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Editor: Prof. Akshaya Kumar

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No. 43

Spring 2024

CONTENTS

Editorial

Towards Critical Spatiality: Re-Routing Literary Studies

Akshaya Kumar

v-x

Interviews

“And Academics Make Very Good Trolls.”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Sumana Roy

1-11

“Moon and Mud in the Very Same Frame”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation Arundhati Subramaniam

12-29

Research Papers

Traversing with *Chai*: A Scrutiny of *Chai Chai* as a Train Travelogue

Komal Yadav

30-46

Ecology, Literature and the Sense of Place: Floods in Colonial Odisha, 1907–1937

Siddharth Satpathy

47-65

Fairyland Protests the Anthropocene: Climate Change, Time, and Narrative Solastalgia

Maria Sebastian and Susan Mathew

66-82

Third Space and Cosmopolitanism Imaginings in Anjum Hasan’s *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*

PF John Bosco

83-103

“Sanctioned Trespassing”: Rhythmanalyzing Rome in Jhumpa Lahiri’s <i>Roman Stories</i> Minu Susan Koshy	104-120
Divya Srinivasan Breed’s <i>Meru</i>: A Paradigm of Disability-Conscious, Postcolonial, Gender-Neutral Posthumanism Manpreet Kaur Kang and Simran Mittal	121-137
Dubbing as Another Art of Failure: Re-Reading John Ciardi Rimpa Mondal	138-151
Crimson Realities: Navigating the Body Politics in <i>Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia</i> Hima S. Madhu and Nayana M. Pradeep	152-163
Alternative Rationality and Agency: Schizophrenia as a Case of Narrative Resistance Arunima AV	164-184
Laughter as Protest in Bama’s <i>Harum-Scarum Saar and Other Stories</i> Vijaya Singh	185-197
Plastic Landscape: Ecological Dystopia and the Disposability of Emotion in Don Delillo’s <i>White Noise</i> Smaranika Chakraborty and Himangshu Sarma	198-212
Karnad’s <i>Hayavadana</i>: A Feminist Performative (Re)telling through Repetition Indu Jain	213-225
Digital Self-Representation and Resistance: Memes on Menstruation by Women on Instagram Pages Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhry	226-239

Infidelity to Exoneration of the Wives: Redefining Morality through the Optimality Lens	
Kanak Kanti Bera	240-263
The Conversion and “Education” of Duleep Singh in Navtej Sarna’s <i>The Exile</i> and Lady Login’s <i>Sir John Login and Duleep Singh</i>	
Sakoon N. Singh	264-279
Reverse Internal Migration: Identity Negotiation in 1232 Km: <i>The Long Journey Home</i> and <i>Homebound</i>	
Kanika Panghal and Ila Rathor	280-290
Interpolation of Patriarchy: A Study of <i>Devadasi</i> through Select Literary Representations	
Neha Rohilla and Rekha Rani	291-305
Reception and Conception of Bengali Muslim Literary Works in the Colonial Period: A Critical Study	
Aliya Halim	306-318
Rituals of the Eunuchs in Punjabi Fiction: A Critical Study	
Gurjeet Singh	319-335
Translations	
<i>The Saga of the Blind</i>: Translation of Surawa Naatak	
Ravindra Pratap Singh	336-355
Poems	
Amlanjyoti Goswami	356-361
Jaydeep Sarangi	362-363

Book Reviews

Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Poems of Chandalini: Poems by a Bengali Dalit Womanist*.
Rajesh Kumar Jaiswal 364-367

***Scent of Rain: Remembering Jayanta Mahapatra*,
edited by Ashwani Kumar.**
Jaydeep Sarangi 368-371

S. Hussain Zaidi, *R.A.W. Hitman: The Real Story of Agent Lima*.
M. Jayadaarini 372-373

Aisha Sarwari, *Heart Tantrums and Brain Tumours: A Tale of Misogyny, Marriage and Muslim Feminism*.
Sruthi S. 374-376

Contributors 377-382



Editorial

Towards Critical Spatiality: Re-Routing Literary Studies

Akshaya Kumar

The obligations to dig deep invariably take us along the vertical axis of time. Going horizontal is flat, plainly boring and critically unexciting. The place or space which provides a fulcrum to history, for it to happen and implode, is usually taken for granted as a passive site, *sans* any possibility of inter-active entanglements. Through the sustained efforts of Stephan Greenblatt, Hayden White, Louis Montrose and others, the discourse of history – in its new textualised ways – has remained in the critical reckoning. The vector of space, however, continues to suffer critical neglect. It is only recently that a new sense of geography has made its way as researchers now begin to probe the textuality of place as a discursive site of competing and complementary conceptions, perceptions and lived experiences. Foucault, Lefebvre, Edward Soja and many others have given ‘space’ a critical precedence that bring a rare critical impetus to the trope of ‘route’ over and above the much sought-after regressive metaphor of the ‘root.’ Traversing across a landscape, or inhabiting a space yields its own affective topophrenia – a place-mindedness, which in terms of its cognitive value is critically no less important than the nostalgic narrative of deep time. The space in a neo-geographical setting is dynamic, textual, chequered, interspersed and heterotopic. It can be produced and reproduced, configured and reconfigured, arranged and rearranged to host new localities and correspondingly create new neighbourhoods.

Though the present issue of the *dialog* is not theme-specific, and the papers included in it are varied in terms of their thrust and methodological orientations, yet most of the papers tend to explore the spatial networks and the ontological flows that run through them in multiple ways. In the very first paper, using Foucault’s template of heterotopic configurations of the space, Komal Yadav reads closely Bishwanath Ghosh’s train travelogue *Chai Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get off* (2009). As the train traverses

through the landscape, passing across six junctions, the emerging heterotopias inside the compartment, challenge the dominant discourse of India as a cultural monolith. Reading junctions as a ‘non-place’ further unsettles the notion of space as an absolute organic anthropological fixed entity; the space is seen as a set of relational matrices, where indifferent passengers both inside the compartments, and outside on the platforms interact purely on contractual basis. The paper traces how non-places begin to acquire a sense of ‘place,’ and how junctions with the passage of time provide daily passenger a sense of cohesive working identity.

Siddharth Satpathy’s paper “Ecology, Literature and the Sense of Place: Floods in Colonial Odisha, 1907–1937,” foregrounds the role of literary and non-literary discourses about floods in Odisha towards the making of place-consciousness. The floods – an ecological disaster, were approached differently, by the British colonialist, the nationalist elite and the regional writers according to their respective power-dynamics. While the colonialists placed the phenomenon of floods in the larger framework of ecological crisis, without ever-holding their own colonial policies of lop-sided development as the cause of it; the nationalists saw it as a tragedy for the poor people of Odisha who are in need of philanthropy. The regionalists see the bio-zone of the province as a body that needs affective engagement, an eco-sensitive familial bonding. In a co-authored paper Maria Sebastian and Susan Mathew take us back to the fairylands which once upon a time were sites of ecological bliss. The spectre of Anthropocene, as the sum total of all the disasters that have happened to mankind, now threatens to leak into the idyllic world of fairy tales, generating a sense of ‘solastalgia’—an affective feeling which is caused due to disruption of existing order, and which overturns place-identity.

In the new spatial order, the places are no longer originary blackholes; rather they are porous, always open to their inevitable hybridisation. The liminal hyphenated zones or interstitial spaces cannot be glossed over in an anxiety to draw a definitive atlas of the globe. Dealing with Anjum Hasan’s novel *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*, John Bosco invokes Bhabha’s theory of the ‘Third Space’ to come to terms with the conventional binary of the insider-outsider. In its attempt to understand the quandaries of North-Eastern states, the

paper goes beyond the poetics of negotiation to suggest ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ as the way forward. In another paper by Minu Susan Koshy, the problematics of insider-outsider binary is resolved through the idea of “sanctioned trespassing.” Using Lefebvre’s concept of ‘rhythmanalysis,’ Koshy proposes that migrants are ideal rhythmanalysts; while being inside the city, they enjoy the necessary critical distance to observe the rhythms of their adopted homeland. The author takes up Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Roman Stories* for her textual analysis of urban landscapes. The phenomenon of reverse migration, particularly induced by epidemics and other natural disasters, is taken up by Kanika Panghal and Ila Rathore in their paper “Reverse Internal Migration”. Using theoretical insights of “Self-Categorization” as proposed by David Willer and Henri Tajfel’s “Social Identity Theory,” the two scholars study the pangs of belongingness through a study of two novels: *1232 Km: The Long Journey Home* by Vinod Kapri and *Homebound* by Puja Changoiwala.

In another co-authored paper “Plastic Landscapes,” Smaranika Chakraborty and Himangshu Sarma while emphasising the morphologies of landscape underline the importance of relationality and interconnectedness among the unorganised things and objects – human and non-human – that occupy a space, go on to analyse at length the disrupting role of overuse of plastic and other reckless Anthropocene activities through a reading of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985). As planet Earth becomes uninhabitable, the fictional imagination seeks to visualise alternative sites and spaces for posthuman futures. In their reading of Divya Srinivasan Breed’s *Meru* – a speculative work of fiction, co-authors Manpreet Kaur and Simran Mittal unfold a world which is not hierarchised along gender-lines, or not influenced by colonial-postcolonial hangovers. Virtual sites create unprecedented textual possibilities within the discourse of space and territoriality.

The space, more so if it is specified, inter-acts with the persons or things that it inhabits, at an ontological level. The space of temple with young women as servants of the presiding god or deity, immediately brings into critical contention the inter-section of gender, religion and site. Temples turn into bastion of patriarchy. Neha Rohilla and Rekha Rani in their paper on *devadasi* system and

its latter-day mutations within ancient temples, through a study of Vaasanthi's "The Symbol" and Rishi Reddi's "Devadasi" foreground the site of temple as the compelling space of priestly authority, and structural female oppression. Gurjeet Singh's paper also is significant from the angle of cultural anthropology as he catalogues various rituals that Punjabi eunuchs perform inside their *deras*. The site of *dera*, and the power-dynamics inside the close-confines of it, is keenly captured through a study of Punjabi fictional texts that venture to delineate the miseries and joys of the eunuchs. Another space – that of theatre – as a site of radical re-writing of the myths – is explored by Indu Jain in her paper on Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's experiments with Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* with a special focus on the creative use of native folk resources.

The spaces are ossified into legible and mappable public spheres through processes of modernisation, and in this context the printing press played a pivotal role. Due to inbuilt compulsions of print capitalism, the vernaculars are standardised, and turned into national languages. Any language is a medium of communication, but it also suggests a corresponding space. Aliya Halim's paper brings into critical focus the varieties of Bangla registers which acquire communal overtones over the passage of time. The Bangla Muslim writers preferred an interiorised Persianised form of Bangla, as compared to Bangla Hindu writers who chose a more Sanskritised form of the same language. Such differences can be discerned in case of Punjabi language as well. In Pakistani Punjabi, the influence of Arabic and Persian is more pronounced, whereas in Indian Punjab, Punjabi is more Sanskritised. Vijaya Singh's paper takes up caste atrocities that occur around the rural landscape on river Kamma created fictionally by Bama in her short stories collection *Harum-Scarum Saar and Other Stories*. The narratives that emanate from this space are sad, tragic, and defiant, but the poetics is that of disdain and derisive laughter.

Since languages create their own spatial spread and distinct geographical borders, the rhetoric of nationalism rests on 'linguistic' divides and differentiations. In this context, the issues of translation are inextricably linked to the politics of nation as a space. Rimpa Mondal in her paper builds on John Ciardi's basic premise that dubbing, like translation, is an exercise in good failure. At a

fundamental level, the author does not romanticise the purity or insularity of both language, and space. Sakoon Singh's paper also, in a way, is implicated in the politics of a translational process called 'conversion' through which individual or communities undergo a process of identity transformation. She zeroes in on the forcible conversion of the child Maharaja Duleep Singh into Christianity by the colonial administrators to delineate how a potential king was exiled from his own kingdom and his people.

In the present issue of *dialog*, there are quite a few papers which bring onboard the issue of health care and concern, through an enabling interface of literature and visual culture, online as well as offline. In her paper on "Alternative Rationality and Agency" through a reading of the first-person accounts of the patients of schizophrenia, Arunima very persuasively overturns the myths of madness that are usually associated with such patients. The paper on menstruation ad-campaigns through memes run on social media platforms (particularly Instagram) underline the collective role of visual culture, literature and digital humanities in subverting stereotypes and fostering new ways of activism. Another paper "Crimson Realities" by Hima S. Madhu and Nayana M. Pradeep, also takes us through an array of writings on the body politics in which the discourse of menstruation is embedded, to the disadvantage of the female. There is one more 'unusual' paper by Kanak Kanti Bera that employs the matrices of optimality theory to study the psychological processes of moral-decision by women in Indian English fiction.

The issue, like the previous issues of *dialog*, includes scripts of two conversations that were hosted in the University with two leading writers of Indian English, namely – Sumana Roy and Arundhati Subramaniam. The issue also consists of a translation of a folk Bhojpuri skit called *Surawa Natak*. The difficult text has been translated by Prof. Ravindra Pratap Singh who has done seminal work in the domain of folk theatre and its translations into English. The poems of Amlanjyoti Goswami and Jaydeep Sarangi lend an extra edge to the journal, and in the coming issues, the component of creative writing shall find more space. There are four book reviews covering various aspects of contemporary critical issues. Overall, the issue has enough variety and a necessary academic standard.

Towards the compilation of this issue, two editorial assistants – Chahat Rampal and Arunjot Kaur – have played a significant role. They reached out to experts, referees and paper-writers to coordinate a timely publication of the issue. Chairperson of the Department, Prof. Meenu A. Gupta, has also lent her unconditional support, and the office staff of the Department has worked like a cohesive team. Shubham Choudhry, the typesetter and the manager of the Printing Press, Mr. Jatinder Moudgil, have given the necessary final touches to the issue and we hope it lives to the expectations of all the stakeholders.



“And Academics Make Very Good Trolls.”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Sumana Roy

(This is an edited version of a conversation that took place between Sumana Roy and Prof. Akshaya Kumar at Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 16 February, 2024 in the Chandigarh Language Congress.)

Akshaya Kumar: It is very difficult to introduce a writer, more so when a writer is very un-authorly. An author normally operates within certain culturally-shared horizons to strike a ready resonance with his potential audience, but here is a writer who rebels against conventional authorly protocols. For Sumana Roy even the exclusive categorisation of literature as ‘literature’ is not-so-comfortable. She is not very happy with the division of literature into genres, she goes to extent to describing the division of literature into genres as some kind of “literary racism.” It is always a challenge to write *ab initio* without being conditioned by the given forms of literature. The very idea of the scripting ideas into a genre-free form amounts to challenging the entrenched templates of culture. One has to postpone, perhaps create an alternative kind of world to write, intransitively. One has to create a very different kind of world because as long as one is in this world, one is instinctively driven by the classificatory complexes of this world. Sumana does create a different world of plants and trees. Therein, she finds the whole idea of genre-wise division simply preposterous. Let me quote from her well-received book *How I Became a Tree*. She writes, “When I eventually decided to write about my experiences of metamorphosis, my spiritual and emotional transformation into a tree, I wasn’t sure whether I could use the word ‘literature’ at all. It seemed so artificial, not just the scaffolding of voice and structure, but this whole things about genre” (26). She goes on to assert that there is no natural division of genres, and that there is no way one can assign a particular genre to a plant or tree. There is no way that one can call “grass as poem and banyan as epic, ginger as philosophical tract and rose as young adult fiction” (26). So, let us start the conversation on this note. How can we postpone or even abandon the very idea of genre while writing

literature? Would we then not relapse into some kind of literary primitivism?

Sumana Roy: I must clarify that I am not against the idea of literary as I am against the classification of genres. (Just as I am against the category of the 'bio-note.' It is a category I dislike.) Let me try and explain this through something that I teach – the *rasa* theory. At this moment the people I can see on my screen, myself included, we are experiencing a range of emotions at any given point of time, and these emotions are fluid and in a state of flux. To classify a person and limit them to one definitive category is therefore to do them injustice, because we move across a range of emotions and are not the same person at all times. I think this manner of classification goes against the idea of our experience of literature itself. If I buy a book for you and say it is a thriller, then you already know that when you will read it your palms and armpits will sweat. So, you have been preconditioned by the classification of this genre to think and expect something of the genre. One of my favorite thinkers, Michelle Serres said – and I'll paraphrase – that at any given point of time, for instance you can hear me, you can smell me, see me, feel the temperature of the day on your skin. . . . At any given point of time all your five senses are active, but when you mention a genre, the effect of one sense is heightened and the rest suppressed. I would like to meet the literary text directly, without being introduced to it through its generic name. I dislike any kind of classification. It also has to do with my resistance against linear classification.

AK: I have seen in your writings that there is a constant struggle to break free from the grid of genres. For instance, look at your anthology of animal stories *Animalia Indica*, you include not just stories alone, you go on to include a couple of poems – one by Rudyard Kipling and another by Vikram Seth, extracts from novels of Perumal Murugan, Nalanjana Roy and Motilal Kemmu, also non-fictional prose of George Orwell. In your novel *Missing*, you quote quite a lot from newspapers, bringing together two registers simultaneously in a relationship of juxtaposition – one of jejune journalism, and other of reflective and layered fiction. Should that mean that now we have to look at the genre of story or fiction in a much more enlarged and expansive way?

SR: I think I should not take credit or discredit for *Animalia Indica* alone. Many of the suggestions also came from my editor who had done a bit of research himself and pointed me towards certain texts. But if I were to be left to do an anthology such as this one, you are absolutely right to suspect that I would include a variety of genres. To have poetry, fiction, non-fiction, essay, graphic narratives, art, some stills from cinema, that comes naturally to me. I know it is frustrating for a publisher because publishing today survives on categories. Akshaya, when a subject comes to me, it also comes in a certain form – for instance, I discovered this news item about Barack Obama coming to India and planting this tree in Delhi, and the death of the sapling a few days later. And I thought there was something there, in that news item. I wanted to write an essay. But I just couldn't fit it into the form of an essay. An essay would require a kind of elaboration that I felt would not be appropriate for what I had in mind. My proclivity after reading that news item was to take the text from the news story and smuggle it into a poem, and that is how the poem "VIP: Very Important Plant" was born. Maybe if you asked me now, I would respond to it differently, in a different genre. All artistic choices are contingent, as you know.

AK: As I see today that already people are expressing some amount of no-confidence in the future of fiction. Even the practitioners of fiction are saying that for the kind of complexities we are up against, we need a mixing of the genres. So, the emerging style is not loaded in favour of one genre or the other. When I look at you, this book *How I Became a Tree*, I found that there are entries which have a short story like structure, there are entries which look like autobiographical snippets, there are entries which look poetical, and there are entries which look almost like diary notes. Even in your collection of short stories *My Mother's Lover and Other Stories*, there is a mixture of genre. In the title story, for instance, the lover of the mother happens to be a poet, and that allows you to use a lot of poetry within the scope of narrative prose. So how do you look at the future of literature in terms of its tryst with literary taxonomies?

SR: I think it was H.D. who, after the first world war, said that we will never be able to write an epic again. The first world war changed Europe's relationship with forms such as the epic, and a consequent gravitation towards shorter forms that felt more alive and urgent, both

spatially and temporally. So, James Joyce's ambition was different from Homer's – not the entire life of Odysseus, but a day in a person's life. The fragmentary and the lyrical were privileged over the epic or the epical. Similarly with *Mrs. Dalloway* and so on. What do we think of fiction now? I think that was your question? Social media, Internet, after what is happening in Gaza, after Syria and Serbia, after the everyday violence ... what has happened to fiction, to the novel, for instance? I think writers, particularly women and non-binary writers, are moving outside the tight compartments of genres. Publishers have been forced to invent a new category of classification, one that is disobedient to conventional genres. It is possible that the rise of autofiction owes to this phenomenon too – that the hand-me-down form of the novel wasn't sufficient enough to include the sideward glance. This, however, is not new. I am thinking of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel *Aranyak*, born out of a diary that he kept during his time of employment in the forests in Bihar. His job was to clear the forests for plantation, and he kept a diary in the 1920s. This would eventually come to us as the autofictional novel *Aranyak*, the title deriving from the Upanishads.

