carnevalization of relations, and the populist dissolution of the borders that mark out stylistic regions, postfashion is characterized by a decisive change in the relation of fashion to time” (Vinken 67). Having elucidated the nuances of both the concepts (postfashion and diasporic fashion), it becomes apparent that diasporic fashion exhibits alignment with certain characteristics of postfashion. This inference is drawn from the evident "dissolution of the borders," as diasporic fashion

epitomizes the blending of clothing forms from diverse cultures. In this context, geographical and cultural boundaries lose their significance, highlighting the inclusive and boundary-defying nature inherent in both diasporic fashion and the broader concept of postfashion. The showcased designs exemplify that diasporic fashion subtly alludes to "populist myths and their motives," underscoring its integral connection to the essential aspects of postfashion. Examining the aforementioned examples and designs from an alternative standpoint, the deliberate experimentation with traditional Indian garments such as sarees and lehengas may aim to shock or provoke the sensibilities of conventional middle-class individuals ("épater le bourgeois"). While diasporic fashion doesn't strictly conform to all the characteristics of postfashion as outlined by Vinken, it aligns with certain elements, establishing itself as a component of the postfashion.

Proximity of Postfashion to Postmodernism & Deconstruction

The following statement by Vinken alludes to the idea of postfashion being analogous to concepts of postmodernism and deconstruction—

The creative impulses now come from *prêt-à-porter*, and not from *haute couture*. Postfashion breaks the dominance of Paris fashion, which with its couturiers had been the last remainder of French power of the eighteenth century. Above all, it breaks the dictatorial privilege of the great couturiers. The fashion designer loses his absolute power. His inspirations no longer come to him from an obscure genius. Fashion becomes a co-production between the *créateur* and those who wear the clothes. Whether fashion is interesting is no longer dependent on the designer alone, but in equal part, on people in the street: on what they 'make' out of what is on offer, as Yohji Yamamoto says. (Vinken 35)

The *prêt-à-porter*, denoting ready-to-wear garments available in standardized sizes and finished condition, facilitates the democratization of fashion, thereby challenging the notion of Paris fashion's exclusivity and superiority. Similar to the paradigm in postmodern literature where the author relinquishes the authority to

create and convey meanings, postfashion isn't solely centered on the designer; rather, it encompasses the recipients and their interpretations. The manner in which individuals receive and perceive these designs holds equal significance.

Jean Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, defines postmodernism as "Incredulity towards meta-narratives" (xxiv). Postmodernism is commonly characterized as anti-authoritarian, rejecting the recognition of any single authority, and marked by subjectivism and skepticism whereas deconstruction is a way of understanding the uncertainty, undecidability and indeterminacy of meaning in a text, also advocating the possibility of absence of the meaning in a text. John David Caputo, an American philosopher, articulates deconstruction as a method aiming to demonstrate that various entities like texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices lack concrete meanings and fixed purposes. According to Caputo, these elements always transcend the limitations imposed by any predefined mission, consistently exceeding the boundaries within which they currently exist. Analogously, postfashion rejects the authority of any singular fashion form or definition, surpassing the limits imposed by dominant fashion standards and practices. These three concepts share the fundamental idea of questioning established standards and subverting their authority. The nuanced examination of fashion alongside deconstruction and other postmodernist ideas is opening new avenues for research in fashion studies. Alison Gill, in her essay "Deconstruction Fashion," traces the emergence of deconstruction in fashion, exemplified by the works of Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo, whose garments are often described as "unfinished," "coming apart," "recycled," "transparent," or "grunge." Barbara Vinken views Martin Margiela as a representative of postfashion, while Alison Gill identifies him as an exemplar of deconstruction in the realm of fashion. This convergence illustrates the shared similarities between deconstruction and postfashion.

In conclusion, diasporic fashion illustrates the "dissolution of the borders", positioning itself as a key element within the realm of postfashion. This trend reflects a proclivity for integrating diverse clothing patterns from various cultures, resulting in the creation of

novel and avant-garde styles. From a broader perspective, this phenomenon aligns with the artistic principles of "bricolage" and "pastiche" prevalent in the postmodern era, wherein disparate elements are skilfully assembled to generate innovative creations. Within the realms of postmodern art and postfashion, there exists a profound ethos of inclusivity and a genuine celebration of diversity. It involves the artful combination of different fashion elements, imbuing them with new meanings or, at times, eschewing conventional meanings altogether. In conclusion it may be noted, that Diasporic fashion, as an integral part of postfashion, embraces the notion of challenging established practices in the fashion industry, transcending cultural and national boundaries.

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Production Strategies and Marketing Expertise: Tracing the Paradigm Shift of Indian Popular Campus Fiction

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, the paradigm of the Indian English book market has considerably shifted in terms of production and consumption. The striking reason behind this is the emergence of new globalised technological policies that took place in the last decade of the 20th century which significantly changed Indian social, economic and demographic structures. Adhering to the capitalistic system, these changes have transformed societal conditions, consequently making it favourable to easily produce, circulate and consume the products of popular culture, including music, movies, games, artworks and literature at large. Technological developments, such as cheap binding of books, automated case-binding machines and coloured dust wrappers, make it possible to popularise 'paperbacks' in the publishing industry. This paper is an attempt to capture the paradigmatic shift in the publication and marketing of the texts of Indian popular campus fiction as a significant result of the aforementioned developments.

Keywords: Popular-Fiction, Production Strategies, Social-Media.

The Indian publication industry and book market have undergone several changes during the last few decades due to emerging global technological developments. The inception of free trade policies across the world has transformed not only Indian economic conditions by opening up industrial and business platforms but also

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has brought significant changes in the socio-cultural scenario. These changes have led to a huge demographic shift in the Indian social setup, resulting in the birth of middle-class professionals in multinational companies and other technology-oriented organisations. This new middle class is a product of the amalgamation of different cultures; it shuns society's orthodox and conventional value system and inclines more towards westernised policies and lifestyles. The impetus behind the immense popularity of 'popular' or 'commercial' fiction is the emergence of this young English-speaking community with completely different tastes, interests and attitudes. To meet their tastes and interests, several new IIT- and IIM-based professionals started penning down societal transformations in the form of different fictional and non-fictional narratives. Their narrations, constituting the elements of contemporary mass media culture, gave birth to a new literary market in India. The present paper explores the possibilities of why popular fiction texts are enjoying a specialised emporium in the current scenario and how flourishing technological advancements are facilitating the publishing industry in the production of popular literature in India. It elaborates how writers, editors, publishers and readers work together to conform to this mode of production and keep sharpening the market strategies for the global dissemination of literature products. They provide design and shape to the manuscripts of these texts as per readers' choices and tastes and also produce "with the expectation that it will enjoy a profitable career within the Indian market" (Gupta, "Commercial Fiction" 46). These issues are exhibited through an analysis of the of Indian Popular Campus Fiction texts: Chetan Bhagat's *Five Points Someone*, Soma Das' *Sumthing of a Mocktale*, Amitabha Bagchi's *Above Average* and Abhijit Bhaduri's *Mediocre But Arrogant*. Popular culture functions as a law governing tendency which processes the fashioning of individuals and governs their personal worlds. It is unconsciously diffusing the textures and structures of everyday lives as "the artist is becoming debased to a petty commodity that he or she will lay claim to their transcendent genius" (Eagleton 65). Therefore, popular fiction, while undertaking the elements of the popular culture, primarily represents the cultural standards and individualistic notions of the prevailing social setups. Its subject matter largely depends upon the common beliefs, customs and ideas

influenced by the respective societies within a specific timeframe. The products of popular fiction engage the audience in prevailing cultural contexts in apparent and unconscious ways. Ken Gelder scrutinises how the whole field of popular fiction “is made up not simply of novels themselves but an entire apparatus of production, distribution, and consumption: as I have noted already, it is both cultural and industrial/commercial in character” (75). Therefore, it is produced and marketed with a focus on mass distribution and consumption. The publication sector of popular genres demands its authors to write spiced content and garnish it with appropriate marketing techniques by “bringing a few things to the table that most Indian publishers don't — a clever marketing strategy, excellent pricing, a clear pitch and a willingness to spend on advertising and wait for people to turn up and read his books” (*Forbes India* n.p.). Significantly, these phenomena have become the heart and soul of the success and embellishment of ‘bestselling’ trends in the contemporary Indian publishing industry.