To return to your question about the idea of 'research' and its role in creative practice – as one of my colleagues said, "you are not an academic. Why are you putting so much research into the book?" It had never occurred to me that the person who would read the book might be unintelligent. I don't think any reader is unintelligent, we are always dumbing down the reader. That is the publisher's job, particularly the sales team. So, I trusted my reader. Everything, whether I am researching, living, walking through a forest, all of these come together at different points of my existence in my life and consequently into everything I write. At some point of time, I would like to think that the poems too would enter my non-fiction. They have in fact in the next book that comes out next month. It is called *Provincials* – how our literatures, cultures, cuisines, the way we live have contributed to metropolitan culture but it has never been acknowledged, how we continue to be bullied by metropolitan culture and how this idea that we are calling 'World Literature' is actually something that has been created by our ancestors from places like where you and I are. It's not about practicing what I preach, it's something that comes to me naturally. It has nothing to do with the

fact that I believe in this and I must do it. It is not premeditated at all. If it was premeditated, I could have become a content creator on Instagram.

AK: Tree remains your mainstay, so if trees and forest by that analogy constitute the primary unit of our survival, should we then not dismiss the categories of culture, namely nationality and nationhood? It is not a question of just dispensing away with the idea of literary forms or genres, then it comes to demolishing all kinds of political denominations and identity-formations. Would it then not be a kind of lapse into the Hobbesian state of nature?

SR: Civilisation and what constitutes the idea of the primitive has always been in flux. But I will come to that later. Do I want to do away with all categories? It is a utopia. The fact that we have our passports, we need visas to move between places, the reason we envy birds for instance. These categories are bureaucratic. For instance, take the word 'forest'. The word we were taught in our languages was 'jungle'. But there are no jungles left in the world anymore. A few forests remain, where the human hand has still allowed it to survive. We say 'afforestation' or 'deforestation', not 'a-junglification' or 'de-junglification'. It is a utopian ideal. The doing away of categories interests me because categories are, by their very nature, hierarchical. In academia, where we teach Foucault, we continue to be happy about the hierarchies of professor, associate or assistant professor; it supplies us with reasons to feel proud. We want to use these prefixes when we write our bios. So much of what we say and preach to our students, we do not end up practicing. The difference between a tree and a plant also has to do with a different kind of hierarchy. Trees will survive longer. Seasonal plants have shorter lives. And then in a very Deleuzian way you think of grass and the rhizomatic, and how that is a challenge to the platonic idea of the tree. All these categories have the backing of history. And when we say history, whom do we mean? We know by now that history is always of the winner.

AK: You do talk about the materiality of tree, but there is this propensity to slip into the metaphysical as well. In your poem "Bodhi Tree, Bodh Gaya," for instance, in lines such as these – "One comes to trees to escape the pornography of waiting. / There must be something about sitting under a tree." (*Out of Syllabus* 121), a tree

acquires equanimity of divine proportions. In another poem, you assign a metaphysical anonymity to trees: "You look at the trees, their indifference to recognition, / and you begin to see the path of evolution – / the mammal's backbone needs fame. The tree trunk none." ("Are Trees Anonymous?", *V.I.P.*, 12) The metaphysical is a kind of a zone where all boundaries of space and time collapse. Unless we materialize trees, the tree consciousness would become just a matter of utopian fantasy. What do you say?

SR: I encounter variations of this question and also feel slightly hesitant when people ask me – what is this tree or what is this species? I have to remind them and myself about my lack, that I am not a botanist, and I am not coming to plant life through the botanical. My groping towards plant life might have begun from a place of flight, because I was going through a very difficult time and had tired of the human social world. I was looking for other forms of life. I did not want to die; I was sure about that. I considered the possibility of living like a dog, but then realised that a dog does not live outside emotional economy. I was looking for a form of life that was outside the emotional economy that humans are raised in. I had jaundice and lay on my bed for what seemed like months. I remember the summer afternoon – I saw the shadows of papaya leaves, shaped like the human hand, only more beautiful. Something shifted in me, I felt the will to live. I thought to myself – I did not plant the papaya plant, some bird or insect must have, and yet it has given me something, so it is outside the conventions of reciprocity, perhaps outside an emotional economy. It was a moment of epiphany. I wanted to live like a tree. A few years passed and I thought that surely, I am not the only abnormal person in the world who has wanted to live like a tree. I then began looking for people who had exhibited a similar desire. Then discovering Jagdish Chandra Bose who had proved to the world that plants were living beings was like me, childless, did not have biological children of his own. Why did Gautama have to travel all the way from Nepal to Bodhgaya and why did he have to sit under the tree? What did the tree give him that the human company did not? So, looking at these people, both well-known and those like myself, led to this idea. I did not own a laptop at that time, so I was making notes on my phone and notebook. Gradually a form began to emerge and I thought that this probably has the shape of a book.

I think our ancestors had a far more spiritual understanding of beauty. Look at our government buildings and those built 500 or 600 years ago. I think beauty is necessary in our lives. Something that the government and terror regimes make us want to forget. That is the reason we find something when we go to forest, go to the sea, or when we work with our hands. These are things we have been forced to forget by the very head-heavy nature of our education system. I think we need to have a metaphysical revolution in the Indian subcontinent today. So many of our poetic traditions owe to the various forms of the metaphysical. There has been a complete disappearance of the phenomenological tradition which created so many of our poetic philosophies. So, if in some way we could work towards rehabilitating that kind of consciousness, I am up for it.

AK: Academics, and the contemporary pedagogy is at a receiving-end all through your writings. Even the title of your collection is *Out of Syllabus*. You are clearly unhappy with the syllabus-driven academics.

SR: Because people like myself, which I presume is the majority, will never find a space in the syllabus. There is a kind of writing – and art – that is meant to live outside the syllabus, that, because of the hierarchies in which the academic corporation operates, never manage to find illustrative duties of the courses that are taught in the humanities today.

AK: You are absolutely dismissive of the kind of pedagogy that we do in our classrooms. In your short stories – particularly “New Provincials”, and “Close Reading”, and in your columns in newspapers also, you often complain about the ways in which literary theory has usurped literature and its enjoyment from the classroom. It would be wrong to assume that literary theory is used in the classrooms in unfiltered and uncalibrated ways. May be, in some elite universities – and Ashoka is one such, it is pedaled too much, and therefore the disenchantment?

SR: I came to Asoka only four-and-a-half years ago when I had already been formed by the circumstances of my life. My parents are very unremarkable people, fortunately, like I am. So, there was no pressure to be an academic. The critical theorists you mentioned are very important, not just to you and me, but also to the world. But the

way it is taught and the way it has colonized the English major syllabus, it has fortunately not managed to colonize the Punjabi, Bangla, or Spanish literature syllabus, for instance. But “we” have this burden. It has been very important for me that I should not be Robinson Crusoe who writes about Friday in a language that Friday does not understand. Maybe a hundred years ago people had access to philosophical culture through music, literature, spiritual practice, or religion. It came in different forms; it came through daily living. I am not exoticizing the past, but there were points of access. I get to know of so many idioms through the person who cooks for us in Siliguri, for instance. That kind of life has been ignored by academia. A complete dismissal of lived experience and living knowledge systems outside the autoethnographic. How that does not form the body of Anglo-American critical theory. Even before you have read any text you must read *The Hungry Tide* as an environmental humanities text. The category – the lens – has been decided for you. It has marginalized a large portion of modern Indian literatures that formed people like you and me. Humor is not sexy or political enough, though we know that we love to laugh, though we know that the nation state right from the time of Plato to the Indian government right now, whatever their political dispensation might be, loves to keep its comedians and writers in prison. If I were to ask how many humorous novels are there in the syllabus, the answer would be none. Because we do not take humor seriously. The hierarchy, whether it operates between people, between knowledge systems, between locations, makes me deeply uncomfortable.

AK: When you use tree as your way of life, it has its implication on the very art of writing that you do. For instance, *Missing: A Novel*, is a narrative of just seven days and you pack so much in this rather short span of time. And there is a small essay in the book *How I Became a Tree* where you foreground the role of “slow time” in the growth of a tree. How has slow time become your default way of writing? In your writings, the melodrama is put on hold, and emotions are expressed in a very relaxed slow-paced way.

SR: A few other people have told me the same. I think it is not a tree that I wanted to become but grass. And the fact that grass is so used to being trampled upon but it continues to survive like so many of us. The woman in the novel *Missing* is called Kabita; kobita is poetry,

she has gone missing. The woman goes missing just like poetry has gone missing from our lives. I was copying portions of the newspaper, *The Telegraph*, and how time moves in them, in these excerpts. It is hyper condensed, time in the newsroom and newspaper, and I wanted us to become aware of how much more poetic life is, compared to the heightened politics of the newspaper report. And I thought how wonderful it would be to be able to take leisure, pain, and experience the nine *rasas* in everyday living that the newsroom does not allow us to.

AK: You show almost a pathological dislike for Instagram, Facebook. One can understand dislike for Spivaks and Bhabhas for all the linguistic obscurity they weave in their theoretical works but what about these modern means of instant-connect? These internet social media platforms are the lifeblood of modern generation.

SR: Absolutely. I agree with so much of what Spivak says in her work in the last fifteen years, but my problem is with the language. Similarly, my problem is not so much with social media as in the language in which it comes to us. The language of Instagram is meant to be unmemorable. Your body is not liking the post, your finger is. So, it is the language of faking, it is the language of lies. Everyone is either marvelous and amazing or we are trolling each other. And academics make very good trolls. Whether it is the language of praise or of trolling, both are languages of cliches. We are living in the age of the blurb. That kind of thing on social media has its uses. It has helped us create political movements. It's just the jaded generation that it is producing that I am against. Students have become consumers instead of creators. Also, it begins to get tiresome. You like the same kind of post every day. We have all become clones of each other and this has been indulged and embedded by social media and its vocabulary. That is my only grudge against it.

AK: Coming back to the novel *Missing*, one thing I notice that throughout you evince a remarkable flair of playing with words. In the novel, you play with the word "miss" in multiple ways. When Bimal-da asks for 'Miss form', it triggers off number of speculations. Eventually it turns out to be a form for 'Monthly Instalment Scheme' at the post office. In your opening story of the collection *My Mother's Lover and Other Stories*, "Blind Water", you twist the serious climax

involving suicide of a lady into “a dry lake” into a parodic ending. The profound “Water Martyr Point” is turned into a comical “matar paneer”. You do refer to the role of humour. Is ‘humour’ specific to contemporary writing? Is humour or parody the only strategy left to puncture the tyrannies of the grand narratives of past?

SR: The serious men of the state and academia are all scary. I like the comic. But I think my natural gradient is towards the tragi-comic. I know about the Monthly Instalment Scheme because my father gets a very small pension and has had to rely on the monthly instalments from post offices. That’s how I got to know of the MIS. I find that I have gravitated towards the tragic-comic very naturally. The examples you give are of the Found aesthetic, and it’s one I’m very fond of – in *Missing*, as in some of my poems, I have relied on it to hold a history that I might not have been able to capture otherwise.

AK: We in academia are very fond of fashion and trends. These days people are talking about climate change, and the age of Anthropocene. And also, this whole idea that human beings should abdicate their sovereign positions and distribute the agency to animals, and non-human beings. When someone makes a pitch for these things, how to make out whether one is theory-driven, or is intrinsically attached to these concerns or things?

SR: You remember the epigraph of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*? “The East is a Career.” The environment is the new subaltern.

I was at a residency in Harvard where I first discovered the phrase “plant humanities”. This was three or four years after *How I Became a Tree* had been published in India. It was the first time I learned that what I had been doing for so long was actually plant humanities. It might feel like I had gained a career, but I actually lost something. To have such a boring name such as the “Anthropocene” for something I care for so much is, of course, a pity. We should have a word that shows a real relationship. We should not have umbrella terms. Many of my essays are critique of this professionalization of environmental humanities. My reason for creating this Indian plant humanities reader is not necessarily to generate academic writing, but to go back to two thousand years of our literature. I think love is a radical act, and, if we are able to think and write of those we love, it will have memorability and impact.

AK: How does your obsession with trees and your disenchantment with marriage as an institution go together? You do not dismiss marriage, but you repeatedly refer how marriage augments the sense of loneliness. I am reading some lines from your poem “Singular-Plural” to illustrate my point. The entire poem de-romanticizes marriage, of course without any rancour. The poem begins with some degree of weariness, marriage-fatigue: “Every wedding anniversary, we behave like mountaineers, /and pretend to have conquered distance”. Then you add few more lines on the ritual of anniversaries: “Anniversaries are wall paint, a smoothening of pores. / They bring colour to the skin of a marriage, / and hide cracks where parasites evade mores”. The poem, towards the end, points towards the sense of strangeness that continues in the melee of marital-marathon: “The marriage becomes a metropolis—/ you and I its anonymous citizens.” (*Out of Syllabus*, 6). In your novel *Missing*, Kabir wondering at mother’s loneliness in her marriage asks a question: “Did ‘being married’ – like ‘doing a PhD’? (84) You seem to celebrate the lonely resilience of tree, its capacities to stand tall against all kinds of adversities. Forest is not what you prefer, a tree is your sanctuary.

SR: I like relationships that are like grass, unexpected, non-linear, alive to weather, not custom. I am uncomfortable with the way marriage seems to have become the most important social unit in our times. The idea of the family makes me as uncomfortable as the idea of the nation state – their omnipresence and the power that accrues from living in these institutions, from any institution. We live as employees of institutions – of the state, of our marriages, of our families, of other collectives. We live without freedom. I like the forest, its natural accommodativeness – it offers an alternative way of thinking about institutions which are, by their very nature, closed. I like my aloneness – I have known no other way of being.

AK: There is no end to these questions and I have tried to cover as many aspects as possible. So, thank you for indulging in this conversation with me.



“Moon and Mud in the Very Same Frame”

Arundhathi Subramaniam in Conversation with Akshaya Kumar

(This is an edited version of a live conversation that took place on 21.10.2024 at Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh before an audience with the poet and editor Arundhathi Subramaniam on her latest anthology titled *Wild Women: Seekers, Protagonists and Goddesses in Sacred Poetry* published by Penguin Random House.)

Akshaya Kumar: We have been inviting Arundhati here for the last couple of years now, and each time there emerges a possibility of renewing the conversation. This book *Wild Women*, I always knew was in the making, and its journey started long back. The image of an Andheri local railway engine as Kali and the image of furious Kannagi hurling her breast on Madurai that occurred in her first collection, still resonate in my mind. The journey that starts with such powerful characters, has no other option but to go forward with more discoveries and storms in its stride. Reading this book is just like navigating a storm, because each page is full of energy, and energy when I say, looks a very average word. What the book unleashes is a gush of high voltage energy. Each *bhakti*-poet, which is included in this anthology, is a poet with an exceptional background, who can be historicised hagiographically only. Each poem is a clarion call. I remember that in her previous anthology *Eating Gods*, she describes *bhakti* hymns as sacred pop songs. Somehow in this collection, the tone and the mandate become far more serious. And therefore, she calls that this collection as a kind of a cry. She further qualifies that the cry takes many forms. The cry is mix of prayers, love songs, complaints, and anthems. And also, very succinctly she would say, the tone is celebratory but not triumphalist.

The tone is celebratory also because the collection of four hundred pages takes onboard fifty-six women *bhakti* saint poets. This

is unprecedented. We, at the best, zero in on the familiar names of Meerabai, Andaal, Akka Mahadevi or Lal Ded, but fifty-six women saint poets is a staggering figure! And you have 'Meera Bai of Manipur' to 'Meera Bai of Mughals,' and a whole horde of the likes of Meera Bai. The number of bhakti women saint poets grows exponentially in this collection. And I tell you, the amount of conviction with which this rebel of the women is chronicled and contained, is self-consuming. I am not happy with this term 'anthology' because sometimes it looks like a mere collection of items, but here on every small detail of the book there is an imprint of the editor. Arundhathi as an editor owns every poet, and she speaks through them as much as they speak through her. She therefore is for all practical reasons an author. Besides including the translations of their verses, she introduces them with very pertinent anecdotes, tracing their background in terms of their allegiance to different traditions. When I say *bhakti* poetry or literature, it is a larger cultural formation which has its own discursivities. *Wild Women* is an anthology within anthology. She has divided this book into three parts. There are fifty-six women saint poets, then there are poems where women as protagonists feature, and there are texts where women and *devis* are celebrated.

In the collection, Arundhathi almost decolonises spirituality, and that too at multiple levels. First, spirituality does no longer remain just a male stronghold. In her *Eating Gods* there was a dominance of the male *bhakti*-poets. Spirituality is decolonised in another sense. It is not approached as an abstract theory of personal emancipation, rather it is approached as a way of life which can be gainfully harnessed for collective upliftment. Spirituality attains instrumentality. When you read these verses, you realise that each poem can propel you to do better; can re-energise you and give you some direction. Spiritualism, as it comes through the *bhakti poets* and their travails and challenges, the component of self-struggle is foregrounded. These poets do not leap-frog into the zone of the infinite, into some miraculous state of frenzy. There was an effort; there was a struggle. So, spiritualism is not without its social praxis. It is not a facile kind of jump into the unknown.

This anthology is a mega-project, and as I observed earlier, it contains many anthologies within it. The traditions of *bhakti* poetry

are too many, and there are regional variations and local denominations of *bhakti* as culture. I am reminded of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* wherein he says that nations are imagined through informal ways. One of the ways in which nations are imagined is through the journeys of the pilgrims. Reading this book is travelling to every nook and corner of the country. Entire Indian landscape is covered in terms of the footprints of *bhakti*-credo across the land. Bhakti poets have been somehow dug out, excavated from all corners of the country and together they constitute the cartography of the nation. It is this dormant form of cartography which comes alive in this book.

In course of designing and compiling this book, Arundhathi has mentioned that at times she threw her hands in despair. So, Arundhati, let me start the conversation. What prompts you to re-invent Kalis and Kannagis for the newer generation? If Kannagi plucks her breast and hurls it on Madurai as a curse, you throw *Wild Women* as no less than a hand grenade. This is a kind of hand grenade thrown on all those who still think that spiritualism is a facile, feminine kind of longing. What is your take on it?

Arundhathi Subramaniam: I just want to thank you Akshaya, and all of you here. It always feels like a homecoming when I am here. There is something that is deeply invitational and I am very glad to be here. And one of the primary reasons is the fact that Akshaya speaks in images and whenever people speak in images, I am at home. So, thank you for that image of hand-grenade. It seems like a terrific start.

And why this hand grenade? You know, oddly enough, I have been asked by three people, all of them male, none of them Akshaya. Why is it *Wild Women*? Can't it be another kind of woman? Aren't there other kind of women? And I will come to that later. But a hand-grenade seems like a good entry point. I think this book for me was a lifetime in the making, but after the anthology that Akshaya mentioned – *Eating God*, which was published in 2016, a few questions started gaining momentum. For me, reading mystic poetry of any persuasion, whether it is St. John of the Cross, or Kabir, or Basho, has always been necessary. Mystic poetry of various kinds has rescued me in different points of my life, in a way that reading

philosophy never has. And yet a question that endured for me was, where are the women? Where on earth are the women? As I started reading with a certain feverishness as my own existential journey took on a certain momentum, I realised that the women I knew—Meera, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded – were a handful in the Indian subcontinent and most of them had been flattened into anti-septic saints. They turned into women in states of such swooning surrender that I could not relate to them. They seemed to have dropped their bodies, the physical selves entirely. They seemed to be devoid of hunger, hormones, and seemed to turn into ethereal puffs of vapour. And when people turn into vapour too easily, I am excluded, because I don't know how to enter that space. So, it always felt to me that women on spiritual quest had turned into these ethereal beings that I could not quite relate to, and on the other hand I found, as I started digging more deeply, that there are legions of women in the subcontinent that I have never heard of. So, whether it was the fact that they have been flattened into hagiography or completely consigned to oblivion, both ways we have lost them. There is really no entry point, at least for me.