Language is indispensable in exploring and expanding the boundaries of literature, and contemporary popular genres are no exception. The phenomenon has been given the utmost gaze to understand the nuances of linguistic styles of popular fiction texts. In addition to its distinct aesthetic dimensions, language also highlights market perspectives for inducing a particular linguistic pattern in popular fiction texts. Unlike academic authors, who tend to build fiction as a strenuous exercise for their readers through “a ‘newly commissioned introduction’ to texts, ‘footnotes’ (‘designed to inform, and never to intrude’), ‘endnotes’ (which ‘may explore a controversy, clarify an historical reference, or provide important information relevant to the text’) ‘further reading’, and . . . with its introductions and footnotes” (Gelder 77), popular fiction texts are written in a very informal style and casual language that leave a lasting impact on the readers. Writers deliberately adopt “a version of English that is much closer to the version of Indian English spoken in contemporary India—with a frequently intense sprinkling of terms and ideas from Indian languages that are presented matter-of-factly and without annotation” (Singh 4). These texts introduce the youngsters with contemporary linguistic slang through the mouthpieces of their texts: “MIJ had its own version of English

language, full of acronyms and words that were part English and part another language” (MBA 48). The authors preferably choose the language spoken by the young audience; therefore, it is always informal, simple and straightforward, as Soma Das admits in her “Claims”: “Read it if you ever desired to know openly or secretly, the unofficial unedited account, if you believe in books that talk” (SMT). There is an intentional demolition of the centrality of the English language through the direct penetration of various informal words like ‘bro’, ‘dude’, ‘chick’ etc. and abusive words such as ‘fuck’, ‘bastard’ and ‘rascal’ which helps young readers to resonate with the storylines of these texts. While speaking about the need for incorporating these words, Amitabha Bagchi argues: “It suggests a particular time and sensibility. When you are writing, you have to try to understand what is the register in which you’re writing to your audience and understand how word choice forms that” (“How to Write” n.p.).

Baudrillard has explored the present-day printed media for its load of excessive information consisting of a flood of simulation. He underlines that the information provided by these media forms is so blurred that it beautifully mixes both imaginary and real; hence constituting a different sort of aesthetic fascination (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 148). It marks a considerable shift in its simple marketing technique in which words and pictures have now become visual representations of the same by displaying the products in the most desired and captivating ways. Attributed with taglines like ‘Must Read’, ‘National Bestseller’ or ‘International Bestseller’, popular fiction texts must always incorporate several aromatic and spicy elements that maintain entertainment and enjoyment. Apart from this, the writers enclose drawings and pictures while explaining the events to make their products more attractive and appealing. Abhijit Bhaduri, in an interview, explains that the texts must have the power to captivate readers’ attention even in the most crowded places to keep them engaged in the storyline. It must also leave space for readers to imagine the incidents in their minds, as he opines: “Everyone likes a good story. No one likes information and chunks of data thrown at them . . . Chances are that you even remember the drawing that accompanied the story” (“Interview” n.p.). Amitabha Bagchi also insists on using a particular writing

style in his texts. He chooses interesting anecdotes from the lives of ordinary individuals, and his approach to characterisation is probably the same as that of other writers, that is, “to enter into the character’s consciousness, try to feel what they feel and guess how they will respond to situations as they arise” (Quadri n.p.). He ensures his readers’ association with his fictional individuals so that their reading experiences can be livelier and more memorable. Moreover, the writers of popular fiction are usually people from some higher business firms, celebrities or market professionals who opt for fiction writing as their part-time activity only. The texts they produce are mostly about something they experience in respective fields as business persons, corporates, academicians, etc.; hence, they do not insist on producing any literary quality or in-depth analysis. The corporate sector offers them several backdrops and ideas to write about. Abhijit Bhaduri reveals how as a part-time writer, he always prefers his professional front and writes only when inspiration and opportunity coincide for him without following any deadline: “When I am home I write in the morning. When I travel, I get a lot of writing done at airports and in the flight” (NAW n.p.). Bagchi also openly affirms his decision to be a part-time professional as he has many other responsibilities and tasks to perform: “I have a day job and a family. However, when I am writing, I do but when I am not writing, it can even be months and years” (Saha n.p.). He further clarifies how his writings have nothing to do with greatness as he doesn’t follow any prescription involving higher literary standards: “I see what engages my contemporaries and I try to understand what it says about the times they, and I live in” (Quadri n.p.).

Profit has significantly overtaken literary aspects in the present scenario; especially in the field of popular literature, where the escalation of sales by supplying thrill along with fictional content has become the ultimate goal of the authors and publishers. Popular culture, as Fiske claims, is highly consumerist in nature, therefore, “its commodities produced and distributed by a profit-motivated industry that follows its own economic interests” (19). It has shifted the strategic production of popular fiction from literary aspects to the market perspectives that the popular writers keep in mind while writing these texts. Due to this, the texts of popular fiction always

rebuff any in-depth analysis, as Bagchi claims: "When you situate literary production within the attention economy, it simultaneously increases its power by extending its reach and weakens it by reducing the depth to which its readers contemplate it" (Quadri n.p.). Another significant strategy that authors and publishers employ to attract massive readership is incorporating intriguing and eye-catching titles. As a predominant phenomenon to hook potential readership and boost sales, this includes designing the cover page, incorporating suitable taglines and labelling with compelling blurbs. The titles are often very evocative, unique and attractive, striking the readers' minds through wordplay and imagery. Most popular fiction writers employ specific standardised formats in selecting the titles of their novels. For instance, Chetan Bhagat puts numerical digits while framing the titles of his novels, such as *Five Point Someone*, *Two States*, *One Night at a Call Centre*, *Half Girlfriend*, *Revolution 2020*, etc. When asked about the reason for selecting numerals for the titles of his books, he replies: "I think it's just a tribute to my past when I was a banker and engineer. When I was in a bank all I dealt with was numbers. I miss my banking sometimes" (Mande, para. 9). This is also exemplified in the title selection of Abhijit Bhaduri, representing MBA as a particular abbreviation that he deliberately uses for almost all his novels—*Married But Available* and *Mediocre But Arrogant*, which he is planning to exceed further by adding one more title as he announces: "I am currently working on my next novel which will be a crime thriller. May be I should call it Mind Blowing Accident and make it a part of the MBA series!!" (Bhaduri, "The 6Bridges" n.p.) Moreover, these titles are followed by some catchy taglines which easily attract the reader's attention by providing small quick teasers about the book, such as *Five Points Someone: What Not To Do At IIT*, *Something of a Mocktale: Where Kurta Fell In Love With Jeans*, *Mediocre But Arrogant: From the Author of Married But Available*, etc. The selected texts contain the words like average, mediocre, five pointers etc., which deliver a particular recognition to the readers for being related to the campus genre in the first place. Also, these words reflect how the texts are not the tales of extraordinary, intelligent and disparate characters, but the stories elaborate the experience of fun-loving and ordinary individuals with whom any average reader can easily correlate. These tactics considerably help

popular fiction writers develop their identities among the vast range of writers and create a particular understanding for readers to identify their texts among the plethora of products in the marketplace.

Social media has become an irreplaceable part of our day-to-day lives. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram etc., are constantly used for various activities which keep us updated about the world around us: revitalising connections with family members and friends, checking updates about other social media influencers and celebrities, and also promoting brands, building corporations, and business firms, etc. Therefore, writers' use of the same, for promoting their creative writing skills and literary formations, is not an exception. Stephen Bates and Anthony J. Ferri, while studying the effects of popular culture on contemporary society, examines how it is augmenting its boundaries while ensuring its subsistence in our mundane lifestyles such as in "the television we watch, the movies we see, the fast food, or slow food, we eat, the clothes we wear, the music we sing and hear, the things we spend our money for" (3). The massive exposure that it provides to its consumers through these distinctive channels makes them more passionate to acquaint themselves more with the unprecedented trends of the world outside. Popular culture is fabricating "a whole society we live in which may or may not be distributed by the mass media. It is virtually our whole world" (Bates & Ferri 3). In other words, nowadays, social media plays a significant role in the creation, development and massive dissemination of literary genres, especially in popular literature. Writers are highly engrossed in using these platforms to build a rapport with their readers and hit their nerves by keeping them updated with their regular life routines. There are several ways in which young Indian writers use social media platforms. For instance, Chetan Bhagat is very active on all his social media accounts, and *Forbes* describes him as "one of the Most Interesting Globalists." In 2010, he was listed in the "World's 100 Most Influential People" by *Time* magazine. He has a fan following in millions. These fans actively participate in interacting and conversing with him through these channels. Similarly, Abhijit Bhaduri is quite vigorous on Twitter, where he posts his short-form

articles and sketches. LinkedIn has voted him as “A Must Know Writer,” who has been credited with more than 8,50,000 followers on it. Also, in addition, SHRM described him as “No 1 Influencer” on social media in 2018. Amitabha Bagchi and Soma Das have also established users who handle various social media platforms and keep posting their views on different socio-political and youth-related issues. Therefore, apart from focusing on factors like theme, setting, characterisation etc., the productive usability of these social media platforms, in producing widespread fascination with their works among the readers and achieving phenomenal success in their career, marks a huge paradigm shift in the marketability of popular fiction.

The popularity of popular fiction also lies in its ability to provide a pleasurable experience to its readers. Due to their satisfactory and indulgent nature, mirroring the popular life patterns of the contemporary capitalistic world, the texts of popular fiction are widely read and enjoyed by the young Indian community who seeks pleasure and recreation through literature. The storylines of the popular fictional texts are intentionally interwoven with the elements of popular culture, entertainment junk, visual imagery, escapism etc., to keep them lively and light. Baudrillard, in his milestone work *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970), reveals: “What characterizes consumer society is the universality of the news item [Le fait divers] in mass communication. All political, historical and cultural information is received in the same - at once anodyne and miraculous - form of the news item. It is entirely actualized - i.e. dramatized in the spectacular mode . . . the cardinal category of our magical thinking, of our mythology” (33-34). To him, an object has more the sign value than the use value which lures or seduces people for its mass consumption. The selected texts provide a very frisky and refreshing experience to the readers. The protagonists like Abbey, Arindam, Hari, Kaya, Alok, Ryan etc. are not depicted as extraordinary individuals with high intellect and genius but as average students whom the readers can easily recognise in their day-to-day campus journeys. Moreover, these writers scrutinise maximisation in readers’ absorption of the texts and active involvement in their personal lives through various social media accounts and public platforms. The

narratives of these texts are perfectly built up by keeping in mind the readers' needs as they can seek their reflection in the texts. The readers inhabit a particular world provided by the texts and share specific characteristics with the characters. They are encouraged by the authors to be active participants throughout the process—from confirming the newly bloomed ideas to publishing the concept in the form of a product. Bhaduri explicates a similar notion by designating writing as an opportunity to share ideas and learn from the readers' feedback: "I have always enjoyed writing . . . In 2005, when my first novel *Mediocre But Arrogant* was published, I also launched my website abhijitbhaduri.com. I became my own publisher! This helped me explore varied themes and write on topics that I passionately believed in" ("Interview" n.p.). He claims that his interaction with readers through these technological platforms not only provides him an audience to write for but also makes him aware of their preferences and interests. Similarly, in one of his interviews, Chetan Bhagat highlights the importance of building a connection with his readers. He enunciates: "I write to change society and mindsets and achieve this by a two-step process. I try to reach most Indians through books or movies . . . If I do not interact with readers, I will lose interest in writing" (Devulapalli n.p.). Hence, social media platforms provide ample space for authors and readers to corroborate and converse on different aspects. Through live virtual meetings and conferences, the writers can share their content with their readers in advance. These pre-arranged discussions also offer readers the opportunities to share their valuable remarks, ask questions and give feedback for the shared ideas, which, retrospectively, helps the writers to modify the content if required, as Bhaduri confirms: "The reader's response is a critical factor for me. If they had been luke warm in their response I am sure my enthusiasm would have been dampened. Although I still see myself as a novice who is still learning to take baby steps, appreciation of the readers has helped me to be a little more confident" ("The 6Bridges" n.p.).

The success in the marketability of popular fiction texts also lies in their ability to adapt to movies frequently. Conversely, the writers intentionally carve certain events and bawdy content in their texts so that the manuscripts can inspire the makers to produce

different movies or web-series based on and inspired by them. While writing these thrilling drafts, they intentionally follow cinematic techniques and keep in mind the likelihood of the audience pursuing movies and spicy content. The narrative patterns of these texts are quite different, which provide visualisation of the events depicted in these stories, as exemplified in Kaya's description of her first-day visit to JNU: "That night I dreamt of myself running in slow motion ... amidst lush green grass, looking nothing less than a Yash Chopra heroine ... with folios of all colours raining from the sky" (SMT 3). Apart from this, the fast-paced events, flashback techniques, thrilling style, spicy language, westernised content and erotic imagery serve as constructive tools for the cinematography of these texts. The cover of *Above Average*, with interesting glimpses and textual incidents, incorporates readers by asking questions and making imaginative powers run to find the answers from the text itself: "Three years of college, Abbey has no answer to the question 'what next?' . . . Will the two years at MIJ bag Abbey a job? Will this be where he finds love? (Blurb MBA). The whole criterion resembles a trailer released before a movie or a web-series, which makes people familiar with the upcoming events so that they do not miss the opportunity to watch that particular show. The front matter of *Five Points Someone* also holds a similar expression: "Welcome to Five Point Someone by bestselling author Chetan Bhagat. This is not a book that will teach you how to get into IIT or even survive it ... the story of three friends whose measly five-point something GPAs come in the way of everything—their friendship, their love life, their future. Will they make it?"

Also, the selected texts are highly obsessed with Bollywood movies as they are flooded with references to multiple Hindi films, film stars and dialogues. The narrative techniques used in these texts provide us a filmy touch. Bollywood movies and film stars are so frequently taken up in the stories as if the process of unfolding the story's events is impossible without them. In *Sumthing of a Mocktale*, Kaya compares the green fields of the small village to the landscapes in famous Hindi movies in a very sarcastic way: "The fields look so picaresque exactly the way they show in Hindi movies – in *Silsila* and *DDLJ*. But when Rekha ran through those gardens with the romantic take-me-in-your-arms expression, did she

also inhale the foul smell of compost which is assaulting my nose now?" (115). Again, Kaya compares the outfits and looks of Professor Heera with famous Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan: "He wore tight clothes, probably to make his stocky figure look leaner. And finally this gentleman had a secret wish, which only he thought was a secret ... After all Amitabh Bachchan is not someone whose style can be left untalked about in India. Yes sir. We all knew about your secret wish to be A.B" (133-34). These writers also employ cinematic features like 'warnings' and 'disclaimers' to clearly explain to the readers what the particular storyline is not about. They proudly mark the texts as pure fun feasts and entertainment material and strictly warn the readers that the texts do not provide any readers' guide for academic life and also that there is nothing serious in it: "BEFORE I REALLY BEGIN THIS BOOK, LET ME FIRST TELL you what this book is not. It is not a guide on how to live through college. On the contrary, it is probably an example of how screwed up your college years can get if you don't think straight ... I think I have made my disclaimers, and it is time for me to commence" (FPS 1-2). "Oath", in *Sumthing of Mocktale*, in which the writer promises the reader to provide ultimate entertainment, also has a similar note: "I swear by the JNU logo that I shall speak only lies, more lies and nothing except lies ... I shall try my level best to spice up the lies to the fullest dramatic effect" (*Claims SMT*). Cinema and literature share a very close relationship as they depend on each other for disseminating their products and introducing each other to a larger audience. The writers have become extremely conscious of the choices and tastes of the masses. They understand that people, nowadays, are engrossed in the content showing fast stories, love, sex, violence, alcohol, abusive words and slang highly demonstrated in movies and web-series. These elements deliver pleasure and gratification to their desires which they find suppressed under the heavy schedules of their professional lives and orthodox Indian social setups. Hence, the use of cinematic elements in popular fiction texts extensively assists the writers in increasing the marketability and readership of their products.