So, another question this it is linked to is the fact that when we speak of women or the spiritual path, many people will say, "I am very spiritual." And one is never quite sure what they mean, and far too often when people use the word spiritual, they seem to suggest a state of easy surrender, and that word surrender to me, is such a difficult word. It makes me very uncomfortable. I think as a woman I have felt deeply uncomfortable with romantic literature of all kinds which has spoken of women who seem to drop their agency at the drop of a hat. And a question that I often went back to personally on my own journey, was a question that I encountered when reading Valerie Saiving Goldstein, a Christian theologian. I read her in my college days, years ago. And she asked a very simple question which always stayed with me: "If we are encouraged to surrender all the time. Surrender ourselves to God. If we have not learned to value ourselves, what is the value of that surrender?" That question has always been with me. What is this journey of selfhood? How do we find out who we are? To me that is what the spiritual journey has always been about.

So, what excited me about this project was to find women with bodies, with questions, women who are human, women who are confused, women who are bewildered, women who ask questions which are deeply inconvenient, and who are willing to stake their lives on those questions. That's the only difference between, as I see it, me and them. They stake their lives on those questions. That started the journey, and I think that was the beginning of the hand-grenade. I would hope that this book journeys into the lives not just of women, but as much into the lives of men and any gender that people choose to identify with. Simply because I think all of us, each one of us, yearns without knowing it. It is often an unconscious yearning. We all yearn for a less lopsided and less exclusionary heritage of culture and spirituality. We all thirst to know of ancestors we can claim as our own. We thirst for friends we can claim as our own. Sisterhood that we can claim as our own. We want to know that other people have walked this path before and we are not alone. I think that deep thirst was something that I felt and it simply grew.

The moment which was very telling for me, was an anecdote that I read many years ago about a Buddhist woman Roshi, a Zen Roshi, who gave a talk on "Little Known Women in the Buddhist Tradition." She gave the talk and found that a young woman in the audience was in tears and a long time after the session was over, the young woman continued to cry. When I read that, no one needed to explain to me what had happened. I knew. And I wonder whether that incident in some way is an incident you recognise in yourselves in some way or the other. It can play itself out in many different ways. I remember entering a Goddess temple with just a certain smidgen of curiosity and little else in 2010. And I hear the thirty-three names of the goddess in the temple. I was not approaching it with any great religious fervour or devotion. I simply sat there. But something stirred when I entered that space. And it felt like what stirred had nothing to do with religious allegiance, with a sense of political validation that this appealed to my feminist credentials, none of that. Just the sense of something too long forgotten. Having suddenly heaved again in this shock of retrieval, suddenly heaving again into my living experience. It felt like I had touched groundwater. When you read a poem, a poem that really works, it is like touching groundwater. It is knowing that a thirst has been addressed that you

didn't even know existed. That's what a poem ought to do for you. And I hope that this book and all the other reading that you do, I hope poetry will never leave you at any moment in your lives. I hope you will touch groundwater again and again, because this is the most distilled utterance that we know. And when we come into contact within, we are irrigated on one hand, and to use a completely different metaphor, we are in the presence of that hand-grenade all over again. We feel alive and energised.

AK: So, you rightly said that these moments of spiritual epiphanic awareness were lost somewhere. But as you go through these poems page after page, you are swept off your feet and realise that there is a torrent of awareness that seems to overwhelm you. One question however has always bothered me, and other younger people like me: is there an algorithm for this kind of a leap?

AS: That's a good question. I am fine with this book being read just as an archive. This is a possible archive of voices that you knew and many voices that you are likely not to have known. There are many voices here that at least took me by surprise. I can only answer this from my own experience because I am not good at algorithms. I would be probably something other than a poet if I were. I read AK Ramanujan's *Hymns for the Drowning*, many years ago. I read it and saw that this was an accomplished translator, and put it away. I have always enjoyed AK Ramanujan; I go back to him. That was it. When my own journey took on a certain intensity, I happened to stumble upon his *Hymns for the Drowning* again. These are his translations of the Tamil poet and Vaishnava saint Nammalvar. And suddenly it was an ambush. This is what it was all about. When you are deeply lonely, this is when poetry can rescue you, because you suddenly realise you have a campfire of dead poets perhaps, but living poetry. And that's how a poem can come and pick you out some of your darkest moments. It's fine to read it simply as an archive. But when a book is going to come and ambush you that's something you can't programme. Many things have to be aligned perhaps for that to happen. There is a certain mystery about it. There is one thing I would suggest all of you: never lose your willingness to be surprised. We are living in times where the mind feels so clogged with information. That it is possible to sometimes feel like one's capacity for gobsmacked wonderment is gone. But poetry is meant to return you

time and again to that state of, “Oh my God! I really don’t know.” I hope some of these women will come into your lives like that. You could read them simply because they ask strange and wonderful questions. They ask questions which some of us don’t dare to ask even today.

For example, Punnika is a slave girl 2500 years ago at the time of Buddha. She attends a talk by him, in which the Buddha says that when you have deeply internalised the *dharma* or *dhamma*, your words will come from a different place within you, and what you say will sound like a lion’s roar. For me, it was something that spoke to me deeply. When Punnika then found herself on the way to Ganga, walking down the steps of the *ghats*, she meets this very orthodox, ritualistic Brahmin. And she asks him where he is going, and he says, “I am going to the water”. She says, “I have to go, it’s my work, but why are you going, it’s cold.” He says, “Well I am a Brahmin, I have to do my thing, wash away my sins.” To which Punnika says, and this is when the lion’s roar enters, “Beware! You may wash off your sins, but you may also wash off your merits. I am prepared for that.” The exact in translation read thus:

If these rivers could carry off
the evil kamma you’ve done in the past,
they’d carry off your merit as well
and then you’d be
completely left out

And the Brahmin is suddenly stunned into silence, because questions about purity, impurity, and karma are suddenly staring him in the face. And a quiet moment occurs when he suddenly realises that this young girl seems to know a lot more than he does. I never knew of Punnika. Why did we not all know about her? Why did we not hear of her children? Why did I not hear of Soyarabai as a young girl, why did I not hear of her, the fourteenth century Maharashtrian woman mystic, who says: “If menstrual blood makes me impure, / Tell me who has not been born of that blood?” Why had I not heard of her? Even though I am a Tamilian, why had I not heard of Shenkottai Avudai Akkal, an eighteenth-century mystic? She is a Brahmin child widow, and it would have been a life of great seclusion. She has an encounter with a wandering spiritual teacher

and her life is transformed. In poem after poem, she asks questions about why menstruation is impure, why ideas of ritual impurity exist. And she says that if the idea that saliva can be considered a source of contamination, then everything is impure. The first word, sound, and form, is impure. The *vedas* are impure because they arrive through the saliva of those who utter them. All of creation then based on this logic is contaminated. Why had I not heard of her? Why had I not heard of Janabai? To me it felt like these were women asking questions about everydayness. And everydayness is not something you need an algorithm to enter. It is a part of our lives. That is what Janabai tells us, and she has the gumption to make the leap from everydayness to the extraordinary. She says:

i eat god
i drink god,
i sleep on god

i buy god,
i count god,
i deal
with god

god is here
god is there
void is not
devoid of god

jani says:

god is within
god is without
and moreover
there's god is spare

She basks in surplus divinity while she is casually going about her home – eating, sleeping. This is what some of the finest female voices bring into the realm of sacred poetry. They remind us that the sacred is not up there; it is not remote and unattainable. You don't have to purify yourselves endlessly to reach this. It's right here and now. It is immediate. Which is why Sule Sankavva, this wonderful

prostitute poem of the twelfth century says that the men around her are unsurprising, and that her relationship with them is essentially transactional. But her god she says is *nirlajjeshwara*, a shameless god. You will never be judged by a shameless god. This is a god who will get his hands grimy and messy in the business of *samsara*. You don't have to purify yourselves to reach him. You don't have to become self-conscious speakers to read these voices and be touched by them. You just have to be willing to be surprised, to allow a poem to take you over, and lead you by its own logic. So that, you can see the moon and the mud in the very same frame, and see that they are not separate.

AK: But as I gather from the book and your answers, the social unrest is the point of beginning of a lifelong quest. Spiritualism that the bhakti poets – men or women – eventually lapse into or attain, actually starts from the everyday social discriminations and their entire relentless interrogation of the social hierarchies. So, I have gone through the bio-notes. Most of these women poets have faced some kind of social deficit and deprivation. So, spiritualism therefore is deeply rooted in the social. That it is the social unrest that actually propels them to look inwards and outwards as well.

AS: I think, I am not so sure. I'd say that the social unrest is a wonderful entry point for us when we encounter these poems. But I believe there are appetites for which we have no name, and I think the appetite for the sacred is one such appetite. It's a nameless longing. It's a longing for something you cannot quite define, and for a want of a better word, you sometimes end up calling it, a god with a name and form, a nameless god if you want, a shameless god if you want. But you end up calling it something. But that unappeasable hunger for something that you are not able to define, to me that is also an integral part of this journey. Which is why I mentioned Akkal, because I don't think this is a poetry of mere social reform. It comes from a place that suggests a woman who has not just been reformed, but one who has been transformed. And that transformation which is deep and radical, I believe comes from that unnameable place, which the Buddha himself did not name. He just said that when you internalise this deeply enough, it will come as a lion's roar. It is not the voice of a social reformer alone; I don't believe it is. I believe it is a much deeper voice than that.

There is a realm of mystery which makes these women more than mere social reformers. And that to me leads us to *bhakti* itself, which I think is such an overused, misused, maligned word. We are using it all of the time, so it has turned into this dreadfully mangled word. We forget that devotion is not pining, servility, servitude, or turning into a puddle of spinelessness at the feet of the guru or god. *Bhakti* is a very profound science of intimacy, and we don't know it. And perhaps the only way to know it is to experience it, and allow it to deepen you and transform you. Not being in too much of a hurry to give it a name. *Bhakti* is not about uncritical surrender at all. Women here are passionate, argumentative sometimes, erotic, they are "wild." So, we come to that question of "why wild?" And I say it is this. It's the fact that poetry is itself a subversive utterance.

Sacred poetry is even more subversive which we often don't realise. We think that religious poetry is about love songs to god. Right? Boring. And of course, some of it is terribly boring. I have spent much of my life gnashing my teeth on all the poems I have grown up with *nayikas* endlessly pining for their lord. They do nothing more than waiting for absent male lovers to come. And of course, when the male lover comes, and assuming he is god, when he comes, he is always unpunctual, unfaithful, he comes with tell-tale signs of his love making with other women. God must be promiscuous. And you have to take it. If this was female yearning, I wanted none of it. So, I was happy to throw that lot of poems out the window as far as I was concerned.

When I talk of sacred poetry today, I am talking about reclaiming those aspects of it that speak to me. Perhaps the most important thing I realised about yearning is that it is not passive. *Bhakti* is not passive. There is a reason why the protagonists in the second section are women. Because deeply implicit in this is the understanding that somewhere between endlessly doing and in order to achieve and simply passively waiting, there is a middle and third way. And that third way is one that turns yearning into something active. Yearning can be a radically alive state of stillness and receptivity. This yearning is being transformed into a new kind of self-possession where these women begin to self-discover that they are quite whole as they are.

AK: There is an unmistakable insistence on approaching the sacred hymns or *padas* as poems. And indeed, when you look at these poems you find all those conventional tropes and elements of poetry. There is irony, paradox, and a necessary climax. But don't you think 'sacred poetry' is an oxymoron in itself. Because poetry by its very nature is a secular form of art.

AS: I think poetry by its very nature can touch precisely this realm that I am calling indefinable. For want of a better word, we call it sacred. I agree with that entirely. Everything in that sense is capable of transforming us. You look at mud long enough, it can transform you. If you look at your lover for long, he/she can transform you. That is what I love about what I call sacred poetry. God becomes a wonderful device that you talk to, argue with. The idea that you can argue endlessly with this God. You can because you are intimate with him/her. You can hurl an abuse at this God, you can throw tantrum and call it a prayer. This is your license. But the God then becomes this device you can love and direct your passion towards. This is why Akka Mahadevi tells us:

Take these husbands who die,
decay and feed them
to your kitchen fires!

This is why Lal Ded says:

I pestled my heart in love's mortar,
I roasted it and ate it up.
I kept my cool but you can bet I wasn't sure
whether I'd live or die.

These are women who are using metaphors of kitchen. A kitchen can transform you too. They remind us that something else can go on in this kitchen and it is not the kind of food you and I might want to eat. It is dangerous. It is a sacred laboratory. So, this is what I believe the finest poets do in using this god as the interlocutor, the amoral presence in their life. We don't need to be believers to read this poetry. It is an invitation to drop persuasions of all kinds. I'd say use the word "sacred" as a provisional word. Use it, drop it. You don't have to be a believer or poet to read these poems. Let them wash over

you with a certain openness. No conclusions. The finest poetry never invites us to full stops, but always commas and pauses, and sometimes it just leaves us with a big question mark. And that is fine too.

AK: Coming to the anthology part. In the first part, you stop at Indira Devi. What happens to sacred poetry post-Indira Devi?

AS: It will perhaps be written by some of the people in the room. I wanted to stop with the twentieth century. If you go to the last section, which is the write-up to the twenty-first century. There are contemporary poets too. I wanted a sense of a journey that comes all the way to this moment and then leave it, and of course the rest of it is there for the rest of you to fill in.

AK: Your third section is about poetry, but I am talking about the march of the sacred in the twentieth century. That stops at Indira Devi, which looks to me a very abrupt kind of ending to this part. Because if sacred is a continuous tradition, it is part of everyday life.

AS: Akshaya, one has to stop somewhere with a book.

AK: I am curious to know. Are there mystic poets, post-Indira devi which you could not include for practical reasons?

AS: That's a good question. There are many contemporary women poets writing about using mythic figures in certain ways. That to me still does not constitute what I consider to be this kind of mystic poetry. Perhaps, I'd say, I see my own work very much in the literary tradition of poetry that recognises mystery in particular way. And that is sensitive, I hope, to the energetics of language and pause, sound and pause. Investigating sound and pause. You don't have to sit there and be bored. Poetry is not about me or who I am. It is about your life and every sound that you utter. Every pause that you are capable of, and every pause that you have in a conversation, perhaps unconsciously. It's just about growing more conscious. Everyday speech, just becoming more conscious of that. Where is it coming from? Which part of you is it coming from? I don't have to ask you if you understand this. You will know the difference.

AK: Even in the last section when you say, the twenty-first century, which for us is no less than a long nineteenth century. My point is that you pick up four poets, you even go beyond India to include a Sri Lankan and a Greek within that framework. Haven't you short circuited the trajectory?

AS: I think an anthology is a *thaali*. It will just give you multiple flavours you can taste. You can't do everything. And *Penguin* will perhaps excommunicate me. But I'd say that there is room for definite expansion if you want. There is a book that will happen hopefully next year, and it is a book of poems of my own. And I hope that in some way will pick up some of the threads that this anthology leaves.

AK: I could not come across this word, the 'divine feminine'. Have you used this word?

AS: I have tried to use it minimally.

AK: What is the strategy behind not using this phrase in a conspicuous manner? I see many contemporary Indian women poets and translators like Mani Rao, Priya Sarukkai Chhabria, Karthika Nair, Tishani Doshi, and others are actually creating a '*shakti* cult of poetry' in ways which are unconsciously collaborative.

AS: Oh, I see! That would be another conversation where I see each one of these poets. I recently did an interview with someone around contemporary poets that I felt deeply drawn to. And I think Mani Rao's translation of the *Saundarya Lahari*, Kala Krishan Ramesh's poems to Murugan, and Karthika Nair's poems on the women of the Mahabharata. I see these as reclaiming women voices in ways that speak to me, and not sacred poets necessarily. Kala Krishana is not about women's voices except she is a woman, but she addresses Murugan as a very real living deity in her poems. So, to me, these voices and works have mattered. At this point, I want to read a poem from *Wild Women* to give the audience a flavour of the tone and content of the verses included in the book, but I am not sure what to read.

AK: Read a poem.

AS: Here is Nammalvar. You know when I was talking to you earlier about why these women *bhakti* poets are called as ‘wild women’. To me they are wild because poetry itself is wild. It asks dangerous questions. Sacred poetry even more so, because it overturns the hierarchy between human and divine. And when women take on those questions, it becomes strictly dangerous. So, here is Nammalvar saying:

You have all heard Meera talking about being Baawri

Right? One crazy woman. What does that really mean? To my mind, Nammalvar gives us an answer when he speaks of a young girl’s mother who is telling her neighbours, “I don’t know what’s happened to her. She has just gone crazy.”

It goes on:

My girl, who’s just learning to speak
says,
‘I’m beyond all learning.
I’m all the learning that you learn.’
‘I’m the cause of all learning,
I end all learning,
I’m the essence of all learning
says she.

To me this is an example of the ‘wild woman’ as ‘wise woman’. What seems to happen to this girl is state of divine possession, says her mother. Something has changed deeply in this young girl. She is no longer the girl her mother knew. I feel this is what the wild women always point us to. That there is really no way to journey into the deepest parts of ourselves without acknowledging the wild in some way. There is a call of the wild that each one of us has to heed. That means being willing to take risks, being willing to ask some tough questions. Not just of the world, but first of yourself. It is about self-implication at its deepest level. And yet there are rewards. The wild woman becomes the wise woman.

AK: Are you attempting a manual of Indian feminism?

AS: I am contented hanging around poems that make me happy, poems that excite me, poems that speak to me deeply, women who take my breath away. I just wish I had known of them Akshaya. They would have rescued me many times over in the past. It helps so much to know that one is not alone. That these questions are not questions that we are asking for the first time because we are so different and live in the age of information technology, and we are original. No, we are not. We are not. The very same questions, preoccupations, and bewilderments have existed all down the ages.

AK: Last question from my side. This kind of conversation is open-ended. This question might look little out of place. Is the category of 'woman' any longer secure?

AS: Elaborate.

AK: Because you know, we teach our students Judith Butler and all other people who say that the whole idea of sisterhood is deeply problematic, and this idea of gender and sex is implicated in all kinds of performative practices. Did you ever interrogate, or did you have the occasion to interrogate the sexual orientation of the poets you included as 'woman poets' in this anthology?

AS: As I say in the second section of the book, the poems that excite me are the poems that lead me to places where definitions begin to melt. Where identities begin to dissolve, where hierarchies begin to fall apart. So, there is a reason why I am drawn to those poems. We don't know where God ends and the human begins. This is why Radha can kick Krishna out of bed. This is why Narsi Mehta, the Gujarati poet, has the Gopi tying Krishna's arms to the bed post. She will not let him get away:

To the foot of the bed I'll fasten your arms.

You are the gardener, I the flowering vine:
Why plant me if you will not water me?
You are the honey bee seduced by my love,
You, dying in the fragrance of my lotus heart.
To the foot of the bed
I'll fasten your arms

All this is possible. These would seem like transgressive acts if we believed that our Gods were just meant to be worshipped at altars alone. These transgressions are possible because it is relationship of such intimacy. Rupa Bhavani, seventeenth century Kashmiri poet, she says: “On Shiva’s path, becomes Shiva Himself.” You are not looking any longer to simply worship the divine, you are looking to embody the divine. When that happens, you are going to be led to places where nothing makes sense. This is why all of us effortlessly understand why Bulleh Shah dresses as a woman and wears dancing bells. We know that when it comes to intimacy, anything is possible. We don’t know who we are when we are in intimate relationships. I do believe that the finest female protagonists of these poems, and the finest female poets, lead us to these liminal places. Where we don’t wear ourselves rigidly. We are willing to wear ourselves the way we want to wear ourselves. As an answer to that, let me read you this very short poem by my favourite from today, that is Rupa Bhavani:

I have not bowed, I never will
The one who listens
Is resplendent, within me
That is worship, that’s what I do

AK: One poem I will also like to read. This is by Janabai translated by Arun Kolatkar, my all-time favourite

god, my darling
do me a favour and kill my mother-in-law

i will feel lonely when she is gone
but you will be a good god, won’t you
and kill my father-in-law

i will be glad when he is gone
but you will be good god won’t you
and kill my sister-in-law

i will be free when she is gone
I will pick up my begging bowl
and be on my way

let them drop dead says jani
then we will be left alone
just you and me

So, let us now have some questions, comments and observations from the alert and responsive audience here.

Audience 1: You mention that *bhakti* is a profound science of intimacy. I consider, so is poetry. But later on in the conversation, you also mention that poetry is supposed to be consumed in a way which makes you pause, sit, and not understand. So, in case something is supposed to make you feel intimate in a way, how are we supposed to consume that without understanding?

AS: I would have to write many paragraphs to explain that god can be sublime, and can be seen in the transcendent and imminent all at once. Big words. I don't think I will have to use any of these words, and you will understand it entirely. We all recognise an utterance that is borne of the heated intimacy. Where we know that a person can be master and slave, all at once. Basically, where we know that all hierarchies are redundant. Right? That's what poetry can do. It can lead you right there to a naked, wild experience of that moment without anyone having to explain to you what it is about. I think that is why poems work. It is a highly distilled utterance that takes you right there, to the heat of the moment. It speaks to you differently. You recognise and understand it without me saying anything. The poem says it much better than I ever could.

Audience 2: How do you perceive human desire? In the sensuality of these women, does sexuality also come there? How are they projecting it towards that god we are talking about?

AS: What do these poems bring? For one, they acknowledge body. They acknowledge the fact that it is fallible, finite, but that it is also capable of something miraculous. It seems not just an impediment that has to be transcended. It is an instrument of the divine. It is the very site of the sacred. It cannot be wished away or side-stepped. They bring us face to face with that body. I would say that desires, as most of know, in some way have to be confronted and acknowledged,

and only then do they undergo the fire of transformation at some point. This is essentially about deconditioning desires. So much of human desire is conditioned desire. How do we peel away all that is conditioned and speak of what is the earliest fires that we know of? Hunger, thirst, the deep greed for the other. How do we speak of those appetites? The best poetry takes us there. I would say that's where the human meets the divine, where we are no longer talking about doctored desire, and realising that what animates one part of our lives is no different from what animates another. I think peeling away centuries of conditioning is also part of the journey of any spiritual seeker.

AK: Let us fold the session, and thank the poet and editor Arundhathi for giving us a chance to have a feel of her new book *Wild Women*. We are sure that this book will trigger new debates across disciplines.



Traversing with *Chai*: A Scrutiny of *Chai Chai* as a Train Travelogue

Dr. Komal Yadav*

Abstract

The significance of the train can be emphasised by the fact that the train in India is posited metaphorically as the representation of the nation, symbolising its perennial ambition for progress and continuity. Keeping the significance of the train in mind in the Indian landscape, the paper endeavors to engage with the cultural analysis of the train travelogue *Chai Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get off* (2009) by Biswanath Ghosh. The paper contends that Biswanath Ghosh uses train as the liminal and heterotopic space to underline the polyphonic realities of India. By experimenting with the concept of ‘Non-Place’ and ‘Travel Glance,’ Ghosh debunks the traditional ways of journeying and destination. This paper is an attempt to outline the narrative methods of Biswanath Ghosh in the train travelogue to understand the contemporary trends in Travel writings. It is divided into two parts. Part I is an attempt to underline the cultural significance and relevance of train travelogue in contemporary India. Part II seeks to delineate the ways in which Ghosh destabilises the established and popular ways of journeying.

Keywords: Liminal Space, Non-Place, Travel Glance, Journeying

Introduction

Chai Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get off (2009) gained its acclaim from the time it was put on shelves – as “a delightful travelogue with a difference” (Paperback Pickings). The train travelogue reads like an anthropological survey of railway junctions and small towns near the stations. Suffused with historical details of their foundation, naming, socio-cultural practices, and anecdotes, Ghosh attempts to write about the presence and role of

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small-town India and thereby underlines their contribution to the nation.

The paper envisages that the Indian train can be read as a liminal and heterotopic space that embraces multitude, cultural interaction and assimilation. Etymologically, the word 'liminal' derives its meaning from the Latin word *Limen*, which means "a threshold," coined by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909. In his seminal text, *The Rites of Passage*, Gennep affiliates the concept of liminal with rites of passage, which signifies the ritual of transition of a group or an individual in a certain amount of time in small societies. "This change in phase can be identified with change in status, change in location, situation from childhood to adolescence and adulthood" (Dubey 321). Gennep introduces the ritual ceremonies of transition into a tripartite structure – separation, transition, and incorporation.ⁱ Scrutinised in the light of Gennep's argument, the Indian train can be foregrounded as a liminal space which is a true exemplar of a culture of transience. In the liminal space of the train, unfamiliar cultures are brought into interaction and assimilation, and a new form of identity emerges. As the passengers from different cultures and religions board the train, they inhabit this in-between space, questioning the prominence of domain culture. As the train is in the process of becoming, so are its passengers because the passengers are experiencing a new socio-cultural set-up and constantly witness the landscape in alteration with the train's motion. Biswanath Ghosh notices this in the prologue, "the journeys are not just about the levelling, but also about getting acquainted with each other's cultures, especially food habits. . . . the story here is that the railways are not just a means of transport, but the circulatory system of India. No railways, no India" (3).

In the liminal space of the train, the passenger is traversing the unfamiliar terrain of culture, linguistics, and geography. During the train's journey, the passengers interact with their co-passengers and take cultural hints. Interestingly, however, along with the transience of the train, their self is also translated. This scenario is best captured in another Indian train travelogue, *Around India in 80 Trains*, by Monisha Rajesh. She notes: "An Indian train ticket was a permit to trespass on the intimacies of other people's lives, and certain improprieties became instantly acceptable" (qtd. in Dubey 132).

Therefore, the paper reads the space of the train and the halts it takes as a liminal space that allows co-habitation, further reflecting upon the multitudinous multiplicity of the culture of an Indian nation-state as enumerated by Foucault's idea of Heterogeneity.

In *Of Other Spaces*, Michel Foucault makes space understandable by dissecting it in two sites – utopia and heterotopia. Utopia is a “placeless place,” whereas heterotopia is described as “a simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (Foucault 24). One of the central principles of the space of heterotopia is the heterogeneity and co-existence of otherness. Read in this light, a train can be analysed as a heterotopic place – as the structure of the train is such where others are both included and accepted. For instance, Biswanath Ghosh, in the travelogue, notes, “India can have no better symbol for national integration than the railways. . . . A millionaire who travels in a first-class air-conditioned compartment to maintain his exclusivity is forced to share the makeshift bedroom with a much poorer countryman. The latter happens to be travelling on office expense” (2). As Foucault argues, heterotopia encompasses multiple spaces and “the power to juxtapose in a single real space several spaces. These several emplacements are in themselves incompatible” (qtd. in Dubey 323). Railway stations though fixed and stationary compared to the mobile train, these emplacements serve as a contact zone where unfamiliar cultures can flow easily. As Ghosh notes, especially in North India, these emplacements serve as “home-cum-workplace-cum-club” (51). Also, as Siddharth Dubey mentions, “[railway stations], become the primary ingredient to witness the primordial version of the dominant culture of the place it represents” (324).

The heterotopic space of the train destabilises the dominant form of culture, as the train, especially in India, is instrumental in integrating the nation. As the people of different cultures, ethnicities and religions alight and de-board the train from various places in India, this structuring problematise the prominence of one culture over the other as it is constitutive of a new culture of accumulation created within the train and familiarise its cultural scape with the new and foreign culture.

Railway Junctions and Non-Place

Biswanath Ghosh's train travelogue *Chai Chai* is a groundbreaking work in post-liberalisation travel writing in India. By focusing on the transit points, railway junctions and the establishment of small towns thriving on the economy generated by the railways, the travelogue destabilises the centrality of place and travelling self, poetic license of the traveler and use of eye and gaze as the dominant trope of travel writing. By foregrounding non-places like railway Junctions and using the concept of travel glance, Ghosh intervenes in the dominant trends of travel writings and attempts to write back the ignored sites with a sense of history. Contrary to the contemporary trend in travel writing, Biswanath Ghosh subverts the prominence of place in the travelogue to draw attention to the process and medium of the journey and undermines the importance of the destination. The railway and its junctions are not just used as a framework in the travelogue; instead, it unfolds as a structural part of the narrative. The travelogue covers six railway junctions in its journey from north to south, reflecting a cross-section of society. Ghosh notes, "I had by now, travelled about half the breadth and almost the entire length of the country. If I were to join with a pencil the towns I had visited during the past few months, I would be drawing a crude 'S' on the map of India" (211). Biswanath Ghosh uses the space of the compartment to understand the cultural dynamics of the places travelled. *Chai Chai* reflects more on being on a train and the halts that trains take to reach any significant destination. It notes:

Railway station! It can be the most frustrating place on earth and also the most fascinating. Right now, it was fascination that was powering me as I made my way through a multitude of sleeping people and several dogs and a few cows to buy a platform ticket.
(107)

The question of place and space has always remained central to anthropology as the inquiry of culture, society, and identity depends on it. Traditionally, ethnography has foregrounded the romantic version of place as a faraway exotic locale, unchanged and un-misted by "the pollution of Modernity," "rooted in the intact soil, and kept up by the archaic and exotic rituals of the Indigenous."ⁱⁱⁱ In contrast,

spaces are created by super modernity and practices of spatial production, which Marc Auge terms non-places.ⁱⁱⁱ By engaging closely with the representation of (non) places in *Chai-Chai*, the chapter attempts to problematise the traditional boundaries of places and spaces. It argues that the concept of the place has to be reconsidered as a space that is not bounded or indigenous. Instead, it is a heterogeneous, political, conflictual space where identity and culture are constantly in formation. The study seeks to destabilise the absoluteness of place and non-place to underscore that non-places can convert into places and vice versa if subjectivity is considered. It is paramount to revisit the configuration of place, space and non-place as it offers insight into why “places are deeply historical and open to the challenges of human interaction.”^{iv} This will further help in what Appadurai argues “to shift the history of ethnography from a history of neighbourhoods to a history of technologies of the production of locality, and think through again the colonial intervention of academic, travellers, anthropologist, linguist and tourist in the production of indigenous categories.”^v

Auge defines non-place as opposed to a place where humans are presented as anonymous individuals without identifying themselves with the space. Non-places, according to Auge, are localities that “come to existence by virtue of being relational, deeply historical and intimately connected to identity, both social and individual. It is where history erupts in the form of a site-specific event, landscape erupts as the loci of the intensified relationships between humans and the world.”^{vi} On deeper scrutiny, non-places are restricted and governed spaces where human action and body are under surveillance. The nature of non-place in that sense resembles supermodernity characterised by impatience, control, security, and acceleration of time.

Maximiliano Korstanje, in his analysis of the non-place, underlines the involvement of the status quo in the differentiation of place from non-place. He problematises the acceptance of the idea of non-place by arguing that “by formulating that a place, which produces rights and persons, passes to be a non-place, we are assuming they create non-persons and non-rights” (92). Also, Korstanje highlights the need to rethink the idea of place and space, keeping in mind the third world as he says, “in the third world, non-

places such as malls, train or subway stations are dwelled by homeless and vagabonds” (Korstanje 85). Individuals construct and reconstruct the places on an everyday basis. Therefore, only anthropological mobilities cannot determine what a place means. Also, “thinking mass consumption places as non-places serves as an ideological mechanism to mark and surveillance undesired 'others' who are excluded from the capitalist ethos” (Korstanje 86).

The narrative unfolds with the description of the railway station wrapped in anonymity, undisturbed by the local tradition and culture. For instance, Ghosh notes, “Railway stations in India stand like fiercely independent states within cities and towns, insulated from the local flavor as if they are territories of a common colonial master sitting in Delhi, which they are anyway” (1). At the beginning of his journey, readers are treated with descriptions of a railway station occupied by the sea of humanity indifferent to each other. The earlier description of the railway station qualifies what Marc Auge calls a non-place. Auge considers hotels, airports, and train stations as examples of non-places that stand in contrast with ‘anthropological space,’ which provide the space to the people that empower their identity. Whereas, non-place are spaces that lack any social references; therefore, anonymity is the dominant sense ruling this space. Auge hypothesis that spaces sans anthropological places and do not integrate themselves with other places. Non-places, he posits, are “listed, classified, promoted” to the status of “places of memory, and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position” (Read 4). So, while anthropological places create the organically social, non-place create solitary contractuality” (Read 2).^{vii}

However, as Biswanath Ghosh started observing various railway stations in his journey, the travelogue offers a critique of the concept of non-place. For example, Marc Auge depicts non-places as lacking tradition and history. The travelogue ruptures this postulate by positing the railway station as a place that has become part of personal history and folklore. Auge himself argues that both places and non-places are places of the imagination. For instance, Ghosh notes, “these junctions have become a landmark in the lives of long-distance passengers . . . for such passengers, these junctions are now part of their personal history . . . yet these junctions, even though they bind the extreme corners of India, are hardly ever mentioned other

than in the context of train travel. That is because as towns, they are too small to matter to you. They too must be having stories to tell—just that nobody ever steps out of the station yard to listen” (Ghosh 4).

The second thesis of non-places is that it is a place of transience lacking any sense of social interaction, identity, and tradition. In the travelogue, Ghosh postulates this place as a cultural space of history, struggle and protest. For instance, to underline a sense of familiarity and continuity of tradition, Ghosh mentions an episode of interaction with Jeevan Lal, a caretaker in the Indian Railways having a family history of serving on the railway. This episode posits the railway station as an emotionally charged space and presents the conversion of a non-place into a place for Jeevan Lal's family.

Ghosh notes, “There is nothing here now, except the railway station,” he said. “The steam locomotives were all dismantled and bundled away in trucks. I saw that happening in front of my eyes. So what remains?” (109). The nostalgia and the emotion that the railway station evokes for Jeevan Lal are further reflected when he is mourning the loss of an earlier version of the railway station. His description of the railway junctions reveals an alternate picture where he describes junction as “a break from the monotony of a long journey” (113). However, in the twenty-first century, “most long-distance trains have transformed into self-sufficient, mobile towns . . . the railways no longer need these junctions, but the towns that have grown around these junctions badly need the railways” (113).

Biswanath Ghosh describes that for the residents of the small towns located near the railway station, a railway station is significant for its economy, but the inception and identity of the town are dependent upon the railway station. The railway station has affinities and a sense of familiarity for the people of the small towns. To quote, “in the logical scheme of things, you first have a town and then- a railway station . . . but towns like Guntakal, Mughal Sarai and Itarsi came up only after the railways set up their junctions there” (146); furthermore, Biswanath Ghosh himself feels a sense of connection with the station when he says “[through] his annual trips from Kanpur to Calcutta . . . another piece of lost childhood was catching up” (9).

Marc Auge argues that non-places are conferred with homogeneity and anonymity because of their lack of social interaction. Initially, the travelogue asserts the sameness of the railway station so much so that it is a task to recognise one from another. For instance, Ghosh notes, "Such is the sameness that if you were to ignore the yellow slab and all other signboards that identify a railway station, you would barely know where you are. All you would know is that you are in a country where tea is available round the clock and whose inhabitants have two primary occupations-travelling and waiting" (1). However, the perception with which Ghosh begins his journey is later altered when he delineates each station's different nature and experience. For example, the railway station of Mughal Sarai is described as "the fountainhead of all evils. Pickpockets roamed the place. Ticket Examiners were into extortion, preying on poor and voiceless passengers. Vendors were hand in glove with the railway officers. Policemen were hand in glove with the pickpockets" (32). In contrast, he finds the Guntakal junction as "frozen in time." Ghosh describes this junction as "pleasant looking" – "it was one of the most pleasant-looking railway stations I had ever set foot on-clutter free, crowd-free, and standing innocently in the middle of barren land" (141). Ghosh further notes that "so old fashioned is the place that to get out of the station, you will have to walk down the platform and cross a railway track by foot to reach the parking area where autorickshaw would be waiting in the queue" (141). Interestingly, this is a place where the railway station is considered monumental. Whereas, Arakkonam "resembled any characterless suburb of Chennai . . . where ugly concrete structures had sprung up overnight to accommodate the spillover from the city's population" (172). It is due to these noticeable differences that Ghosh points out "presumptions and conclusion are two railway stations that are miles apart. Yet, there are times when we mistake one for the other. The blunder dawns upon us only after the train has left" (173).

Lastly, as Maximiliano Korstanje points out, considering the places of mass consumption as non-place becomes a tool of othering and surveillance where unacceptable others are denied access to these places. This ideology underlines the status quo of anthropology, which fails to consider how the third world modifies and inhabits the place. As Korstanje notes, places like railway stations and bus

stations become dwellings for thousands of vagabonds and the homeless in the third world. Their dwelling in the non-place turns into it a place. So the question that needs consideration is how far non-places can become places? At the various juncture in the travelogue, Ghosh illustrates the scenes outside the railway station, reflecting how the people dwelling outside are otherised because they are not part of mass consumption. Also, their constant presence in these places raises the basic tenet of the concept of non-place. For example, Ghosh describes the scene of the platform at Mughal Sarai as “the platform resembled a large ward of government hospitals, with dozens of people scattered around on impoverished beds- on the floor, by the walls, on the benches. They all looked numbed and weary as if reeling under an epidemic or a natural calamity” (8). Also, Ghosh notes that “there are two things you prepare yourself for a while stepping out of a railway station in India . . . the horde of autorickshaw drivers and rickshaw-pullers who almost grab you by the arm in their eagerness to take you to your destination. The other is the clutter around it: cheap hotels...dilapidated houses that must be standing from the time the station received its first train” (56). Thus, the travelogue delineates the passengers in transit and places in transience that are accepted and inclusive of the people, especially in the third world, who are otherised by hypermodernity's spatial and temporal boundaries.

Therefore, *Chai-Chai* critiques the celebrated idea of non-place of anthropology by underlining its shortcomings – as it fails to take into account the inhabitation of place by the third world and the question of subjectivity. As what is a place for someone can be non-place for the other person.

(Un)Romanticising Destinations

Indian literature has myriad ways of engagement with the railways seeing it as a reminder of colonisation and India's tryst with modernity. Writers like R.K Narayan have attempted to script railway into Indian consciousness in his famous work *Malgudi Days*. As Cronin argues that “the economy of [Narayan's] fiction depends on the fact that Malgudi has a ‘little railway station’. Trains stop at Malgudi, newcomers arrive and disrupt the dreamy contentment of Narayan's Heroes. Without their intrusion, the novels would have no

plot, and more than that, they would have no point” (Cronin 77). The figure of the train assumes a place of significance in the Indian popular imaginary where it explodes with a plethora of emotions – that of horrors of partition, displacement and migration, a reminder of colonial rule and modernity and interconnectivity.

Traditionally, the genre of a travelogue delineates the cultural and linguistic practices of the place of dwelling. The focus is centred on and around the traveller's destination, which in most cases is pre-decided. The emphasis in the travelogue is not on the medium and journeying but on exploring the places of destination. As a train travelogue, *Chai Chai* digresses from the popular ways of travelling to famous destinations. The travelogue subverts the trope of 'popular' by underlining how the places acquire a particular character as something unchangeable and static as they become 'popular.' Ghosh juxtaposes the two small towns of Benares and Mughal Sarai to delineate how mass consumerism in some places changes the entire outlook of how and where we travel. “Mughal Sarai, even though its name gives off a whiff of history, is unlikely to interest anyone unless you have routinely passed its railway station during childhood- a time when you read about the Mughal emperors and when names of places inspire larger-than-life-images . . . Benares . . . but the moment you identify the river and the town, the earth under your feet becomes worthy of worship. Unlike other places whose history is measured in years, Benares has defied time: its history is as enchanting as and entwined with that of the gods” (49).