To sum up, the present study explores a paradigm shift in literature whereby a text, instead of its assessment for literary

aspects and standards, is treated as an entity placed against various production apparatuses or other modes of representation, such as cinema, stage and television. The picturesque representation of popular fiction makes it a communicative practice for dramatically portraying the contemporary consumerist society in the most appropriate manner. The arena of popular fiction has developed as an industrial practice in which texts are produced to reach a larger readership, irrespective of age, class, gender or profession. It significantly redefines different nuances of India's contemporary publishing industry and book market. The marketing success of popular genres largely depends upon their production, distribution and consumption, which makes it an active and profitable literary exercise. Various factors, such as the incorporation of contemporary Indian style, selection of young Indians' dialects and slangs, readers' engrossment through several social media platforms and different approaches to marketing and circulation, have played an extensive role in developing these texts as "easily digestible novels of exotic variety" (Kramatschek qtd. in Gupta, "Commercial Fiction" 52). The profit-seeking attitude and market perspectives of the makers of the literary and culture industry have transformed the arena of contemporary Indian English fiction into a desirable leisure time pleasure-seeking activity for readers and brought a paradigm shift in its production and consumption in the Indian marketplace. Therefore, as the other products of mass culture such as music, fashion, styles and movies, these texts serve as extended literary adaptations of the lives of the masses and thus, have achieved wide publicity and relevance in the current scenario. In short, the changing patterns of popular culture provide an insightful treatment of this topical area of research and, therefore, establish an understanding of how this mass-produced culture and commercialisation drive the system to meet its own design.

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Abbreviation Used:

- FPS- Five Point Someone
- AA- Above Average
- SMT- Sumthing of a Mocktale
- MBA- Mediocre But Arrogant



Redefining Ancient Aesthetics: An Exploration of Percy Jackson Fan Art and Digital Aesthetics

Devika Kakkat*, Chitra Sivasubramaniam**

Abstract

The contributions of ancient philosophers about discussions of beauty and mimesis are part of aesthetic traditions. Rick Riordan's contemporary postmodernist children's fantasy novel series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009), represents a shift in aesthetic consciousness and the subsequent construction of a new digital aesthetic. The historical evolution of aesthetics, particularly in the context of literature and its transformation in the digital age are explored through Percy Jackson fan arts, tracing the impact of digital aesthetics and fan culture on the fans as well as the series. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* is not a mere replication of Greek aesthetics in popular fiction but a Greek mythological retelling that authenticates a liberating space for individual freedom of thought, expression, and action without the sophistication and conventionality of ancient aesthetics.

Keywords: aesthetics, Greek mythology, pop culture, digital aesthetics, fan art

Introduction

Aesthetics, a captivating realm of human experience encompassing "the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, and the elegant," has its roots deeply embedded in history (Daniel 123). The term "aesthetic" is derived from the Ancient Greek word "aisthetikos," signifying

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perspectives related to sensory perception, an idea rooted in “aisthanomai,” meaning “I perceive, sense, learn,” with a lineage that traces back to “aesthesis,” denoting “perception, sensation” (Flensburg 1). The definition of aesthetics is related to the production of beauty, and “[t]he pleasurable experience a reader goes through when reading a literary work can provide an aesthetic value to the work” (Attard 81). According to *Britannica*, aesthetics is “[t]he philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely related to the philosophy of art” (which is the study of the nature of art, including the concepts, interpretation, representation, expression, and form), and is “concerned with the nature of art and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated” (Aesthetics n.p.). The scope of aesthetics is broader, as “. . . it does not only deal with the nature and value of the arts but also with the response to natural objects that find expression in the language of the beautiful and the ugly” as there are several ways of saying that something becomes beautiful and ugly; the ‘how’ of it is what matters (Aesthetics n.p.).

Historical Account of Aesthetics in Literature

The inception of aesthetics can be traced back to the collection of articles titled “The Pleasures of the Imagination,” penned by the journalist Joseph Addison in the initial editions of *The Spectator* magazine in 1712. The term “aesthetics” was appropriated with a new meaning by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, who is often credited with coining the term “aesthetics” in his work *Aesthetica* (1758), published in the mid-18th century (Gregor 357). Baumgarten used the term to refer to the study of sensory experiences and the appreciation of beauty in art and nature. Over time, aesthetics has become a broader field within philosophy, encompassing not only the philosophy of art but also the philosophy of beauty, taste, and sensory perception. The exploration of aesthetics, as a field deeply intertwined with philosophy, art, and beauty, finds its roots in the rich tapestry of human thought and cultural evolution. Ancient Greek philosophers, notably Plato and Aristotle, laid the foundation for the philosophical discourse on aesthetics. In Plato’s *Symposium*, discussions on art and beauty reveal an early contemplation of aesthetic experiences (385 BCE).

Aristotle, in his *Poetics* (330 BCE), expands the discourse by examining the nature of artistic representation of epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, painting, sculpture, music, and dance, which he identifies as fundamental acts of mimesis or imitation. Key concepts within the philosophy of aesthetics have been extensively examined in literature. Mimesis, derived from Aristotle's theories, remains a cornerstone in discussions on artistic representation and imitation. In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), Erich Auerbach delves into mimesis's historical development and cultural significance in literature.

Throughout the centuries, influential thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and John Dewey shaped the philosophical landscape of aesthetics. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) explores the nature of aesthetic judgments, contending that they possess four crucial traits – first is disinterestedness, wherein pleasure results from recognising beauty rather than personal preference; second and third, universality and necessity, respectively are the products of human mind, rather than an object property, suggesting an inherent expectation for agreement; and fourth, the idea that beautiful objects convey a sense of purposefulness without a specific purpose, challenging conventional notions of functionality in aesthetics (Burnham). In *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), Schiller explores the interplay between aesthetic experiences and human existence. Dewey's pragmatist perspective in *Art as Experience* (1934) emphasises the transformative and participatory nature of aesthetic encounters. The interpretation of art depends upon beauty and taste, central concepts in aesthetics. The concept of beauty has been scrutinised by philosophers like Edmund Burke, in the book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) that distinguishes between the sublime and the beautiful, associating the former with fear and astonishment, and the latter with qualities like smoothness and delicacy (Quinton 72). Arthur Schopenhauer's exploration in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) considers the sublime as an aesthetic experience transcending ordinary beauty. Taste, as a subjective and culturally influenced aspect of aesthetic judgment, has been a recurring focus. David Hume, in the essay "Of the Standard of Taste"

(1757), proposes that a refined and educated taste emerges from exposure to diverse cultural experiences.

The literature reflects a notable shift in the focus of aesthetics from traditional interpretations to contemporary expressions, particularly in digital spaces and popular culture. Walter Benjamin, in the book *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), discusses the influence of technological advancements on the authenticity and aura of artistic creations. Benjamin's insights foreshadow the contemporary prevalence of digital aesthetics. Ancient aesthetics drive home the immersive capacity of art, and "ancient authors provide fascinating material for the current discussion on aesthetic experience. Their emphasis on the immersive power of art can stimulate an aesthetic theory" (Grethlein 311). Aesthetics prefer not only the pleasant experiences that art offers but also the profound experiences of one's reality, like intense representations of real-life experiences of death and loss. Moreover, it provokes an aesthetic experience that is more intense than real life by exemplifying it. A perspective that exclusively considers art in connection to ideology is bound to overlook the deep contemplation of the profound essence within the intrinsic aesthetic encounter (315).

Technological Impact on Aesthetics

In the digital age, aesthetics has expanded beyond traditional forms, embracing new forms, interpretations, and contexts by infiltrating popular culture through social media platforms. The Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), constructs an aesthetic theory based on the dynamic nature of media. Additionally, the work of the contemporary digital culture theorist Lev Manovich, in the article "Post-media Aesthetics" (2001), explores the intersections of aesthetics, technology, and the evolving nature of cultural expression in the digital era.

Percy Jackson and the Olympians

The article navigates through the evolution of aesthetics, tracing its evolution from ancient Greek philosophy to its contemporary

expressions in popular culture with a specific focus on Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2023), a contemporary postmodernist children's fantasy, which is a retelling of Greek mythological tales. As readers explore re-contextualised stories from Greek mythology, the article aims to illuminate not merely a replication of Greek aesthetics in popular culture but a transformative retelling that fosters individual freedom of thought, expression, and action. The series serves as a lens through which shifts in aesthetic consciousness and the construction of a new aesthetic becomes evident. The article endeavours to unravel how *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* contributes to the contemporary aesthetic landscape, navigating the complexities of digital aesthetics and fan engagement and creativity, called fandom, which is a manner of the readers of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* show their love for the series that in turn popularises the series manifold, keeping the fandom visible and relevant, which is a broad impact. Fan engagement, in which the word "readers" is substituted with the word "fans," arises as "young people are motivated to invent and illustrate imaginative "stories, which often feature characters from popular culture," in response to "unconscious needs and drivers" ("Enchanting Tales and Imagic Stories" 13). Henry Jenkins writes in *Fan, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006) that "Fans frequently express pleasure in an object of affection that is "not about holding it as a distance" but about "being awash in it . . . about not having control and mastery of the beloved subject, pulling it close and integrating it into . . . sense of self"" (qtd. in "What art educators can learn from the fan-based" 259). A similar idea has been expressed by Katherine Anderson Howell, who states that "In cultures saturated with media, fans authorise themselves to critically respond and engage with their chosen texts" (qtd. in Romero n.p.).