Usually, destinations and places of dwellings have enjoyed the privilege of description in travel writing. The halts like airports, railway stations, and bus stations have not received much scrutiny except for the passing reference as a point of transit. As the travelogue notes: “It is impossible to imagine these places are populated towns where people go about their daily lives just like people do elsewhere. That is because these places have never been their destiny but only the gateways to their destinations” (6). Biswanath Ghosh introduces a new layer in the travelogue by centring the narrative on the railway station and foregrounding their description in historical contexts. Form them being celebrated as transit points; *Chai Chai* presents these places as embedded in history and, therefore, present them as a place modifying and re-framing the

way identities are formed in relation to the nation. To illustrate, during his journey in Mughal Sarai, Biswanath Ghosh attempts to imagine “how the place must have looked during Sher Shah Suri” (15). From Mughal Sarai only being a halt station, Ghosh attaches a sense of history by describing it as a place “[that] used to be the biggest railway marshalling yard in Asia and a prominent coal market- and was also the birthplace of India's second prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri” (17). Similarly, while describing Mughal Sarai Ghosh underlines the historical importance of the place by indicating “old Grad Trunk Road-the lifeline of India, the highway of the Hindi Heartland, the tar thread that runs along the Gangetic plain to connect Punjabi aggression with Bengali intellect” (7). Not only that, Ghosh, while delineating the small towns, indicates how these small towns use the local to negotiate the global. This attempt at once questions the celebrated idea of modernity, which only considers the city and its methodologies indicative of the nation’s progress. Ghosh notes, “I had not seen a single hoarding or a poster of a Hindi film in Mughal Sarai. I had been reading about the boom in the Bhojpuri film industry, but I had no idea that it had elbowed out Bollywood stars from this stretch of Hindi Heartland” (40).

Similarly, Jhansi, which is considered a small halt for passengers, Ghosh brings forth the historicity of the city known for its brave queen-Rani Laxmi Bai. The encroachment of the modern ways of being on the local gets reflected when Ghosh talks about the fort of Jhansi. Ghosh notes, “It sat on a mound like a giant tortoise, but dwarfed by cellular phone towers that dominated the landscape around it- a perfect example of the past resigning to the present” (75). Ghosh offers an alternative vision of the small towns famous for their services. Ghosh records, “Jhansi, for them, meant a railway station with grimy wooden benches on which people waited for hours for connecting trains. For me, Jhansi was now an air-conditioned room with a clean, comfortable bed on which I was going to sleep and dream of my trip to the land of Kama Sutra” (79). Ghosh even revisits the places famous in the popular imagination instilled by prominent writer of *Malgudi Days*. He brings out the real effect of the place by actually traversing it. “Since R.K Narayan, the writer, frequently travelled between Madras and Mysore, Jolarpetti finds a passing mention in one of the short stories in *Malgudi Days*” (177).

Secondly, Biswanath Ghosh further debunks the romantic association with travel writers when he shares an anecdote of meeting Paul Theroux, a renowned travel writer. “It was, however, a little disappointing to see Theroux in flesh and blood. In my romantic notion, a travel writer is never seen in public. He is always inaccessible to his readers, busy collecting material in a faraway, godforsaken land which you might never visit in your lifetime except through his books. He is not the one you would like to be face-to-face with: if you see him in real, you could end up looking for flaws in his personality that might take away from the flawlessness of his prose. Gods are best unseen” (139). Ghosh presents the travel writer as a flesh and blood character and, therefore, susceptible to follies and subjective interpretation. Interestingly, Ghosh, like Pankaj Mishra in *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*, writes back the body of the travel writer in the narrative. This is a counter move on the part of Indian travel writers to question the scientific detachment Western travel writers maintain by obfuscating the body in the travel narrative or describing it as a transcendental experience.

Lastly, the train travelogue has offered new ways of narrating the travelling experience. Even though 'I' is still the dominant voice, the introduction of dialogues has bridged the chasm between fiction and travel writing. Furthermore, unlike the traditional travel narrative, the behaviour of the subject is not predicted as the subjects on the train are random and constantly keep on changing with every new destination. It, therefore, provides a new perspective in travel writing as “the reader is expected to believe that such conversations which apparently transcend a language barrier are recorded rather than invented” (Dubey 235). Furthermore, it subverts the travel writer's dominant authority and ability to record and narrativise.

Therefore, by traversing what is popularly known as transit points and writing a sense of history in smaller towns concerning the nation, Ghosh problematises the established notion of travelogue, which privileges the place of dwelling and destination and offers a place an alternative way of journeying. As “these are the towns that don't mean a thing to you because you never get down there, but at the same time, they mean a world to you because no train journey is complete without these. They are irrelevant, yet they are a ritual” (211).

Travel Glancing the Landscape

The introduction of the railway in the early 19th century overturned the relationship between space and time. Railway travel “annihilated space and time” by quickly completing the traditionally covered amount of travel, introducing a noticeable ‘shrinking of space.’ Train narratives have mainly focused on the co-passenger and the travelling landscape, which is surveyed through the mechanised visual window in the train. Monisha Rajesh asserts:

Trains were my escape, my ticket out of the city. They allowed me to curl up in comfort as my surrounding slipped away. Unlike air travel, a cramped clinical affair conducted in recycled air, causing bad tempers and bad breath, a train travel invited me to participate.
(8)

There has been a long relationship between travel and visuals, as evident from the beginning of the Grand Tour. As David Bissell argues, “visual has been an axiomatic way of comprehending the experience of travel” (42). The focus on vision and visuals in contemporary mobilities will provide us with multiple ways of journeying. Therefore, it becomes imperative to deconstruct the different ways of visualising and experiencing the landscape from the mobile train. Especially the train, as Larsen notes, “The train's sensuous economy privileges seeing over other senses” (91). The architecture of the train made of steel and glass has changed how we visualise the everyday. The outside is seen and perceived differently from the different arrangements of seats in the compartment. The question that invites attention is whether there exists any relationship between visual and mobility. Secondly, how does the materiality and construction of the carriage serve and mediate how we look?

Train travel has inaugurated new ways of experiencing landscape which ultimately opens up the discussion on the new ways of seeing and modes of perception. David Bissell notes how the journey through the landscape with the new speed of the train has reconfigured the connection between people and the landscape. As “through this time-space compression and the annihilation of space, people could travel further distances in even shorter times, thus

changing passenger's routine perceptions of time and space" (Stein 42). With new travelling technology, the new modes of perceiving the landscapes and their visualisation emerged 'filtered' through "the mechanic ensemble of the train" (Stein 45). The train window becomes a new way of systematical observation of the landscape and its mobile qualities. Ghosh in *Chai Chai* notes, "The train had now picked up speed and hills started appearing on the horizons, but before you could fix your gaze on them, the hills would be suddenly gone and replaced by lush green fields. Moreover, they would reappear after a while and disappear again. Then it came upon a short stretch when you look out of the left window, you saw the brown of barrenness, but when you looked out of the right window, the greenery of the fields dazzled your eyes. The train ran like an animal that had lost its way in the confusing topography and was desperately trying to find it out" (138).

John Urry further notes that the panorama offered by the mobile landscape from the train window changed the perception and 'public mobilization.' To opt for this mode of travelling increase the diversity of landscape for their visual experience. In the beginning, the train and the mobility it facilitated were perceived as "shocking speed machines," which problematised the whole notion of distance, speed and time. He further introduced the concept of 'Travel Glance' as opposed to the Gazing practice. The "mobility of vision" (Schivelbusch 97) that the train provides is a paradigmatic example of travel glance. While the tourist gaze is a static photographic way of seeing, the travel glance provides a visual cinematic-like experience of moving landscape images to the mobilised yet (im)mobile spectatorship. To quote, "the mobile travel glance provides a visual "cinematic experience" of moving landscape images to the travelling yet corporally immobile "armchair spectator." Thus, travel glance will be captured through the metaphor of cinema" (Larsen 82).

The train's "automization of sight" and "domestication of nature" have progressively increased with continuous modernisation. The train offers a hypersensual seeing experience, which purposely governs all the other senses. In this sense, we can understand their mobility machines as simultaneous vision machines.

Conclusion

Chai Chai as a train travelogue emerges as a ground-breaking work in contemporary travel writings as it unsettles the presumed ways of journeying to places, dwelling in destinations and recordings of travel. The travelogue underlines a unique approach to journeying and further opens the debate on the relevance of travel writing in contemporary times.

Endnotes

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Ecology, Literature and the Sense of Place: Floods in Colonial Odisha, 1907–1937

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Abstract

Ecology was one of the most discussed public issues in Odisha in the early decades of the twentieth-century. The rivers in the region flooded time and again, and brought starvation and epidemics in their wake. Appropriate response to these unprecedented devastations became the subject of public discussions. This paper adopts an eco-critical conceptual lens and studies how some of these literary as well as non-literary discourses about the floods, in English as well as Odia, helped construct a sense of place.

Keywords: Floods, Odisha, Ecology, Imperial-Global, Anti-colonial Nationalism, Colonial Journalism, Popular Tracts.

Introduction

Contemporary discussions in eco-criticism underline an understanding of place as relational.ⁱ A place is relational in the sense that it is embedded in networks of “power and relations” that go beyond its “immediate geographical boundaries.”ⁱⁱ Having said that, the relational understanding of place also makes some room for its material and geographical aspects without regressing into the problems of territorialism.ⁱⁱⁱ It makes room for a sense of “belonging to the local as familiar and tangible,” and pays attention to “the ecological materiality of place as a geographical and biological region.”^{iv}

Drawing upon some of these insights, the paper argues that floods in Odisha came to be embedded in three interrelated networks of relations—imperial-global, nationalist and local, and gathered

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around them diverse imaginaries of the place. The first mobilised what can be described as a political-aesthetic of human and material trace to create imperial-global awareness about the ecological devastations in the colony. The nationalist politicisation of ecology, among other accomplishments, marked the region as irredeemably poor so as to imagine a pan Indian public that is generous and philanthropic towards Odisha. Finally, local literary engagements, in high as well as popular genres, worked to envision a social body that is suitable to inhabit the ecologically sensitive bio-region.

Ecology and Imperial-Global Journalism

Next day I returned to Jenapur, and mounted a large elephant, which, sad to say, could heartily enjoy a daily meal that would keep any Hindu in prime condition for six weeks. As upon a watch-tower, for the next few days I passed up and down the long line of flat country that had been flooded beside the Brahmani, sometimes crossing over into the basin of the Kharsua, another of the uncertain rivers that alternately save and devastate the land. Where it was not devastated, the country was thickly cultivated in little fields of rice, pulse and a kind of millet, and the numbers of planted mango-trees gave it much the same look as an elm-row part of Essex or the Midlands.^v

Ecocriticism, scholars argue, aims to formulate a judgment on the extent and manner in which a literary text works to create awareness about and intervention in ecological concerns.^{vi} Henry W. Nevinson's "Floods of Orissa" espoused precisely this aesthetic-political task at the turn of the nineteenth-century in the midst of an imperial-global world system. A late Victorian journalist, Nevinson toured through the imperial-global space and wrote about it in leading British newspapers of the day. He travelled through India, South Africa, Greece, Angola, Russia, the Balkans, Gallipoli and Ireland. His pieces featured in the *Daily Chronicle*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Daily News* and the *Nation*. His biographer has argued, "A lifetime of international reportage accorded Henry Nevinson a privileged position in observing the uneven shifts towards democratic rights across the globe. In turn his perspectives illuminate the gradual

dismantling of the old and the shaping of the modern world order.”^{vii} Thus, Nevinson landed in India in October 1907 on behalf of the British press with the brief to “discover the causes of the present discontent and to report, without prejudice, the opinions of leading Indians as well as officials.”^{viii} The “present discontent” included the economic condition of the peasantry and the growth of a national consciousness. In course of his tours through India, Nevinson met G. K. Gokhale, B. G. Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose, and others. He wrote about the *ryotwari* system in Madras and Bombay presidencies, and joined the crowds at Marina beach celebrating the release of Lala Lajpat Rai and heard them sing the Vande Mataram.^{ix} He visited Odisha, and delivered a speech to about four thousand people in an open-air congregation at Cuttack. He spoke of the recent floods that devastated the region.^x

He also wrote about it. Published in 1908, *The New Spirit in India* is a travelogue of his journeys through India. It includes a long chapter on the floods in Odisha. The extract, which serves as the epigram to the section, briefly delineates the political-aesthetic Nevinson mobilised to create imperial-global awareness about the ecological devastations. The pairing of the elephant and the Hindu, the comparison between the coastal plains of Odisha and the plains of the Midlands, and the traveller’s persona articulated in the investigating “I” are all markers of this political-aesthetic of the environment.

Two features of this political-aesthetic deserve particular attention. First, it mobilises both human and material “traces” to construct realist portraits of suffering. The floods invariably brought starvation and displacement in their wake. Nevinson pays particular attention to displaced and emaciated human bodies. These bodies serve as mere traces of the ordinary lives they led before the floods. “When I reached Orissa,” he writes, “the first sign I saw of the calamity was a band of thirty or forty brown skeletons crawling towards me as I stood in a garden at Cuttack.”^{xi} They had left their “ruined homes” on the banks of the Brahmani river, and were “looking for work or food” (137). Several hundreds of them were “wandering over the country...even as far as Calcutta” (137). “There is no need to describe a brown skeleton,” the narrator says (137). And

then goes on to describe it in detail – “the projecting ribs and spiny backbone, the legs and arms like withered sticks, the deep pits at the collar-bones, the loose and crinkly skin” (137). He also includes photographs to supplement the realism of his narrative (Fig. 1). As the unknown man stands in a pose with the arms raised, camera has an opportunity to catch and highlight his emaciated rib cage. Beneath him is his little bundle of belongings. A little further off in the background stands a woman with her little bundle on her hips. They were walking along their path before they were called in for a photograph. The man, the woman and their little bundles of belongings are but traces of the lives they led before the devastations.

The portraits also include material traces. Nevinson soon moves out from the urban space of Cuttack and goes into the banks of the Brahmani to carry out his investigations. Mounted atop the elephant, he finds material traces of the devastations long after they occurred. “In November,” he writes, “I could still trace the tidemark of the flood by tufts of dried grass and drift-wood sticking in the trees high above my head, as you may do in early summer on the banks of the Severn” (136). And again, “But in many of the villages that I visited neither flood nor drought will matter for many years. Sand like the seashore had covered crops, and fields, and boundaries, and homes in one indistinguishable desert.” (142). The tufts of dried grass and drift-wood stuck high in the trees, and fertile land and homestead turned into barren sand deserts are but traces of the bio-material life of the region before the floods.

Second, Nevinson’s political-aesthetic situates these portraits of suffering in relationship with three specific figures embedded in the realist narrative—the official mind, the native benevolent public-man, and the imperial-global reporter. The official mind, in the upper echelons, interpreted the ecological disaster in terms of statistics. Surrounded by “his barricades of reports, abstracts and regulations,” the British commissioner of the province furnished Nevinson “the official figures of distress, as far as was ascertained at the end of the third month after the disaster” (139). The statistics showed “an estimated area of 460 square miles affected by the flood, with a peasant population of over 300,000” (139). It also delineated the number of houses swept away, the volume of loss in cattle and horses,

the number of deaths from cholera in the wake of the flood, and the amount of rupees distributed in relief measures (139). In the lower corridors of power, the official mind was not favourably inclined to enquiries. A Bengali deputy magistrate he met along with a native public man was “evidently determined not to fall below the standard of European dignity,” and “Consequently...received...[them] with his legs on the long arms of his deck-chair . . .” (148-149). This “attitude,” “. . . he had observed as customary among English officials when they receive natives . . .” (149). In any case, whether in the upper or in the lower corridors, the official mind was doggedly determined to deny death by starvation. The “. . . official cause of death,” Nevinson writes, “is always some innocent and unavoidable sickness like cholera or ‘bowel complaint,’” and concludes that “the official mind has a rooted objection to starvation” (140).

If the official mind denied starvation, the benevolent native public man doggedly drew imperial-global attention to the precise reality of starvation. Madhusudan Das, the most prominent public man in Odisha at the turn of the century, drew the attention of the British public to the subject. The *Pall Mall Gazette* in London, for instance, reported a cablegram from him on the floods and the consequent devastations.^{xii} Das invited Nevinson to Odisha and accompanied him on his tours in the flood-affected regions. On the one hand, Nevinson writes, Das was “almost worshipped as the saint of Orissa by the poor among his countrymen” (148). On the other hand, Das “appeared to act on official minds much as a hedgehog would on naked man who found one rolled up in his bed” (148). Nevinson argues that someone like Das could have been of greatest help to the officials in the crisis “for the people trusted him absolutely” and “no one living understood them better” (150). However, Das could not be fitted into the official mind’s project of interpreting the ecological disaster in terms of statistics – “It was only that he was the kind of man who perturbs tabulated columns” (150).

In this Das stood in close affinity with the imperial-global reporter. Nevinson’s narrator also positions himself as someone who does not think in terms of statistics. “For myself, I cannot think in thousands. I trust economists and officials to do that for me” (139). The narrator makes it a point to highlight the humanitarian affinity

he shared with Das – an affinity that moved across the racial divides that marred the imperial global space. Nevinson articulates this affinity in personal gestures. As they tour through the countryside, Das and Nevinson came to rest one night at a dak-bungalow. Of the three rooms available, “a Bengali magistrate and a colleague” occupied two. Nevinson chose to sleep in the open air along with the elephant, and offered that “Mr. Das, who was oldish and invalid, should have the other room . . .” (148). Nevinson also articulates humanitarian affinity as he stands before the starving populace. This articulation touched upon human limitations in face of ecological disasters. As he rode through the flooded areas, people expected help from him – “Surely a man who rode an elephant and wore a helmet, and was white by courtesy, could save them!” (143). But, “What could I do?,” he wonders. “There were 15,000 living skeletons ready to join in that prayer,” he informs, “and I had one pocketful of coppers” (143). He poses questions to his imperial-global readership, “Where is charity when things are like that? And where are economics?” (143).

To this imperial-global readership, he suggests remedy. The narrator does not blame the individual officials of the Raj. Rather, he locates the fundamental problem in colonialism per se. “In Orissa itself and in Calcutta the British officials were being rather angrily criticized for negligence,” he observes. However, he argues, “apart from the necessary failure of a system which tries to administer welfare through foreign rulers who live completely isolated from the people, I do not think the officials were to blame” (145–146). Let us then turn our analysis to the nationalist imagination that was at work in India in the early decades of the century, and analyse its engagement with the problem of floods in Odisha.

Nationalist Politicisation of Ecology

The Harrowing tales of distress that are daily coming in from the flood stricken tracts of Orissa call for prompt and generous action on the part of the public spirited and philanthropic citizens of every community and every province of India . . . When it is remembered that Orissa is one of the poorest provinces and the distress that has been

caused by these unprecedented floods is widespread and acute, the duty of other provinces towards Orissa will, we feel sure, be fully realized and simply discharged . . . The distress in Orissa is so terrible that we feel confident that all those to whom our appeal is addressed will realize that it requires a national effort to alleviate it.^{xiii}

“Appeal for Generous Relief,” Madan Mohan Malaviya,
Pandit Nilakantha Das, 1927.

In a recent essay, Cheryl Lousley argues that “the representational challenge that ecocriticism faces” is “not the *representation of nature*, but the *politicization of environment*.”^{xiv} Politicisation of the ecology of Odisha gathered pace with the intervention of the Indian National Congress in the third decade of the century. Its reformist programs took up the ecological condition of the region, and articulated it as a political concern. Cited above is an appeal for relief signed by a range of political leaders affiliated to the Congress including national eminences such as Madan Mohan Malaviya and local stalwarts such as Nilakantha Das. Issued in the wake of the devastating floods of 1927, the appeal appeared in full in the *Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Of all possible strategies of representation, the nationalism of Congress mobilised a specific rhetoric to politicise the ecology of Odisha.

The national imagination made room for the ecology of Odisha only in a manner that marked the region as irredeemably poor, and thereby came to conceive itself as generous and philanthropic. It presented Odisha as “one of the poorest provinces” and appealed other provinces of India to discharge their duty towards her. The place is then embedded in a network of unequal relations—she comes to occupy the position of a poor relation vis-à-vis other Indian provinces. Thus, the appeal cited devastations in Gujarat and Sind as well, and noted that the “Indian Legislative Assembly has made an appeal to the Government and to the people in respect of Orissa, and in respect of Gujarat and Sind.”^{xv} However, it made a special case for Odisha and argued, “A special appeal has become necessary in respect of Orissa as she cannot help herself and requires outside support as funds must be earmarked for relief in Orissa.”^{xvi} It then

advised “the public spirited and philanthropic citizens of every community and every province of India” to join in the “national effort” of providing relief and to send support directly to Gopabandhu Das, President, Utkal Congress Committee at Cuttack, and alternately to Lala Lajpat Rai, M. L. A. Simla, who consented to serve as the Treasurer of the Funds.^{xvii}

The nationalist rhetoric also involved a sharp censure of the role of the colonial government. It argued that the colonial state regularly downplayed the extent of devastations in its official communiqués, and made political demands on the state to resolve the ecological problem of floods in a manner that was systematic and meaningful. In 1926, C. F. Andrews who was active in relief work in the region, “was deeply concerned to see the Government communiqué concerning the damage done by floods in Orissa,” and had reasons to believe that “the damage was likely to be even more extensive than last year.”^{xviii} He “urged that the time had come for a more thorough and extensive examination regarding what could be done to put an end to these perpetual floods, which were wearing down the peasantry of Orissa to helplessness and a pitiable state.”^{xix} Andrews argued that “[t]he engineering works needed might be very costly, but no cost was too great to save from such miseries many thousands of human lives.”^{xx} In a resolution moved by T. Prakasam and seconded by Subhas Chandra Bose, the All India Congress Committee in session in 1927 at Calcutta condemned “the callously minimising attitude of the Government of Bihar and Orissa with regard to the recent flood disaster in Balasore and Cuttack districts of Orissa.”^{xxi} In the same session, Gopabandhu Das explicitly presented the ecological condition of the region as a political problem. He argued that “Orissa was a problem in Indian politics, not only on account of its dismemberment but on account of its annual floods,” and entreated “the Indian Congress to help the struggling people of Orissa.”^{xxii} Finally, published in 1935, the report of the Orissa Flood Relief Committee, again under the presidency of C. F. Andrews, pointed out that despite a long history of British rule, the ecology of the region had not received the care and attention it deserved, and thereby made a case for the colonial state’s negligence. “Orissa is a land of floods and famines. One hundred and thirty years of British

rule have passed, but this life and death problem has not been tackled with the amount of care and attention that it deserves.”^{xxiii}

Lastly, the nationalist rhetoric on ecology found yet another form of articulation – that of uneven competition and governmental care – once Odisha was formed as a separate province within British India in 1936.^{xxiv} The Congress formed government under Biswanath Das in 1937. In a speech delivered to the provincial legislative assembly in 1939, Das directly alluded to C. F. Andrews and mobilised a language of uneven competition and governmental care.^{xxv} He began where Andrews had left off, and argued that the province had suffered a “century long neglect” (2). Unlike the other “sister provinces established long long before” (2), the Odia speaking regions came to be united under one provincial administration only in 1936. Nevertheless, Odisha is “called upon to keep pace” with the other older provinces in “the tremendous responsibility of developing the nation-building departments” (2). “Necessarily therefore,” he observed, “we are given a start in life with finances limited, areas to be developed and with wants unlimited” (2). This language of uneven competition enables Das to reimagine and resituate Odisha in the league of Indian provinces. She is no longer the irredeemably poor cousin, but rather the newly formed province who bravely enters the uneven competition of nation-building despite a century long neglect.

Having cited the uneven legacy of the colonial administration, Das moved on to the language of care. “Rev. C. F. Andrews, whose love for Orissa is so well known...laid stress on three activities which are essential to put life into Orissa” (2), he observed, and went on to “state all that has been done” to take care of one of these, “The flood problem” (2). The governmental language of care was about investigation and production of “expert knowledge” on ecology. It was also about the exertion of state control over ecology. As regards production of knowledge, Das mentioned how his government created a dedicated “Flood Division” and appointed a designated “Flood Officer” to “collect and collaborate all necessary information and to make an intelligent study of the situation” (5).^{xxvi} On the advice of Sir M. Visvesvaraya, he said, the government also formed an “Expert Flood Committee” under the aegis of C.C. Inglis, Director of Central Irrigation and Hydro-Dynamic Research Station at Poona,

and M. Rangayya, the Chief Engineer of Orissa (5).^{xxvii} Besides, the government hired the services of P. C. Mahalanobis to compile a “report on the statistical analysis of the rainfall in the catchment areas of the rivers in Orissa” (6). As regards the exertion of control over ecology, Das mentioned projects of irrigation. His government set up a “Special Irrigation Division” under the chief Engineer, and set out to “harness our rivulets and river courses to divert the water for purposes of irrigation” (6). The language of care, with its emphasis on production of knowledge and exertion of control over ecology, helped Das to differentiate his government from that of the previous apathetic dispensation.

Ecological Suffering and a Social Body

Floods, again! Day after day pass by, and so do months and years. Fates of many individuals change, circumstances of many races change, the good days of many nations return. However, the days of suffering do not cease for Odisha. Fortune does not return, circumstances do not change, afflictions do not leave, misfortune does not move. People have hardly recovered from the disasters of one year, and again comes flood; famine relief programs have not concluded, and again comes famine. It is not in the destiny of the residents of Odisha to eat a full meal in good health and remain without worry for even a day. ^{xxviii}

“Banya Biplab,”
Gopabandhu Das, 1927

O brothers,
seated atop the thatched roof of a washed away hut,
a woman was [floating down],
ceaselessly crying in fright and grief.
O ! [in the midst of it all],
she gave birth to a boy!
as she floated away into fathomless [water].
She starved for four days long.
People went in boats to her rescue,
and could cut the umbilical cord of the newly born babe

four long days after [his birth]!
See the deception [deceptive consideration] of the Lord! ^{xxix}

Ajay Kumar Ghosh, “Jajpur Naibadhi Gita O Kanda,” 1928

Scholars have argued that literature acquires significance in ecocriticism as it helps one to reconstruct particularly the non-material aspects—the memories or sensory experiences—of place.^{xxx} Literary language has the capacity to construct an intense sensory experience of local ecology, an affect, and make it available to those who do not experience it at first hand.^{xxxi} By paying attention to the work of language, one can study the ways in which human beings come to interact with the environment.^{xxxii} Taking a cue from some of these arguments, let us explore how literature in Odisha envisioned a social body that is fit to inhabit an ecologically sensitive bioregion in the period under consideration. We need to turn to Gopabandhu Das.

Das, who represented the ecological condition of Odisha as a political problem for the Indian National Congress to resolve, was not only the President of the Utkal Congress Committee but also a litterateur of the front rank. Das toured flood affected areas and published reports in the local newspapers broadly between 1907 and 1927. These were later collected and published under the title *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha: Gopabandhu Rachanavali*.^{xxxiii} To Das goes the credit of forming an ‘affect’ for ecology in modern Odia discursive traditions. The intensely sensory experience of ecological devastations he constructed and made available to the public at large revolved around the figure of a *padosi*. Literally, a neighbor, the *padosi* is one who inhabits the same ecological region. However, he or she is not immediately endangered by the disasters, and hence can bear witness to the suffering of the others and provide material succour. As he witnesses and intervenes, the *padosi* provides the suitable ethical principle for the formation and preservation of a social body in an ecologically vulnerable region.

Das and other leaders of the time exhorted the public in Odisha to skip a meal one time in a week and donate the money to those who starved in the wake of the floods. “If a *padosi* is dying of starvation,”

he wrote in 1925, “I have no rights to eat a full meal and remain content.” He evoked the idiom of *dharma*, and continued: “I must do something for the *padosi*. I need to give up something, need to accept some small degrees of hardship. May be the present laws do not make this binding on me, but *dharma* does” (152). Not only should the concerned *padosi* skip a meal, he should also go out to meet and lend a sympathetic ear to those who are caught up in the devastations, “...in these terrible times of affliction, we fulfill our duty as *padosi* by reaching out to the people and offering them a word of sympathy; it brings them a little hope and courage” (149).

The ideal of the *padosi* provided the affect around which Das imagined the social body suitable to inhabit an ecologically sensitive bioregion. He acknowledged that floods have become a chronic problem in the region over the first quarter of the century (79), and often mobilised an affective language to make the experience of suffering available to the public at large. We see this language at work in the extract cited above where Das sets up a figurative contrast between the transformations that occur in the lives of individuals, peoples and nations, and the seeming intransigence of the ecological predicament in which the people of Odisha found themselves embedded in the first quarter of the century. Das did implore the colonial state to intervene and find a permanent solution to the floods via science and engineering. He argued that floods are not natural phenomena like earthquakes. Prevention of floods was not beyond the powers of man. Such measures were in place in other countries. Courses of rivers and oceans were restricted, and the powers of science put them into the service of mankind. If the government agreed, he observed, such measures could also be initiated in Odisha.^{xxxiv} Having said that, Das also moved beyond the role of the state. He laid emphasis on the notion of the *padosi*, and social and sentimental responsibilities one owed to another in face of ecological disasters. “Without saying anything further to the *sarkar*,” he wrote, “we deem it more necessary to specifically address our countrymen on the subject” (152). He went on to acknowledge and encourage all segments of the local social body—the urban intelligentsia, professionals, and trading communities, the rural landowners and money-lenders, the monasteries and other landed religious establishments—to come forward and carry out their social

responsibilities towards the distressed (152, 117). Das argued that these social relations—in particular, the most fundamental relation in the local agrarian world, the one between the *zamindar* and *mahajan* and the *praja*—needed to be recast in the model provided by the notion of the *padosi*. For their own self-interest, Das argued, the *zamindars* and *mahajans*, should adhere to the social responsibilities of a *padosi*.

The *zamindars* and *mahajans* have a serious responsibility in the matter. If the *praja* cannot cultivate the land, it is the loss of the *zamindar* and the *mahajan*. The former cannot pay his rent or redeem his debts. The wealth earned by the hard labor of the *praja* makes for the prosperity of the *zamindar* and *mahajan*. If the latter do not perform their duties towards the former, it will only spell more loss for themselves. (152).

Das did not call for an abolition of social hierarchy. Rather, the aim was to render hierarchical social relations more sensitive towards the present ecological crises. His affective engagement with the ecological disasters and the suffering of the region then revolved around the figure of the *padosi*. It helped him not only to reconstruct an intense sensory experience of local ecology but also to provide a model to reimagine the social body that inhabited an ecologically vulnerable region.

If Das initiated the literary trend to engage with ecology and suffering, others followed suit. In more popular genres, it acquired a more sensationalist and democratic tone. Ajay Kumar Ghosh was a small-scale publisher and bookseller in Cuttack. He sold cheap and popular tracts, both of religious and secular variety. On the one hand, he sold tract versions of early modern Odia religious poetry such as “Kapata Pasha,” and “Mruguni Stuti.” On the other hand, he also sold modern farce such as “Mohini Babu Farce” and “Diara Bhauja Rahasya.” In the wake of the devastating floods in the rivers of Brahmani, Kharasuan and Baitarani in the region of Jajpur in 1927, Ghosh published a verse tract titled “Jajpur Nai Badhi Gita O Kanda,” literally, “Jajpur Floods, Song and Lament.”^{xxxv} *Kanda* or lament is a

popular genre in Odia poetry. Usually, it delineates the sorrow of a newly-wed daughter who is about to leave her maternal home for her husband's house. Affective evocation of familial relationships is the primary work of the genre. The daughter turns to each of her relations, starting with the mother, conveys her sorrow, listens to the sorrow of the relative, and then takes leave.^{xxxvi} In "Jajpur Nai Badhi Gita O Kanda," the scope of the genre is expanded to include lamentations for ecological devastations. Taking a cue from Das, as it were, the tract addresses the reading public as "brothers," and thereby seeks to forge an affective relationship within the social body at large. However, unlike Das, Ghosh imagines a more democratic social body. Das acknowledges the hierarchical nature of social relations. His prose addresses diverse constituencies of the social body—the *zamindars*, the *mahajans* the *prajas* in the rural countryside, and the lawyers, traders and the *bhadralok* in the urban towns. In his tract, Ghosh puts the complex network of hierarchical social relations spread across the rural and urban spaces of Odisha under erasure. He brings all the potential readers and listeners of his verse lament into the same ontological space of affective brotherhood. In face of the ecological devastations, social hierarchies were as if suspended for the moment. A sensational treatment of the subject enables him to accomplish this more democratic evocation of the social body that inhabits an ecologically sensitive bioregion. In the extract cited at the beginning of the section, we see his literary style at work. The short literary scene is about a pregnant woman caught up in catastrophic suffering in face of the unprecedented environmental disaster. The details—seated atop a thatched roof, she gives birth to a boy; both mother and baby starve for days together; the umbilical cord that binds them remains uncut till their rescue—help the narrator evoke an intense sensory experience of the ecological disaster for the distant readers. The verse tract includes a series of such vignettes. Dead animals from the forest—tigers, elephants, bears and sambhar—float away in the waters. Railway lines and telegram wires—signs of colonial progress in the region—are blown apart. The most appealing of these, as the work of the genre demands, are evocations of familial sorrow. Ghosh writes:

Some one says, come O mother!
[I] cannot see where to go;

O mother mine, death is near for sure
Water is only knee deep [here]
Hold onto courage, and stand here, O
Mother mine, the Lord will come to our rescue for sure
(32/33).

Some one says, right here, brother spoke,
[And the next moment,] we could not see him [anymore]
O gentle souls, some weep in fright and sorrow
Some one asks, 'Where is father?'
Some one says, 'Could not find my daughter'
O gentle souls, some one says, 'let us run away.' (34-35).

These vignettes of lamentation invite the reader to participate in an intense emotional experience of ecological suffering. The reader is expected to participate in it not as a *zamindar* or *mahajan* or *praja*. Rather, he participates as a brother. Ghosh, then, renders social identity of the reader irrelevant to his affective experience of the ecological devastation. The genre he works with enables him to reimagine the social body that is caught up in the disaster as a family and to invite the reader to see himself as a member of the family.

Conclusion

Floods in early twentieth-century Odisha came to be embedded in three overlapping networks of power and relations—the imperial global, national and local. British visitors to the region mobilised a specific political-aesthetic to create imperial-global awareness about the ecological devastations. This political-aesthetic looked out for and deployed both human and material traces of the devastations to construct realist portraits of suffering, and demand intervention. The nationalist politicisation of the ecological devastations in Odisha followed diverse trajectories. It marked the region as irredeemably poor so as to imagine an Indian public that is generous and philanthropic towards Odisha. It also involved a sharp censure of the inefficient role of the colonial state in redressing the problem of the floods. Local literary engagements worked to envision a social body that is suitable to inhabit the ecologically sensitive bio-region. This social body was built around discursive figures such as the “*padosi*”

or neighbour, and often found articulation in minor literary genres such as the “*kanda*” or lamentation.



[Figure 1: Source, Nevinson, *The New Spirit in India*, 1908]

Endnotes

- i. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*. For a discussion of the formation of social space in colonial Odisha, see Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*.
- ii. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 8.
- iii. Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 25-26. See footnote no. 18.
- iv. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 11. Also see, 26.
- v. Nevinson, “The Floods of Orissa.”
- vi. Kerridge, “Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Forms and Genre.”
- vii. John, *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*,” 2.
- viii. John, *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*,” 105.
- ix. John, *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*,” 108.
- x. John, *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*,” 110-111.
- xi. Nevinson, “The Floods of Orissa,” 136.

- xii. "A Cry from India: Floods Devastate a District." *Pall Mall Gazette*, Special Edition, October 29, 1907. Accessed on 5.10. 2022.
- xiii. "Orissa Floods: Appeal for Generous Relief." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Monday, August 29, 1927, p.7. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xiv. Lousley, "Ecocriticism and the Politics of Representation," 156.
- xv. "Orissa Floods: Appeal for Generous Relief." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Monday, August 29, 1927, p.7. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xvi. "Orissa Floods: Appeal for Generous Relief." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Monday, August 29, 1927, p.7. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xvii. "Orissa Floods: Appeal for Generous Relief." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Monday, August 29, 1927, p.7. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xviii. "Floods in Orissa: Mr. Andrews advises preventive measures." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Saturday 25 September, 1926, p.18. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xix. "Floods in Orissa: Mr. Andrews advises preventive measures." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Saturday 25 September, 1926, p.18. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xx. "Floods in Orissa: Mr. Andrews advises preventive measures." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Saturday 25 September, 1926, p.18. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xxi. "Flood Distress in Orissa." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Monday, October 31, 1927, p.14. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xxii. "Flood Distress in Orissa." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Monday, October 31, 1927, p.14. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xxiii. "Ill-Fated Orissa: Land of Floods and Famine, Central River Board Suggested." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Friday, November 15, 1935, p.6. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xxiv. The history of the Odia language movement and the formation of Odisha, one of the first states in India to be organized around the principle of linguistic identity, are beyond the scope of the paper. For relevant discussions, see, Mishra, *Language and the Making of Modern India*.

- xxv. Das, "Speech of the Hon'ble Sreejukta Biswanath Das."
- xxvi. In this pursuit of knowledge, Das followed the lead of the government of Bihar-Orissa who in response to public demands had formed a "Orissa Flood Committee" in 1927 under the chairmanship of C. Addams Williams, Chief Engineer to the Government of Bengal, and sought to investigate into the cause of the flood problem and recommend solutions. The committee submitted its report in 1928. Accessed at <https://nvli.in/report-orissa-flood-committee>
- xxvii. The Flood Advisory Committee was formed in 1938. It met each year from 1938 to 1942 and submitted its reports in 1938-39, 1940 and 1942. Accessed at Dhananjayrao Gadgil Library, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune. <https://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/>
- xxviii. Das, *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha*, 234. My translation.
- xxix. Ghosh, *Jajpur Naibadhi Gita O Kanda*, 4. My translation.
- xxx. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 15.
- xxxi. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 27-28.
- xxxii. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 4.
- xxxiii. Das, *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha*.
- xxxiv. Das, *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha*, 235.
- xxxv. Ghosh, *Jajpur Naibadhi Gita O Kanda*.
- xxxvi. Gantayat, *Jemadei Kanda*.

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Fairyland Protests the Anthropocene: Climate Change, Time, and Narrative Solastalgia

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Abstract

Anthropogenic climate change's lasting negative impact on the physical environment stops humans from ever restoring Earth back to exactly what it once was. In contrast, modern readers are conditioned to associate the pristine landscape of fairy tales with beauty, belonging, and happily ever after. The impossibility of going back to a pre-climate change real-world tarnishes these associations. The primary objective of this paper is to explore the impact of climate change on the environments of fairy tales, by analysing the book *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic*. McKibben's theory of fatal confusion of time is modified to assert that the time of the real-world and time of the fairy tale world has to eventually be the same, since fairy tales fundamentally reflect the values and fears of the cultural time period it interacts with. Therefore, real-world climate change inevitably affects fairy tales. The paper argues that this contributes to narrative solastalgia, a term for the emotional or existential distress caused due to environmental change in nostalgic literature, especially fairy tales.

Keywords: Anthropogenic Climate Change, Fairy Tales, Literary Solastalgia, Time.

Introduction

Despite Tolkien's opinion that "fairy-stories should not be *especially* associated with children" (56), a stronghold of the bowdlerised versions of the *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, most notably by Disney,

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established a potent association of them with modern childhood. The corporate chain of animated fairy tales also succeeded in creating an implication that most, if not all, popular western fairy tale characters live in a faraway place called Fairyland, which may have many names, but in essence is the same. The tales also agree that these characters live during what is ambiguously referred to as ‘once upon a time’, which is decidedly *not* the present time of the real-world. Historically, whatever humans do in the real-world did not negatively affect Fairyland. However, post-pandemic disillusionment does not afford this leniency anymore. We have, finally, arrived at a conjecture beyond which the dreaded Anthropocene insidiously seeps into even familiar age-old stories.

The primary objective of this paper is to analyse the impact of climate change on the environments of fairy tales, using the children’s book *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic* (2023), written by Bijal Vachharajani and illustrated by Rajiv Eipe. When the familiar changes, a sense of distress is created, since we cannot go back to how it once was. In the light of climate change, Glenn Albrecht coined the term solastalgia “to describe the pain or sickness caused by the loss of, or inability to derive solace from, the present state of one’s home environment” (35). This paper argues that solastalgia is also applicable to narrative home environments, or imaginary story-worlds that once gave a sense of belonging, but are now so far removed from reality that it is no longer comforting. In fact, these pristine landscapes only worsen the prospect of living in the degraded environment of the real-world. This produces a “narrative solastalgia,” which is especially evident in the case of fairy tales and Fairyland, often associated with a romanticised ‘golden age’ childhood, the time back when *things were not this bad*.

What is Hidden in Fairy Tales?