Review of Literature and Research Gap

A robust body of literature exists on fan fiction and literary adaptations, highlighting the intersection of literature and fan culture, yet within the expansive realm of fan activities, there remains a noticeable dearth of academic exploration of the unique expression of fan creativity through visual mediums, namely fan arts that have cropped up over the years in the context of Riordan's *Percy Jackson*

and the Olympians on social media platforms. Investigating the dynamics of fan art communities on various online platforms offers insights into how fans collaborate, share, and critique visual creations. The article explores the role that the platforms play in shaping the visual culture of the Percy Jackson fandom and how fans interpret and visually represent the characters, settings, and events within their artwork.

Method

The methodology for the analysis of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* integrates the phenomenon of fan art, considering its role in shaping the aesthetic experience of the series. The framework draws upon concepts from participatory culture and aesthetics to explore the dynamic relationship between the original literary work and the creative contributions of the fan community. It provides a lens to examine how *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* becomes a cultural phenomenon, transcending its literary boundaries. It considers how fan art contributes to the evolving cultural landscape by reshaping and reinterpreting the series. The analysis delves into how fan art functions as a form of cultural expression, extending the narrative beyond the books. By exploring the visual representations created by fans, the framework seeks to understand how the reinterpretations contribute to the cultural significance and reception of the series. The participatory culture of active fan engagement emphasises the creation and dissemination of content related to the fans' favourite works, considering how, as active participants, they contribute to the expansion and enrichment of the narrative universe. The framework explores how fan art serves as a manifestation of participatory culture within the Percy Jackson fandom. It investigates how fans build on the original narrative collaboratively, creating a shared visual language reflecting their collective interpretation and imagination. Aesthetic elements incorporated in the series guide the analysis of fan art, considering how visual elements contribute to the overall aesthetic experience of the series, which involves examining the use of colour, composition, symbolism, and thematic consistency in fan-created visuals. The framework investigates the aesthetic choices made by fan artists within the Percy Jackson fandom. By exploring the visual components of fan art, the analysis seeks to

understand how these choices enhance or alter the aesthetic appeal of the series, creating a parallel visual narrative that resonates with the fan community.

Fan Art Digital Aesthetics in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*

Fan art comes under the broader purview of cultural studies under the participatory culture of fandom that proliferates online (Thompson 512). Fan arts are powerful catalysts that inspire creators and consumers to reimagine different versions, fostering a continuous cycle of creativity within fandom for fan communities. The main idea behind creating fan art is to envision the artists' and the readers' favourite characters into more easily perceivable artistic visuals that visually represent characters, settings, and events that complement the series. Fan art engagement fosters a personal connection between the fans of the narrative and text, and it also introduces the series to new audiences and helps maintain its relevance for years. The fan art of the series does not conform to the canonical text while the fans perform their fan identity. They deviate from the cannon by juxtaposing various visuals, making the audience aware of cultural blindspots and creating a network of possible meanings. Fan arts further expand the narrative beyond the books, creating illustrations by depicting scenes not explicitly described in the series, providing additional layers to the storytelling and sparking the imagination of fans. Therefore, the original narrative is changed and compressed to integrate a new story into the narrative every time a new thematic artwork is presented. Fans can collect fan art and create a string of fan artwork to create unofficial graphic novels. Fan art eventually starts becoming stories because they become unofficial graphic novels when fan artists start creating their favourite scenes. Several fans create similar art works, contributing to the "aesthetic canon of a fandom" where "the next stages of growth involves collaborative interaction with other fan artists. Each participant is self-motivated to improve his or her work in direct proportion to the work of others of the group so the integrity or the entire ensemble of players" ("Enchanting Tales and Imagic Stories" 15).

Fan arts, as a form of extended storytelling, contribute to the fandom's creativity and imagination, offering fans new ways to

experience *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. Fan art not only serves as a source of inspiration for fans but also wields influence over the original creators. Rick Riordan has openly acknowledged and expressed appreciation for fan contributions, recognising their impact in sustaining the series' resonance with readers. The reciprocal engagement between creators and fans fosters a symbiotic relationship within the fandom. Examining fan-created aesthetics allows readers and researchers to explore how fans engage with *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and interpret them in a visual format that is easy to comprehend instead of reading, which is time-consuming. Social media platforms become hubs for sharing and celebrating fan-created content, attracting new fans, and maintaining the enthusiasm of the existing community. Some popular platforms to explore Percy Jackson fan art are Devian Art, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, ArtStation, and Reddit forums, Discord, Wattpad, Archive of Our Own (AO3), where fans, both amateurs as and professionals, expand on the existing narrative by creating scenes, scenarios, or alternative storylines that are not explored in the official books by sharing fan art, discussing the series, collaborating on creative subjects, and sharing stories including fan fiction.

Fan art can be created using various digital techniques, using smart phones, laptops, computers, and tablets to create digital fan art by sculpting and rendering characters or scenes and collages of images, videos, and animations from scratch, amplifying existing artwork, and even converting texts to visuals with softwares like Adobe Photoshop, Procreate, Autodesk Sketchbook, Inkscape or Clip Studio Paint. Artificial intelligence has made the creation of fan art easier with numerous Artificial intelligence (AI) tools have also become increasingly popular for generating unique and stylised fan art. Aligned with the fan artists' preferences and goals AI tools can assist and enhance the creative process with Google's DeepDream, Artbreeder, DALL-E, RunwayML, Midjourney, PaintsChainer, DeepArt, Blender, Autodesk Maya, and ZBrush. Combinedly, the softwares and tools are also used for visual marketing and brand-building or as a hobby where users seek visual perfection with pleasing visuals with great lighting or props in the background, colour palette, or AI artwork to make it cohesive and appealing to the eye.

Technological advancements have reshaped the meaning of aesthetics, moving it away from traditional interpretations. These days, aesthetics is not related to the perception of art and is extrapolated from the world of philosophy but to the continuum of cultural forms and ordinary experiences, forming a new phenomenon framed in terms of appreciation of literary works but less of contemplation and reflection, solely as digital aesthetics. Digital aesthetics has evolved into a notable phenomenon, influencing daily vocabulary and trends to the extent that it has transformed into slang, seamlessly integrating into everyday language. This linguistic shift is propelled by the pervasive influence of social media, where trending phrases like cottagecore aesthetic, academia aesthetic, etc., mostly on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, gain prominence and contribute to the ongoing evolution of digital aesthetics in daily communication. Alyana Olivar writes in “That’s so Aesthetic! But What Does it Mean?” that the overarching meaning of “aesthetic” is nowadays used as an adjective to denote a person’s dynamic fashion, style, and mood – “It’s not so much their physical appearance, though it does still fit. A person’s aesthetic can mean their fashion sense, their demeanour, or their taste in items aside from fashion” (Olivar). Focus has shifted from aesthetic objects to aesthetic experience, the rediscovery suggesting that narrative is more than a means of representation – the strong reactions it can provoke hints at its capacity to create presence.

The approach does not imply a return to the traditional meaning of aesthetics that celebrates antiquity as the ideal model. Earlier, the nets of the concept of aesthetics were cast wide, but now, they are constricted. The concept of sublimity is not included and is all about outward appearances – the new aesthetics, which are seen in the digital world, popularised on the digital space or the internet by the fans of the series, who popularly call themselves “demigods.” *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* is ground-breaking in its redefinition and re-contextualisation of Greek aesthetics with the popular culture phenomena in it. The digital aesthetics make *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* relatable to contemporary readers. As much as the series incorporates aesthetic pleasure and vocabulary, the artistic aesthetics in the digital space prove that literature holds a firm place in contemporary aesthetics. Digital aesthetics contributes to

experiencing pleasure in the act of reading, making it a distinguished characteristic of the reading experience. Monroe C. Beardsley exemplifies the principle through his assertion that “In calling an artwork a good one, we must be ascribing some form of value to it, and that it must be a distinctive and special form, properly labeled ‘aesthetic’” (qtd. in Hanson 418).

Percy Jackson aesthetics incorporates aesthetic visual elements inspired by the characters and themes within the Percy Jackson universe that includes character portraits – artistic depiction (fan-art) of characters; using iconography of blue and sea motifs that speaks of Percy’s love for blue coloured food and his connection to Poseidon; magical items, orange motifs that denotes Camp Half-Blood setting and fashion where demigods sport orange t-shirts, blue denim shorts, and colourful clay beads; mythical imagery like Greek symbols of gods; Greek typography; and book cover page artwork. Fan art that extends beyond the confines of the books involves creative depictions of character portraits accompanied by humorous imaginary conversations between different characters. Fan artists also envision characters’ appearances as they age; imagining their phone wallpapers, WhatsApp group messages, Instagram pages, and DMs. Fans contribute artistic reinterpretations through character redesigns, offering their unique visual interpretations. They create comic strips that further explore the relationships between various characters in the series, adding an extra layer of creativity to the fan-driven artistic expressions. Thus, myths, which are cultural icons, when adapted into digital aesthetics, represent the newness of culture and aesthetics in the new era, which is a natural extension of its earlier form, without interrupting or breaking the classic mythology and its significance, connoting its artistic/aesthetic value and quality. Aesthetics on social media include the colour palette used across profiles and visual elements like the incorporation of images, graphics, or videos that align with a particular style, theme, or mood of the series. This can be achieved using typography, the choice of fonts and text styles used in captions or overlays on visuals; composition, which is concerned with how visuals are arranged and presented within a post or on the profile; application of filters and visual effects to create a cohesive book; and thematic consistency by sticking to a particular theme or subject matter that defines the overall

aesthetic of the content. Thus, aesthetics has moved away from its conventional meaning, which concerns the interpretation of source material and emotional tone.

Conclusion

Greek mythology is spread out in the form of mythological retellings like Rick Riordan's fantasy adventure series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and used in a popular cultural context, making it more graspable and popular than it already is. The series is an example of classic aesthetic ideals, which create a great sense of pleasure, complexity, and grandeur to the readers, creating a relatable modern myth. Riordan the new-age mythmaker, chooses an aesthetic classic work and situates himself in the traditional conception of art/aesthetics that is related to pleasure and form. Fan arts have a cultural impact on the readers' influence interpretation and enjoyment, thereby setting the trend and, hence, popular culture itself.

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Translations

March of Hindi Poetry, Post-Independence

Anup Singh Beniwal*

1

Nagarjun

Power

The shriek of skeletons stood in attention surprised
as the great gun of power appeared in the sky
Everyone is spitting insult at the Nazi-pride
That has blunted the gun of mighty dispensation
The deafness increased tenfold; Vinoba went mute
thanks to him, and the mighty gun of power
truth itself was hurt; *ahimsa* went haywire
and the canon of power indiscriminately began to fire
A nightingale began to sing on a burnt tree-rump
nothing could be done by the great gun.

2

Kedarnath Aggarwal

A Sad Day

This sad day
a retired peon
a lost gambler
stands mute like an untamed donkey

The sun weeps like a child
separated from its mother

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Sunshine lies grieving
like an abandoned wife

Legs amputated;
the wind stretched
on a trolley
slowly rolls
towards hospital,
wailing!

Standing on one leg,
bearing the weight of their bodies
tall, ancient trees with hair flowing,
are in deep meditation in the forest.

3

Naresh Mehta

Immortalize

Come, let's immortalize this lake

Not by touch
Not by sitting on its bank
Looking in its mirror together
Let's give ourselves

to its water –
which is Time!!

4

Dharamveer Bharti

Broken Wheel

I am
a broken wheel of the chariot
don't scrape me.
Who knows when

in this complex maze
challenging the mighty armies of deceit
an audacious Abhimanyu is trapped.

Who knows when
knowing well their own untruth
the mighty heroes
might want to crush
an unarmed and lonely voice
with their divine weapons!

Then I
the broken wheel of the chariot
will help defy
the divine-deadly armaments
in their possession!

I am
a broken wheel of the chariot
don't scrape me
who knows, when
the collective march of history
turns suddenly into falsity
the truth may seek
shelter behind the broken wheel.

5

Sarveshwardayal Saxena

Shelter

My whole life
I kept looking for a place
to shelter my head,

and in the end
I could not find a better place
than the hollow of my palms.

6

Kunwar Narayan

Tunisian Well

There is a well in Tunisia
It's water, they say,
has a subterranean connect
with the holy well
in Mecca.
But I have also heard
that there is a subterranean connect
among all the wells
of this earth.

7

Raghubir Sahay

Ramdas

Wide street and narrow lanes
Daytime, with clouds dense
Ramdas was very sad that day
His time was closing on him
He was informed that he would be killed.

He slowly walked forth alone
had thought of taking someone along
decided otherwise, though everyone was on the road
everyone was silent, everyone unarmed
everyone knew for sure that he would be killed.

He stood in the middle of the road
with hands folded on his belly
people arrived with measured steps
looking at him in fear, intently
and gazed at one who was to be killed certainly.

A killer appeared from the street
and on arrival called his name
struck the knife with resolute hands
a fountain of blood ensued
hadn't he informed that he would be killed?

8

Shrikant Verma

Intervention

No one sneezes
for the fear
that it might disturb
the peace of Magadha,
if Magadha has to be sustained, then
the peace in Magadha has to be maintained
If Magadha is, peace is.
No one shouts
for the fear
that might interrupt Magadha's affairs,
there has to be a system in Magadha.
If not in Magadha, then where?
What will people say?
Why bother at all?
At present Magadha is just a cant
not a place worth living in.
But nobody questions
for they fear
lest questioning should become a convention
in Magadha.
Once started,
such intervention doesn't end anywhere.
O! inhabitants of Magadha
however hard you try to evade intervention
it is impossible to escape intervention –
When no one intervenes
a corpse passing by through the city does
by questioning –

Why does a human being die?

9

Dushyant Kumar

Dharma

An intense, sudden pain
engulfed the heart
I gulped it down,
A small happiness
flickered on the lips
I spread it around,
I felt happy and thought –
Dharma inheres in making small deeds great.

10

Dhoomil

Bread and the Parliament

One person rolls the bread
one person eats the bread
there is a third person too
he neither rolls nor eats the bread
he only plays with the bread
I ask –
Who is this third person?
On this my country's Parliament is silent.

11

Naresh Saxena

Crossing

In crossing the bridge
bridge is crossed
not the river
The river cannot be crossed without stepping into it

Without stepping into the river
the significance of the bridge cannot be grasped
In walking across the bridge
without stepping into the river
the bridge is not crossed
only iron and scrape are traversed

nothing can be crossed
without stepping into the river
neither the bridge
nor the river.

12

Ashok Vajpayee

The Eternal Dream

The tree is a body
arising from the earth, in an unbreakable bond
the flower survives as a flower till it is a part
of a tree
and the leaves remain leaves till they are on the tree
Till the time you support this body wholeheartedly
Only till then
its soul bonds with you permanently
The soul dreams of the body eternally.

13

Leeladhar Mandloi

Fire

On my table
Words collide with words

A spark is ignited
and spreads through the poem
like wildfire

No fire, No poem.

14

Devi Prasad Mishra

Unconventional Prayer

Indra, leave and let it rain
Marut, leave and let the breeze blow
Brihaspati, vanish, and let the mind work
Aditi, go, and let there be births
Rudra, get lost, so we may get angry
Goddesses and Gods,
whatever we demand
is not in the form of a prayer!

15

Anamika

Mere Emptiness

People are drifting apart -
(Each from everyone) -
they are drifting apart
and this damn surrounding space
is merely expanding!
I will not translation this space as emptiness
but as an astronomical expanse
for I have launched a flying saucer in it!
Thankyou time
for my watch has stopped
Thanks you window
for a pregnant sparrow
sits just behind its bars!
I thank everything
wherever it does rest
for at present all of these are within me
and my bits and pieces are in all of them.
My empty home plays the harmonium
in silence!