Fairy tales find their root in oral traditions all over the world, drawing from mythology and folklore. However, since they were not written down, various strains of the same story existed and were often modified upon. Hence, there are no pure or original fairy tales, just commonly repeated ones. In the seventeenth century, the women of Paris salons engaged in the practice of retelling folktales with clever

insertions about their own plights. In this case, what is hidden in fairytales is social commentary of the aristocracy by women. This is one of the earliest examples of how the contents of fairy tale time is intentionally made to overlap with real-world time.

In the early nineteenth century, the Grimm brothers collected German folktales and codified them through the act of writing. But these initial versions were so horrific that they had to erase parts to appeal to the larger audience. While their original version was rooted in oral tradition, the written fairy tales were societally expected to be mellow. But in no stretch of the imagination are the tales of the Grimm brothers gentle, even after revision, since they still contain quite gruesome depictions of violence and sexual encounters. The brothers also actively rejected many folktales from their collection if they were not 'German enough' (as in, if they incorporated influences from other parts of Europe). So, in the brothers' version of fairy tales, what is hidden (quite obviously) was nationalism. This careful curation, again, cites a prominent instance when the happenings of Fairyland were made to directly reflect the sentiments of the real-world, and cyclically got to influence the real-world back.

The overall moralistic judgement of the Victorian era did not spare fairy tales. This was the period in which extra care was taken to make all such stories child-friendly, and to remove traces of anything that did not add to the happiness of the tale. The good were rewarded and the bad were punished heavily. Despite the movement into industrialisation, with its soot-covered skies and child labour, the fairytales told to children, especially the wealthier ones, were forced to remain in an idyllic setting, perhaps with even stronger doses of magic and enchantment. Instead of reflecting nationalistic values, these fairy tales developed into a means of escape, back to a pre-industrial world. In the twentieth century, with globalisation and Americanisation, and the advent of mega corporations like Disney, the popularity of fairy tales reached unprecedented heights. What got hidden in the whimsical versions of that time was a large dose of capitalism and gender roles. Despite the medium, evidence points out that fairy tales are dynamic, and continue to reflect the values and fears of the cultural time period it interacts with. This is especially

true when the real-world tries to hide its reality from and through fairy tales.

The act of hiding from reality is inherently political. Only the very young (often due to ignorance), or the very privileged (largely due to wilful ignorance) can hide from everyday reality. Below is an excerpt from David Glassberg's essay "Place, Memory, and Climate Change" which elucidates this point in the pre-pandemic context:

A November 2013 poll showed that in the USA, while 67% believed that the earth was warming, only 44% thought humans had something to do with it. Sadly, although there is overwhelming consensus among scientists, the issue is so politicised that less than half (46%) of registered Republicans or people leaning that way even believed the earth was warming, and less than a quarter (23%) thought that any warming taking place was the result of human activity. These numbers are only slightly higher in other wealthy industrial nations, especially ones such as Norway that profit from the export of fossil fuels. But concerns about a changing climate are much higher among developing nations such as the Philippines that expect to bear the brunt of the effects of rising global temperatures without the financial resources necessary to pay for adaptive measures. (21)

Though industrialisation could disguise chimney smoke as progress, and capitalism could write off environmental pollution for the fulfilment of globalisation, the post-pandemic twenty-first century cannot afford to ignore human actions and its repercussions. Numerous cyclones like Idai and Kenneth in Africa, wildfires in Australia, droughts in parts of India and Africa, floods in the South East Asian etc. all raise accusatory fingers at anthropogenic climate change. We no longer have the luxury to pretend that all natural disasters are natural. Similarly, our leeway to hide from reality through fairy tales is also at an all-time low. Anthropocene, it seems, also extends to Fairyland.

Old Man Anthropos Accelerates Doomsday

His name is a problem. It's too male, too Greek, too monolithic . . . Old Man Anthropos takes up too much space, in the world, in critical theory, and as the cause of so much ecological devastation. Anthropos occupies the dominant and destructive positions: old, rich, male, presumptively white, brutally normative. (Mentz 5)

The term Anthropocene, for better or worse, seems to have taken solid root in critical theory. As Steve Mentz jokes, *The Lord of the Rings* style, "one 'cene to rule them all" (1). The most pressing reason cited for the advent of this epoch, demarcating it from the Holocene, is the unprecedented warming of global temperature. While temperature does rise naturally over large spans of time, the human hand in this present condition, through the burning of fossil fuels and emission of greenhouse gases, is undeniable. But while The International Commission on Stratigraphy, who has the authority to officially sanction the term, is still looking for evidence in the rocks, the concept of Anthropocene has been taken up with great enthusiasm by academia to blame human influence on the planet, particularly anthropogenic climate change and its effects. In an article on the website of the Natural History Museum, Katie Pavid concludes that "although there have been mass extinction events in Earth's history where vast swathes of life have been wiped out, until now they have all been triggered by natural causes like asteroids and volcanic eruptions. This is the first time a single species has caused such destructive effects on the natural world and had an awareness of doing so." However, many critics, like Steve Mentz, "refuse any Anthropocene monoculture," (3) and instead aim to draw from others' attempts to pluralise it.

In spite of one's opinion on the best term for the current 'cene, it is a scientific understanding that at no point in time has the earth been static. Therefore, there has been no original state of earth, only constantly evolving ones. This is why Timothy Morton remarks that "all geological eras are nested catastrophes" (70). Taking this idea, a step further, Jeremy Davies says that "the idea of the Anthropocene should be seen as another product of that neo-catastrophist turn" (9). However, anthropogenic climate change has ensured that the levels

of catastrophe that we currently face have no precedent. Paul Loubere, Lisa Graumlich, John H. Williams and Steven Jackson all call this a 'no-analog,' meaning there have been no previous logs of such climates (Glassberg 19).

However, Eric Higgs argues that “the past offers a wide array of alternative models of ecological integrity” (145). Humans have had various approaches to maintaining the ecological integrity available to them. Glassberg notes three kinds of parables that historians offer as examples of how humans dealt with climate related issues. The first are stories of collapse. These deal with the history of past civilisations that failed to adapt to climate change. The second are stories of environmental sustainability. These examples are often all indigenous or tribal testimonies. And finally comes the stories of resilience, in which societies successfully overcame natural disasters like tsunamis or earthquakes, and human-made ones like war. But what is evident from this is, unfortunately, that history cannot prepare us for the scale of catastrophe we have brought upon us at the present. It is impossible to fully practise indigenous ways of living in tandem with the environment in this capitalistic present. And most examples of resilience have so far been valiant efforts of a people against one major disaster, but the Anthropocene brings in all disasters at once to all peoples.

So, it seems that climate change not only brings in existential problems, but also political ones. It encompasses the rich-poor divide, as well as the divide between the so-called developed and developing nations. The earlier some nations developed, the larger the role they played in climate change and global warming. However, the burden of bearing the consequences of such actions fall to countries that began their development journey later on. From this perspective, climate change becomes a postcolonial issue, and the Anthropocene becomes even more problematic.

Real-World Time vs Fairy Tale Time

Environmentalism Bill McKibben is of the opinion that humanity is lost in a “fatal confusion about the nature of time and space” (7). The confusion he is talking about forms the basis of nature-culture divide.

In essence, most cultures consider the time of nature and the time of culture as two separate times. Rapid changes in human activity seems to have informed the notion of equally rapid change in the time of culture. On the contrary, the general slowness of drastic change in nature is taken as the time of nature being slow on principle. By this logic, nature has to be almost static for long periods. But it clearly is not. From micro to macro levels nature is capable of rapid change. Therefore, this notion of separate times for nature and culture is unfounded.

If nothing else, climate change has accelerated the speed at which nature changes. Tropical regions are getting nearly too hot, and even the glaciers are melting. Unprecedented temperatures have changed wind patterns, affecting hurricanes and cyclones. Human activity, ranging from deforestation to hunting and poaching, has led to endangering numerous species to the point of extinction. Without them, their ecosystems have had to change dramatically. Also, from the time of industrialisation, human beings have demanded too much resources from the earth, resulting in resource depletion. In the face of climate change, the rapid deterioration of nature puts the transience of human existence to shame. According to McKibben, “as climate change accelerates, it is humankind who has become slow-moving and seemingly unchanging” (Bastian 24). Humans are unable to react in time to the changes affecting earth, and this could constitute a catastrophe at a planetary scale.

In the essay “Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises”, Bastian problematises the failure of time-telling devices like clocks to talk of qualitative time. The quote given below offers a glance into the problem:

Schedules for transitioning to low carbon energy production, for implementing truly sustainable fishing policies, or for developing transport systems independent of cheap fossil fuels, for example, are all running decades behind . . . [we] coordinate ourselves with work, school, and transport schedules, with periodic bill payments, public holidays, and anniversaries, while our efforts to respond to climate

change are squeezed into the spare moments around this, if at all. So, while the clock can tell me whether I am late for work, it cannot tell me whether it is too late to mitigate runaway climate change. (Bastian 24-25)

Hence, the time-telling device that a culture uses influences what kind of time they are concerned with. And time is always concerned with change, a before and an after. Clocks have provided cultures reassurances that after a moment comes another, which is much like the one that came before it. There is comfort in the constancy. As Barbara Adam reasons, “the time of the clock is quantified and standardised, unaffected by context and seasons” (70). However, the root problem still remains: if culture considers nature’s time to be different from its own, and also decides how to measure time and with what, then its measurements will always be inadequate to understand change in nature. Bastian phrases this as “the importance of asking what counts as change and for whom” (28). In other words, clocks cannot calculate both quantitative as well qualitative time. “Using the wrong time scale in the wrong context, we risk tricking ourselves into thinking we are aware of, and thus able to coordinate with, those other beings or things that are most crucial, when in fact we may be falling further and further behind” (Bastian 31).

Culture's clock-time is ill-equipped to calculate the changes of time in Fairyland, too. The concept of time is historically significant to the concept of fairy tales. In fact, in an article titled “Fairy Tale Origins Thousands of Years Old, Researchers Say” published on the BBC News website, Durham University anthropologist Dr Jamie Tehrani, declares that:

Jack and the Beanstalk was rooted in a group of stories classified as The Boy Who Stole Ogre's Treasure, and could be traced back to when Eastern and Western Indo-European languages split more than 5,000 years ago . . . Beauty And The Beast and Rumpelstiltskin to be about 4,000 years old. And a folk tale called The Smith And The Devil, about a blacksmith selling his soul in a pact with the Devil in

order to gain supernatural abilities, was estimated to go back 6,000 years to the Bronze Age. (“Fairy Tale Origins”)

Just as the time of nature and the time of culture are not separate, and instead are actually the same, the time of Fairyland is one with that of real-world culture. Though attributed to be always stuck in a nebulous ‘once upon a time’, the time of Fairyland coincides with the changes in real-world cultural time. The reasons for this were already established in section two, but to reiterate, fairytales inherently reflect the values and fears of the cultural time period that it interacts with, and therefore need to be in the same time continuum. In the context of the post-pandemic 21st century, this notion becomes extremely clear, and is reflected in the book, *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic*.

When Fairyland Lost Its Magic Due to Climate Change

Robert Macfarlane calls Bijal Vachharajani and Rajiv Eipe’s *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic* as “grave, funny, furious”, right on the cover. In the section where praise for the book is registered, he goes on to say this: “They re-tell Grimm for our grim Anthropocene, but without (quite) letting hope slip out of sight. A subversive book that will make children want to read on, and also make them want to question the world beyond their windows and screens.” This sentiment showcases the importance of the book in the present cultural time. The book, like all fairy tales, is actually meant for adults, though produced primarily for children, and discusses the values and fears of the third decade of the 21st century.

It is quite important to note that the author and illustrator are both Indian. This Indian-ness does not stop at their identity, but is infused into the characters and tone of the book. Eipe’s abundant black and white illustrations reveal familiar European fairy tale characters, like Rapunzel, Goldilocks, or Cinderella, wearing Indian clothes, and using Indian colloquial phrases. However, it is not merely a retelling. The characters are not merely Indianised while the story remains the same. In fact, the story is completely different, precisely because the characters are Indianised. The book is a very deliberate attempt to retell European (coloniser, first world) tales with an Indian

(colonised, developing country) twist. The twist is, of course, a retaliation against anthropogenic climate change, specifically from the perspective of a former so-called third world country.

Glassberg raises many relevant points regarding climate change and social justice, which is fundamental to the relevance of *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic*. He mentions that early on, it was thought that third world countries remained poor because the coloured people were lazy and did not use their resources properly. The rise of nations like India into one of the major developing countries of the world has dispelled such racist myths (22). But, it cannot be ignored that the drastic change in climate conditions have adversely affected developing or poor countries the most, since they often fall short of the infrastructure to mitigate disasters. They are also the ones who are made to deal with the consequences of the high carbon emissions done by the developed countries early on. Since the majority of the fault lies with developed nations, Glassberg questions whether they should be held accountable to help out the poorer countries (23). He also expresses doubt as to whom to help, and what to protect, heritage sites or ordinary land (23). There are no easy answers, only uncomfortable questions. But the developing world is furious, and it shows in works like *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic*.

Vachharajani's book immediately makes its tongue in cheek nature clear, and shines the spotlight on causes for climate change, right from the first paragraph. The story begins with Rapunzel's hair washing day. Rapunzel's "tower is so high that it rivalled most industrialist's fancy buildings," and her hair is "so long that it rivalled the number of zeros in said industrialist's bank accounts" (9). However, this is no familiar Rapunzel with lush clean hair. Instead, Vachharajani's Rapunzel struggles to maintain her long mane due to the "Great Water Crisis in Fairyland, and could only wash her hair on Thursday between 6 a.m. and 6.25 a.m." (11). This intentionally mirrors the lives of millions in big cities of India who depend on pipeline water. To top it all, since Rapunzel lives so high up, the air around the tower is so thick with pollution that she cannot breathe. She cannot move either, because she is trapped.

Helen Adams remarks that the “poorest people usually live in the most environmentally risky locations” (430). While Rapunzel is not originally financially poor, she is poor in matters of choice, as in, she does not have any. Adams goes on to say, “analysis of data reveals three reasons for non-migration: high levels of satisfaction, resource barriers and low mobility potential. Immobility in dissatisfied people is more likely to be caused by attachment to place than resource constraints” (429). In Rapunzel’s case the attachment is caused involuntarily. But unlike her, millions of people are trapped in their hometowns because of sentimental attachments and familial obligations. There also exist others who lack resources to move; job opportunity wise, or due to the lack of education or skills.

The book then comes to Snow White, who is called No White since there is no more snow left in Fairyland due to climate change. Her famous red lips are hidden behind a mask. Quite interestingly, the seven dwarves are now seven Indian coal mine workers who are named after greenhouse gases. No White’s stepmother’s evil plan to kill her does not succeed since there are no longer apples to poison, due to crop failure attributed to the lack of rainfall followed by a blight.

On the other hand, Sleeping Beauty cannot not even sleep due to climate anxiety. The Three Little Pigs have gone to the city to become construction workers. Poor Goldilocks cannot find anything perfect anymore, certainly not any payasam to eat. She says that everything is too hot and too cold at the same time (21), further noting that:

Nothing was as is, in Fairyland. Their beloved homeland was turning into the Land with Strange Weather, The Land of Smog and Dust, The Land with Too Much Snow (where it wasn’t meant to snow), and Too Much Heat (where it was meant to be cold). The glaciers were melting at such an alarming rate that *The Fairyland Times* had called it the worst climate crisis since the Narnian Ice Age. (Vachharajani 24)

Unseasonal storms and rising sea levels saw Fairyland inhabitants travelling in boats, and boatmen extorting exorbitant prices. Most

importantly, “the morals of Fairyland were messed up. There were no Happily-Ever-After, and the once Enchanted Forest was now the Disenchanted Not-a-Forest . . . Where once stood magical baobabs and banyans, brightly painted flame-of-the-forest and amaltas, and mighty oaks and sequoias; there was now a land full of tree stubs and palm trees, since palm oil was very profitable” (26). The lack of forest clearly affects animals. The Big Bad Wolf is now just a big wolf with acute hunger pangs. Also, his friend, the mermaid, is sad that the corals are all now white, signalling that oceans are warming (36).

Amidst of all this, characters play the blame-game, much like people in the real world who accuse individuals for using plastic straws while letting mega corporations emit unfathomable amounts of toxic waste into the environment. In the book, Cinderella has been living quite comfortably in her palace, showcasing how wealth disparity plays out during climate change. No White sillily accuses her as the cause of climate change since her name has the word “cinder” in it. Fairy Nani is distressed at this and decides to petition the Snow Queen. They find out the rest of Fairyland has also gathered at the palace to voice complaints. Even on the way to the palace, the difference in how climate change affects the rich vs the poor is shown. Cinderella goes in a carriage, while poor characters had to walk for days.

Turns out, the Snow Queen lost her powers, and is currently thawing alongside her land. Ignoring the direness of the Fairyland, Prince Charming embodies the values of patriarchy and capitalism, and insists everything is fine. Much to everyone’s chagrin, he says what Fairyland needs is, in fact, more industries. When Hansel and Gretel show up, the two children symbolising the youth of today, they demand change.

In the end, the inhabitants of Fairyland travel to the end of their world (beyond which exists the real-world), and realises that it is human activity that has seeped into Fairyland, polluting the storyworld too. In the only way that the author can conclude the book, the characters send in strength and magic to humankind, wishing that they will change their ways and make everything better. As far as ending for children’s books go, this is predictably optimistic, but it

also feels like bringing a bucket of water to fight a wildfire. However, the hope is that in seeing someone hold the bucket, others will also feel the need to put out the fire.

Narrative Solastalgia

Even as *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic* makes a poignant point, it leaves the reader feeling slightly lost. This feeling does not stem from the plot of the book, but from its deviation from the familiar. Fairyland, we had assumed, would always remain untarnished by human actions. The last place we expected to bear the brunt of anthropogenic climate change is perhaps, an imaginary land. But as Glassberg notes, “climate change does change almost everything” (18). This pervasive change implies that humans cannot fully rely on fairy tales as escape anymore. That strategy worked well throughout history, and still does work for people who are on the last stretches of trying to remain wilfully ignorant, but for the ones who deal with climate anxiety and want to keep accountability, fairy tales cannot be the same old ‘home territory’ again. This results in narrative solastalgia.

It was Glenn Albrecht, an Australian professor, who coined the term solastalgia by combining the Latin word “solacium” meaning comfort, with the Greek “algia” which denotes pain. The author asserts:

The word ‘solace’ relates to both psychological and physical context . . . If a person lacks solace, then he or she is distressed without the possibility of consolation. If a person seeks solace or solitude in a much-loved place that is being desolated then she or he will suffer distress. In both contexts there is suffering . . . Solastalgia describes the pain or sickness caused by the loss of, or inability to derive solace from, the present state of one's home environment. Solastalgia exists when there is recognition that the beloved place in which one resides is under assault. (Albrecht 35)

Albrecht also makes it clear that solastalgia and nostalgia are different. While nostalgia derives from a yearning to return home, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home. Place identity and attachment are strong factors of solastalgia. The quote given below shall make this clear:

The ways that humans understand and value their surroundings are inseparable from the histories they experience in that environment, either first-hand or through others' stories. They attach memories to places, and over time form emotional bonds with the particular, familiar environments they call home. These bonds orient them in space, telling them where they are in the world; they orient them in time, telling them their place in a succession of past and future generations; and they orient them in society, telling them with whom they belong. Like other species on earth, humans become acclimated to particular places and environmental conditions. They develop a home territory. Even though humans are capable of moving great distances and adapting to a wide range of environments, many of them become disoriented, and often homesick, when they do. (Glassberg 27)

Solastalgia is a product of disruption to existing order, which in turn topples place identity. Technology and disease are both considered agents of such change by Albrecht. Besides these, natural disasters and human-made changes can both factor in. A lot of the natural disasters are caused by anthropogenic climate change, and are often unprecedented in the home territory. "The concept of solastalgia has relevance wherever there is the direct experience of negative transformation or desolation of the physical environment (home) by forces that undermine a personal and community sense of identity, belonging and control" (Albrecht 35). Human beings crave home. When the familiarity of home is threatened, we are lost. To top it, Glassberg points out that by "reshaping the kind of stories that historians tell, climate change challenges historians' efforts to foster a community's sense of place and faith in the continued existence of its familiar home environment" (26). Similarly, the influence of real-world time on Fairyland reshapes fairy tales. The new versions that cannot escape the polluted grime of reality shake the sense of

familiarity that people once felt towards these tales. Fairyland no longer feels like home.