A lots of work is packed
in this empty time-space
I am yet to translate
the worn out discarded clothes
in the language of water
and after that
I will translate the used unclean plates
as white flower-petals
and then standing still for a while I would think
how I may translate
the foam filled sync into some musical note?
The fact of matter is that I want to translate
the whole household in another language
but where will I find such a language
except in that language
in which the children speak?
The whole evening will drift by
In this thought and I will only end up translating
this evening merely in this way -
that I will get up
and slide open all the curtains!
The splinters of fading light
will fill up all the space
and I will never translate that
as an astronomical space
but as just as an expanse -
a mere emptiness!



Poems

(In honour of Prof. BN Goswami)

Amlanjyoti Goswami

Nainsukh

Was in your living room dark
The blinds drawn
Morning not trickling in yet.

He looked at the wall
Sunlight streaming into a pool
Its lush yellow swirling with feeling.

Then he stepped out on tip toe
Not waiting for the tea
You called him for.

Once out, he was at the country fair
With me all day.
With merry go rounds, turnstiles and rock songs.

Wearing shorts, surprised to see
His knees so bare.
I asked if he would like to paint this.

But he didn't answer.
He kept looking at the merry go round
As if it held a clue to his life.

Then skirted the edge of field, as dusk began to fall
And disappeared into the book of miniatures
Where I remembered this scene like a painting.

Workday

Sunday too
He was up early
In work mode
As if Monday arrived
A day too soon.

Sifting medicines
On the table
Stomachache from headache
Like precious stones
From childhood

The urge to just sit there
Mark time & wonder
How things happen
So slowly – & so quickly
How one looks at it.

Finding the correct word
The picture in the book.
Incandescent?
Glowing? Radiant? Luminescent?
Brilliant?

He picks up the picture again
This time from his soul
Sifting with a lifetime's hands
Charmed by meaning
Looking for signs that aren't there.

What was it he saw the last time?
What does he see now?
The light, golden & yellow?
Screaming out of a page
And next to it, a god

Sitting rapt in silence
Waiting for magic to unfold.
The first panel, all bright
The second, the god in golden sun yellow.
The third is the god in gold, sitting on a rough black stone.

This is description, not elation.
He sits there waiting for a dream to turn up
Unannounced, just like morning.
It is Sunday, he remembers.
Though sleep won't come, he feels awake

Sifting medicines on the dining table
Tending to the sick and lonely
Setting out for a long walk, into the heart of the matter
And stop Monday at the door
Saying it has arrived a day too early.

Arranging Transport for the Art Film

First came the mules. Easy as the horses
Shifting feet in a dung corner.
Owners – out of work – eager for something to do.

The cars were not difficult.
Cabbies on hire who knew how mountain roads snake
In white winter.

Foot soldiers, carrying the palanquin
Workers for a day's wages.
Everyone wanted to become an actor for a day.

A van – four wheels – with equipment
Cameras, tripods, steel frames, hope.
This was easy. Didn't cost much.

Outside my gate, the owner kept asking for something to do.
Now the difficult part. I do not wish to hasten
My hesitation in revealing it.

They also wanted... a mythical creature...one that would fly into
Viewer's hearts. Something like half-eagle, half-airplane
With furry wings.

I looked for it, in my morning haunts
My dreams up the mountain, among birch and fir.
They also wanted a whirring saucer, like aliens flying.

This was how the film would begin.
I thought of cable car, strung in thin wire across the peaks,
But nothing buzzed or whirred a string top from childhood.

The third impossible ask was an arrow that moved
From corner of eye when the lashes fluttered.
I said (cautiously): Maybe, animation could design such things?

But there was no money.
I was surprised to find all three – the arrow, flying saucer,
Even the half-bird, in the film, drawn in pictures.

They moved, that was the main thing.
I asked them who did it.
There was no artist in the crew, at least the ones I knew.

This was kept a secret.
The film was crafted frame by frame,
Each shot a visual treat.

A man walked across the distance. My bit role.
The mules and horses found strong roles.
A film set in the 17th century.

No steam engines moved then.
No trains huffed and puffed.
No airplane shot through the sky. No car wheels.

But there were arrows, a flying bird that carried pictures
Nibbling, one by one, to your little heart.
I didn't know how they did it, & I didn't ask.

But there was something else too.
Before leaving, the crew stayed at my house.
Nothing special, but we had a good meal

On the verandah that opened into the night sky twinkling.
During the conversation, over a tippie, the producer said
He had come from far away, another country.

He realised how things were here, bathed in another time.
He said people dreamt up strange things,
Then they came true.

And that – we had – a way with time, as with silence.
They did not speak much, these artists,
But knowing their work, they knew how to travel time.



Poems
Sudeep Sen

Secrets of the Divine
for Zila & Vilayat Khan

you interpret my face as a symphony — RS

When you sing your deep, languorous, elongated *alaap* —
your voice, timbre, breath, chest, quaveringly expand —

slow-dancing in unison. It's like your beloved father's
electric fingers — plucking, sliding on sitar-strings,

unearthing the hidden magic of a maestro's baritone,
it's range, it's fine textures. It's about subtle layering —

each fret is a *parda*, a curtained veil's highly calibrated
sub-sonics — divine and ordinary, erotic and sacred.

When you sing, your hands mimic your *abba*'s deft
finger-dance, nail-pirouettes counting minute syllables

inherent in every *bol* and *taal*. Balance is about extremes
coming together, about centring the heart's vicissitudes.

It is when strings are lips, finger-tips our vocal cord —
our extended tentative limbs, half-touch each other

like da Vinci's in the Sistine Chapel. Under this *gharana*'s
dome, echo unheralded notes of our inner core,

spilling guarded secrets in the safe loving of our raw,
unexpected, solitary presences. Unplanned, predestined,

under the benevolence of family lineage, *you interpret*
my face as a symphony — it is our art's gift, to each other.

The Laughter
for Sonora

In *the laughter* you wear
there is a studied poise,

there are tears of joy too —
their acrid glint, clues to

your past hinting at more.
Even your laced linen

handkerchief cannot wipe
or hide the deep memories

of childhood songs — lyrics
linking your heart-strings,

its bilingual turns of phrase
defying your mind's logic.

It is okay to cry — I say —
tears, touch or even a hug

are not loaded or gendered.
They are tiny simple acts

of humanness, affection,
connection. We're trained

to be subtle — so too much
remains hidden, needlessly.

The straight and sure lines
within these pale margins

of my mind leave no other
trail but those of my design —

you say. Are such designs
apt for unwritten lyrics?

These are songs of elation
etched on flaky red walls.

Its essence lies in the slow
unearthing of syllables —

hand-held gently — with-
out muting or losing them.

To Her Coy Mistress
to Andrew Marvell

Finder of frog spawn and mosquito eggs
in newly flooded marshes — the sun's boiling

tears the membranous Anopheles skin,
exposing human blood. There was no time

for larvae or pupa, or courtship or foreplay —
shy giggles exploding into a tantric dance.

I receive her libation in Mother's verdant
Auroville — Swagatham's sparse white room

welcoming me in her lap. Here the air is cool,
the earth red, and the slow-silence elongated.

The coy mistress is absent in her presence —
her words pirouette, swirling in dizzy passion.

Troy
for Tansy

Troy is burning, but the smoke in this case mollifies
my skin, soothes my charred heart to breathe again.

Eumenides forgot to say that the words filled with love
heal us faster than any surgical intervention. Trojan

horse is ready to gallop into the mofussil marshlands
to sweep Helen off her feet — and slow-sanctify her

in sandalwood, vermillion and turmeric paste in oil.
Then, like a living mummy, she will arise in ardour.

Tungabhadra Banks, Hampi

Late evening's deep matt-aquamarine light
slow-merges with the oncoming night.
Mammoth black boulders lie quiet
like sleeping humpback-whales on the shallows.

I can see only one predominant colour-palette now —
an aggregated thesaurus
of lapis lazuli, indigo, turquoise, teal, azure, sapphire,
cobalt, cyan, cerulean —
the colour of the deep blue-black sea,
its wavelength's elongated mystery enveloping all.

From the corner of my eye,
I spot Virupaksha Temple elephant's silhouette
carrying wisdom down Tungabhadra's ghats.
For now, it is relieved to leave behind the elaborate rituals
in the richly carved religious precincts —
its snout partaking pleasures of the river's cool waters.

A local fisherman, secure within the orbit
of his wicker-woven coracle,

paddles across the river, back and forth,
 attempting to find the last catch.
It does not matter whether he fishes anything —
 just the act of oar-repetition, is yoga enough.

People have long left this place for the day —
 the *mandapa* rest-house pavilions empty,
 barring few stray dogs.
On the shore, a large family of monkeys
make even the towering old peepul tree
 groan under their mischievous weight.

At this late hour, I see just remnants —
 crumpled flower petals, burnt oil-wicks,
 frayed sari-wrapped bundle-offerings,
white-ochre-vermillion marked rocks worshipped as gods.
 River gods come in various *avatars* —
a snarling yellow-striped tiger, an obsidian Nandi bull,
 small statuettes of marble Ganesh,
 an array of carved Shiva *lingams* on wet granite
 embedded in a mosaic of *yonis*,
 and slews of oval stones.

Imminent night's low light deceptively hides
 what you do not wish to see —
pilgrim's litter, their desecration, their misplaced prayers.
 Despite graffiti's defacement,
I can read Vijayanagara's grand stone-etched histories,
 hear their whispered medieval chants
 decipher the inscriptions' coded clarity —
solitude, serenity,
 and the simplicity of somnolent seance.

Waiting Dreams

I wait for that waking moment
when moth light — lights up

my dreams. As you sleep with
your child, exhausted-happy,

I wait for that curl-embrace
you etched in minimal words —

cascading down the shoulders
of another dream. Words

are inadequate now. What will
become of poets in the absence

of words? Will they be helpless
in silence, in sleep, in flesh?

*In star laden air with forests
all around, you sit with me.*

We hold the hands of letters,
threading each sepal-filament

gently into a garland of words —
longing for waiting dreams

to unfold after midnight —
under my private starlight.

Wapa di Ume, Ubud, Bali *haiku for Sally*

sun sets over half-
submerged rice fields — a bamboo
pavilion floats.

The End

after Nguyen Lam's 'Cuoi Cung / The End' (1965)



At purgatory's door, two sandals sleep
side-by-side, refusing to part — lest death

detaches them. A bowl for nectar awaits
on the other side — a gift, if you weather

the rigours of life's passage, transcend them.
The canvas is earthy — vicissitude-filled.

In the mud-scape trenches, remnants
of life — skeletal bones, skin, garment —

signs of a beating heart, frozen fossil-still,
preserved unintentionally, mummified.

I hear the sirens lament, a Miltonic dirge —
anthem celebrating (in)human genocide.

Illusion-delusion — yin-yang's dual face —
bipolarity balancing our precarious psyche.

In days of climate change, contagion, societal
toxicity — is there any light at “the end”?



Book Review

Somdev Chatterjee. *Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative.* Notion Press, India, 2023

Jagdish Rai*

"The universe is made of stories, not atoms", said the great writer Muriel Rukeyser, this book explains why is it so. Our perceptions and decisions are based a lot on stories because the story is the most fundamental form in which we experience our lives. Storytelling took humans far ahead of other competing species because storytelling enabled them to transfer crucial knowledge, imagine possible futures, and cooperate flexibly in large groups. Storytelling presents information in terms of its relevance to advantage in adaptation. Generally, an interesting story has a protagonist, who has some goal, then faces some challenges and overcomes challenges with ingenuity. Plain information without relevance to life is generally ignored to spare our limited cognitive resources. The author refers to a study from the Beckman Institute of Advanced Science and Technology, wherein psychologist Daniel Simons shows that most people cannot notice even a 200-pound gorilla passing through the middle of the room when focused on the task of counting the passes of a basketball among specific players in the room. Our brain has the same ultimate purpose as any other organ, that is adaptation to the environment in a broader sense that also includes our fellow humans. In the quest to increase the certainty of life, our cognitive resources prioritize information collection and processing that is relevant for us as an individual, group, species, or life form, to survive and thrive, rather than finding any absolute truth or ultimate reality.

Long back when humans lived in forests, they sat with tribe members at the end of the day around the campfire, and shared

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information. The information about a member having seen a lion near the camp and escaping being eaten would be paid more attention than another member telling about a leaf falling and its specific detailed trajectory. Then an elder member telling about how they killed a lion earlier and the challenges faced, would be an even more interesting and hopeful story. Based on these experiences shared, one will tell a story about killing that lion the next day and everyone's role in this story in the future. Nowadays the lion is not a likely danger, the most interesting stories are about social interactions. The shared value system and social norms are mostly propagated through grand stories of religion. Listening to stories is advantageous as they train a person to respond to situations that may arise sometimes. Therefore an instinctive liking for listening to stories also evolved so that we listen to more stories due to the pleasure involved in it. The author describes the detailed physiology behind enjoying even horror movies, although all the negative and positive emotions felt by the protagonist are also partially felt by the viewer. The book explains why even fictional stories invoke emotions, referring to a hypothesis by Brian Boyd and further studies by others. We have evolved a capacity to partially suspend our disbelief (cognitive vigilance) when it is safe and pleasurable/adaptive. The recent concept of embodied cognition proposes that the division between thinking and feeling is not as clear-cut as commonly believed, rather Seth Duncan's 2007 study shows that emotion is a form of cognition. The author details how humans later evolved abstract thinking, starting from the interconnection between brain 'modules' that are for sensing smell, touch, sound, taste, and light. Neurons for this cross-modal interconnection are located between the sensory modules, in the IPL (Inferior Parietal Lobules). This interconnection is responsible for the cross-modal abstraction of features from inputs given by the sensory modules. This cross-modal abstraction served as an expatation (co-option) for more and more high-level abstraction. Today it has gone so far that some of us think we can know the absolute/objective reality or "what the universe is made of", completely independent of our senses, with zero influence of even our collective story.

In the 1990s Giacomo Rizzolatti discovered mirror neurons which are fired during the mental simulation of an activity. This is a subset of the set of neurons fired during actual activity of the same

type. Mirror neurons in various parts of the brain invoke different emotions while listening to a story, and collectively perform a mental simulation of the situation and response of the protagonist. In monkeys, it was observed that the mirror neurons of hand movement fire when watching another monkey trying to grab a fruit but not when aimlessly moving hand. Along with other experiments described in the book, it indicates that for a story to invoke emotions, the viewer shall know the goal/intention of the protagonist and the challenges on the way. The author also refers to the concept of super-stimuli proposed by Nobel Laureate Tinbergen, to explain how various arts including storytelling sometimes use superstimuli to hack our primitive instincts. The author is a teacher of a modern form of storytelling, that is cinema, so the book also delves into the challenges and advantages of these new forms. The book explains what I often wondered, how cartoons are preferred by children over realistic characters. The book is for everyone as we all tell stories, live in stories, use stories, and get used through stories. The book explains in easy language, the evolutionary cognitive science behind why stories work, why most popular stories are within some archetypal structures, why we enjoy even horror movies, how stories help in our social adaptation, how storytelling evolved and is evolving, and most importantly how sometimes they can hack into our brain including en masse. It is also a good foundational book for bringing biocultural aspects to literary criticism. The author has used cartoons to clarify concepts in between and reasonably quoted other experts in the domain as well as given further references for detailed scientific studies. Overall the author has made a nice story out of knowledge available so far about the evolutionary cognitive science of story-telling.

Notes on Contributors

1. **Akhil Katyal** is a writer, academic, gay activist and translator based in Delhi. He finished his PhD at SOAS and currently teaches literature at Ambedkar University, Delhi. Katyal has published several books of poems: *Like Blood on the Bitten Tongue: Delhi Poems*, *How Many Countries Does the Indus Cross*, and *Night Charge Extra*. He was also the recipient of the Vijay Nambisan Poetry Fellowship for the year 2021.
2. **Jhilam Chattaraj** is an academic and poet. Her publications include *Noise Cancellation* (2021), *Corporate Fiction: Popular Culture and the New Writers* (2018), and *When Lovers Leave and Poetry Stays* (2018). Her works have been published in *Ariel*, *Colorado Review*, *World Literature Today*, *Room*, *Porridge*, *Not Very Quiet*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *The Wire*, and *Asian Cha* among others. She received the CTI Excellence Award in "Literature and Soft Skills Development," 2019 from the Council for Transforming India and the Department of Language and Culture, Government of Telangana, India.
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