Solastalgia has alternatively been described as the “emotional or existential distress caused by environmental change” (Newport et al. 543). Building on this, narrative solastalgia can be termed as the emotional or existential distress caused by environmental change in nostalgic/familiar literature, especially fairy tales, which are often associated by many with an important time period of personal past. Nostalgic here implies literature with a personal link to a sense of ‘golden childhood’ or very happy/comforting times. For people who grew up reading or watching fairy tales (the happy European ones), *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic* jolts them out of familiarity. None of the characters look or behave the same as they once did. And it is not because the author chose to make them different. Instead, it is also because the reality of the reader themselves has changed so much that the life of fairy tale characters seems foreign. In the face of deforestation, it is hard to picture enchanted forests. It gets confusing to imagine Rapunzel’s long hair without creeping questions of how she maintains it in the time of water scarcity and air pollution. The manufactured happiness that was once acceptable while consuming fairy tales, especially as children, is no longer taking hold in the face of climate anxiety. Even when reading the same tales that we read during childhood, the ones we consider as our narrative home territory, the reader feels a stark sense of not belonging there anymore. And we cannot go back either, no matter how many times we try to read it again. This inability to feel at home, despite engaging with the home territory, as far as fairy tales are concerned, leads to narrative solastalgia.

Conclusion

Fairy tales are “stories so familiar. Retold, recast, made anew with every retelling” (Vachharajani 101). From the very beginning, fairy tales have never been static, and to expect them to suddenly be, to offer solace in the wake of humans trying to escape the desolate reality we have created in the real-world, is the height of wilful ignorance led by desperation. Though fairy tales have been relegated primarily for children, the act of telling them, and the choices made

within, have always been within the purview of adults. In fact, they reflect the values and fears of the cultural time period they interact with. Throughout history, there have been many attempts to hide truths in and from fairy tales, but the post-pandemic 21st century does not leave room for such practices. Hence, the disillusionment that society underwent extends towards the no-longer-protected land of fairy tales, too.

The much-contested Anthropocene with its human influence seems to be unable to leave a place untouched, even the imaginary Fairyland. Reality, in the wake of anthropogenic climate change, triggers a sense of exclusion from the pristine lands of fairy tales. The human tendency to distinguish between the time of culture and the time of nature no longer stands strong either. This false assumption has not only made it near impossible for humans to react well to drastic changes in nature in the first place, but it has also distorted our sense of urgency regarding taking actions. The idea that real-world cultural time is the same as the time of nature, is modified into the idea that the time of Fairyland also must adhere to that of the real-world. And because it does, it is inevitable that climate change adversely affects Fairyland, too. This impact of anthropogenic climate change on Fairyland was explored using Vachharajani and Eipe's book *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic*.

However, changes to familiar home territory, real or narrative, causes distress. Furthering Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia, in the context of literature, narrative solastalgia is the emotional or existential distress caused due to environmental change in nostalgic literature, especially fairy tales. It is the inability to find solace in once-comforting stories, entirely due to the disparity between the pristine imagined lands and the real-world environment ravaged due to anthropogenic climate change. In a way, children and childhood is the demographic most affected due to climate change, since their entire future is under question. So, it makes sense that the narrative solastalgia is strongest in fairy tales associated closely with childhood, taunting generations of adults who gifted them a civilisation on the brink of collapse. Needless to say, Fairyland protests the Anthropocene, much like how Greta Thunberg did, with a heavy heart raising a single question; "How dare you?"

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Third Space and Cosmopolitanism Imaginings in Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*

PF John Bosco*

Abstract

Narratives of belonging can be seen as symbolic ways of creating homes and navigating disputes over differing and conflicting loyalties. In this context, the impasse between the ethnic articulation of home and belonging, often marked by exclusivity, and the “Others” in diasporic spaces advocating for inclusivity, becomes a complex issue. Immigration has heightened existing racial tensions, with “outsiders” seen as undermining collective identity. This contention persists among “insiders,” who define identity through ethnic and linguistic markers. Hasan’s work shifts the focus of early post-colonial Northeastern novels from stereotypical tales of regional discrimination to more nuanced narratives. It introduces a unique dichotomy where the main characters are “outsiders” within the already marginalised Shillong, itself a part of the “otherised” Northeast. This paper examines how Anjum Hasan’s novel *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* challenges the insider-outsider binary by introducing the doubly removed outsider who seeks the “third space,” defined by Homi K. Bhabha. However, the paper argues that the desire for a “third space” does not lead to successful negotiation. Rather it evolves into a form of collectivism where the cosmopolitan becomes “rooted” and absorbed into the larger majority under a neocolonial regime.

Keywords: Insider-outsider, Northeast India, Third Space, Rooted Cosmopolitanism, Neocolonialism.

Introduction

The attempts in post-colonial India to homogenise the nation under the concept of “unity in diversity” have led to the creation of

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numerous marginalised pockets (Deb; Mukhim). Voices from these marginalised regions, especially Northeast India, have engaged in a dialogue with “mainland” India, disrupting the unidirectional narrative of inclusivity. The British imposition of unjust homogenisation, disregarding ethnographic and cultural boundaries, is particularly evident in Northeast India. Categories like hill tribes and valley peoples are closely associated with the colonial project of transforming non-state spaces into state spaces (Scott 9-10). H. Kham Khan Suan has noted that the postcolonial state in India has inherited the state-society rupture, exemplifying “the hills-valley divide” (Suan 264). This sharp distinction between the two binaries is attributed not only to a territorial separation but also to a form of life that is different from the other (Kar 52). Sanjib Baruah writes how British colonial officials and ethnographers believed that each “tribe” had its supposed native habitat (Baruah 2), and cited how Paul Gilroy described this classification as a “bio-cultural” conception of ethnic characteristics as “fixed, solid almost biological” and inheritable (Gilroy 39). The persistence of a strong ethnic connotation of identity, ownership and belongingness found in the creative writings of indigenous writers from Northeast India shows that such associations influence even sociocultural and literary imaginaries.

In the twentieth century, Anglophone literature from this region has emerged as a powerful voice, highlighting themes like the mainland-Northeast binary, belonging, displacement, otherisation, and discrimination. These writers challenge the notion of a “united nation” by presenting narratives that are estranged, alienated, and marginalised. However, as successive waves of immigrants arrived in the Northeast, this exacerbated the already racial tensions present in the region. The presence of so-called “Outsiders” who try to undermine markers of collective identity has always been a source of contention among the “Insiders” of the Northeast, who define identity in terms of their ethnic and linguistic markers. Amit Baishya and Rakhee Moral note that Northeast Literature reflects different sensibilities over time. The early post-colonial period focused on nation-building, ethnic violence, and the new Indian identity. Later authors explored indigenous culture to “decolonize” the native mind, while others redefined Northeastern existence by introducing the doubly removed outsider, who desires for what Homi K. Bhabha

calls, the “third space” (Bhabha 50). This paper focuses on the latter group of writers, here Anjum Hasan’s novel *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*, whose works explore the “in-between space,” supposedly rejecting the dominance of any single political or social worldview. Nevertheless, the paper also argues that this desire for a “third space” does not necessarily lead to the “beyond” where there is successful negotiation. Rather it evolves into a form of collectivism where the seemingly cosmopolitan becomes “rooted” and is absorbed into the larger majority.

Conceptualising the “Third Space” within the Context of the “Minor”

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses the “Third Space” as an intermediary realm that allows for the accommodation of cultural and historical ambiguities or inconsistencies. Bhabha views this third space as a necessary condition for expressing cultural differences (Bhabha 38). He argues that cultural identity lacks originality and unity, and can only be accessed in the “negation” of any sense of inherent completeness (Bhabha 51). He further describes cultural identity as fluid, constantly being created and recreated through ongoing negotiations in what he terms the “Third Space.” This Third Space, though unrepresentable itself, shapes the discursive conditions that prevent culture from having primordial unity or fixity (Bhabha 37).

Bhabha positions the Third Space as central to the dynamics between coloniser and colonised and suggests that navigating this space is essential for advancing human history and reaching new horizons, which he terms the “beyond.” For Bhabha, the “beyond” represents a space that indicates a special distance, signifies progress, and promises the future. However, the very act of going beyond is unknowable and unrepresentable without returning to the “present,” which, through repetition, becomes disjointed and displaced (Bhabha 4). This perspective of dwelling in the “beyond,” while seemingly liberating as it creates spaces for experimentation and negotiation, may also be viewed as undermining the essence of national identity.

Consequently, in the context of newly independent nations, Bhabha's concepts of the "split" or "hybridity" in forming national identity can be an obstacle to nation-building (Abou-Agag 30). In his article "Homi Bhabha's Third Space and Neocolonialism," Naglaa Abou-Agag argues that for postcolonial nations, a solid identity is essential for progress, much like it was for European nations in the nineteenth century (30). While the third space is crucial for negotiating different cultures, focusing on "the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" rather than the exoticism of multiculturalism or cultural diversity (Bhabha 38), it remains confined to endless negotiations and enunciations without ever achieving the "beyond" (Abou-Agag 40).

This is particularly true in post-independent India too, as it started rebuilding the new nation based on Hindu nationalism. These nationalistic forces attempted to homogenise the diverse cultures in the Northeastern states. As far as India's neocolonial attitude is concerned towards the Northeast, Nayar notes that the marginalisation of the Northeast represents a "collapse of the post-colonial project of creating a unified India" (102). Vei Pou has also observed that post-colonial India has, perhaps unwittingly, fallen into the trap of colonial continuity (3), which Homi Bhabha describes as colonial mimicry: "almost the same but not quite" (81). The unjust homogenisation of the Northeast has led to a "sub-nationalism" in the region that opposes both the overarching pan-Indian narrative of nationalism and the inclusion of migrants from other parts of India which worsened the tribal/non-tribal divide (Biswas and Das 73). In this scenario, the literature that focuses on the voices of the migrants becomes a "minor" as they are "a counter-culture to the counter-culture," breaking the political, social, and economic dimensions of a unidirectional binary by portraying their adopted place of the settlement that turns marginalised individuals into "outsiders among outsiders" (Dewan 410).

In their seminal work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari explain that in minor literature, politics permeates everything, and all elements acquire a collective value. This forms a "collective assemblage" of subjects, potentially fostering a new sensibility and community of expression (Deleuze

and Guattari 17-18). This ideology of collectivism eventually gets ingrained even within the “minor.” In contrast to Bhabha’s notion of the need for a third space that involves the “negation” of fixed cultural identity, Deleuze and Guattari view “desire” (in becoming a “minor”) not as an indicator of lack or negation but as the driving force behind political formations and social structures. Desires are shaped by politics to create “interests.” In Northeast India, these coded political signifiers have generated a counter-culture where tribal identity and language respond to the dominant nationalist discourse.

In *Neti, Neti* there is no promise of a future that surpasses the historical moments the text revisits. Instead of an epiphanic moment of reconciliation or negotiation of cultures, we will see that the migrant subject in her quest for liberation from ethnic exclusivity is finally absorbed into mainstream society. So, the third space, instead of serving as an agency of negotiation, becomes a tool manipulated by the forces of neocolonialism (the larger dominant group) (Abou-Agag 38). Additionally, I argue that this may explain why the main character in *Neti, Neti* adopts a form of “rooted” cosmopolitanismⁱ (Nadiminti 355-56).

Narrativising Alienation in the Third Space

In *Neti Neti*, Shillong is portrayed as having an undercurrent of ethnic violence and conflict, with hostility towards migrants evident at every level. This hostility highlights a larger political issue: the desire for a third space. Hasan offers a nuanced perspective on what it means to be an outsider by focusing on the predicament of the non-Khasis, particularly the Bengalisⁱⁱ, who had begun to identify as belonging to the place but were treated as outsiders by the Khasis, the original occupants of the place. The conflicts in Meghalaya over the past four decades stem from the politicised division between tribal and non-tribal communities, with non-tribals perceived as infiltrators whose unfamiliarity threatens social order and stability (Matta 52).

The main protagonist, Sophie Das, is the grownup fictional character of Anjum Hasan’s earlier novel *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) who is an eight-year-old girl living in her fantasy world. In *Neti Neti*,

Sophie is now a twenty-five-year-old. She was born to parents from different linguistic backgrounds: her father is a Bengali from West Bengal, while her mother is a Hindi-speaking North Indian. Although non-tribals are Indian citizens and thus insiders to the Indian territory, Sophie is categorised as a “dkharⁱⁱⁱ” by the Khasis, a term they use to denote individuals they perceive as “outsiders” to their ethnic group, “foreigners” to the tribal hills, and ultimately, “strangers” to the land. While Shillong tribal inhabitant’s counter-narrative responds to unwilling dislocation, second-generation migrant Sophie longs for a space that comfortably accommodates her. Her liminal existence and desire for freedom prompts her to seek migration.

The opening of the text highlights some of the significant phases of change occurring locally, as the narrative immediately introduces us to Sophie’s family’s anxious dissatisfaction with their home location in Shillong, which, in the words of her mother Mrs. Das, has “gone down the drain” (Hasan 29). An encounter with Killer Queen where she is questioned about her presence in Shillong prompts Sophie to realise that it is time for her to leave the small capital town. Her constant ruminations about her place of birth and the inability to find acceptance on the ground of being a “non-tribal” remain the core thematic concerns of the novel. The dilemma of being an “outsider” is that while not wanting to move out of the place that one calls home, one is also aware of the sense of not being accepted. Sophie expresses anxiety about not having identical features with the people around her: “She wasn’t one of his (referring to Ribor who is a native of Shillong) people, didn’t look like one of his people” (Hasan 58). Hasan writes that “[T]his is what Sophie had always understood as home – a place where everyone is a different ethnicity from you and where your ethnicity defines who you are” (Hasan 185). Thus, the tribal communities have adopted the notion of “territorial ethnicity,” a term coined by Meiron Weiner, indicating a profound link between particular ethnic groups and specific geographic regions. This has intensified conflicts between settlers and Indigenous communities, as well as ethnic violence even between various ethnic groups.

This sense of existential crisis is reflected in the text through the dialogues between Sophie, who is struggling to cope with her

situation of being an “outsider,” and Ribor, a native of Shillong who is an “insider”:

‘But I have to leave some day so . . .’ she said.
‘But you’ve always lived here so . . .’ he said.

These incomplete sentences didn’t need completing. Both of them knew what they were saying. Sophie was saying—of course you can’t take off into India just like that—you with your secret language and your unique face. And Ribor was saying—even if you’re a dkhar, even if my people have always wanted your people out, even if blood has been shed, you have the right to stay. (Hasan 58)

Although belonging to different ethnicities, the narrative of the friendship between Sophie and Ribor reveals the possibility of transcending essentialist identity markers. Yet, Sophie’s secret affection for Ribor serves as a metaphor for her incapacity to openly declare her emotional bond with Shillong. There is a tension that exists between longing and belonging. The critic Avtar Brah poses some important questions in this regard:

When does a location become home? What is the difference between ‘feeling at home’ and staking claim to a place as one’s own? It is quite possible to feel at home and, yet the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home. (Brah 193)

Sophie’s feelings for Ribor become intertwined with her love for Shillong, the city of her birth. Similar to Sophie’s unfulfilling love relationship with Ribor, Shillong represents an unattainable entity compelling her to find a way to leave the city. The sentiment of permanently departing from Shillong has been ingrained by the older generation in the minds of the younger ones, causing Sophie to grapple with this conflict until she eventually departs from the city. While the first generation viewed Shillong as a place of opportunities, the second generation saw it as their native land, their homeland.

Despite experiencing various ethnic clashes and feeling like an outsider in her own homeland at times, Sophie came to realise that this small town was her context. It was the town that defined her and her family, shaping their identities and experiences.

Even though Sophie has made an effort to move on from Shillong, she still feels a deep connection to it. Even during her time in Bangalore, thoughts of Shillong persist, indicating that her connection to her hometown is deeply ingrained and not easily severed. The places to which we feel the strongest commitment may indeed be central to our lives. Despite her relationship with Swami in Bangalore, Sophie is constantly preoccupied with thoughts of Ribor. She mentally narrates her experiences to him, imagines his reactions, and considers the advice he might have given. Ribor's influence endures, shaping her perceptions and decisions even in his absence. Paradoxically, a strong attachment to places can also confine people, transforming them into figurative prisons that are difficult to escape.

Hasan delicately explores the sense of alienation and the paradoxical attraction Sophie feels for Bangalore and Shillong. Transitioning from the sylvan beauty, camaraderie, and solitude of Shillong, Sophie finds herself grappling with the anonymity, callousness, and confusion that seem to greet her at every turn in Bangalore. Her disenchantment is partly fueled by the chaos and ugliness she perceives in Bangalore:

The traffic sounded different from the way it did on a bus...it became a powerful, inchoate din as overwhelming as the images that flashed past: the driver of a stalled bus yelling at a tempo-truck wallah, a fat woman balanced sideways on the pillion of a crazily speeding scooter, snatches of music emanating from a car painted with orange flames, a pair of girls dressed identically in black suits and pumps sailing elegantly through the traffic on two scooters and keeping an animated conversation going between them. There was an unmistakably insane tinge to the melee. (Hasan 36)

Sophie contrasts this cacophony with the perceived stasis and peace of Shillong, highlighting the fundamental conundrum she grapples with in her life. At first, Sophie is captivated by the variety and abundance of merchandise on display. However, with her keen social awareness, she quickly discerns the emptiness concealed beneath the glossy surface. Observing the crowds from the highest floor, Sophie “saw how, from that height, people appeared to be driven by a mechanical impulse: swarming into the atrium, thronging the escalators, spilling out of stores” (Hasan 71). Her boyfriend Swami, unable to grasp her mood, repeatedly urges her to make a purchase. The fervour of consumerism surrounding her fills her with a profound sense of disgust. In a moment that seems to mirror her disillusionment, a sudden scream pierces through the mall as a child plummets to his death from three floors above. Sophie had an epiphanic moment when she understood that “nothing in this mall had any connection with her life” (Hasan 74).

Sophie’s departure from Bangalore signifies both a physical and metaphorical flight from the city. When Sophie first returns to Shillong, she is lured to the peacefulness and beauty of her childhood home, finding it alluring once more. Yet, Sophie realises that her idealised vision of Shillong as a place of pristine beauty and unshakeable tranquillity is nothing but an illusion. She eventually realises that her nostalgic image of a close-knit family is also illusory. The fractures beneath the surface soon become evident as Sophie observes her family drifting irreversibly apart. Her father intends to relocate to Shantiniketan to fulfil his ambition of translating Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into Bengali. Her mother has become increasingly devout and wishes to visit Benaras to absolve herself of the perceived negative karma of marrying outside her community. In a final effort to establish a sense of belonging, Sophie embarks on an affair with Ribor. Yet, despite her earnest attempts, she finds herself unable to realise her fantasies of settling down with him. She is confronted with the truth of her father’s words: “Whatever happens, you’re not coming back here, Sophie. You’ve moved on” (Hasan 234). It dawns on Sophie that one can never truly return to what was once considered “home.” As a *dkhar* or settler, Sophie understands that she can never truly “belong.” She comes to terms with the fact that she is merely a passing interest in Ribor’s life and could never

find contentment in his aimlessness or be privy to the complexities of his world. Sophie decides to distance herself physically and emotionally from them all, walking away until she is as far removed from them as she feels in every other sense. They inhabit a different world from the one she had once imagined, a world free from the burdens of history, “a life without history” (Hasan 255). Although Sophie frequently questions her ambivalent sense of belonging, she is surprised to discover that she is less of a foreigner than she believed herself to be in far-away India (Hasan 126).

From Failed Third Space to Rooted Cosmopolitanism

The longing for one's roots and the political desire to belong where one lives without renouncing one's sense of identity is reiterated in migrant writings. For migrants of all generations, the home away from home thus registers emancipatory confabulations. *Neti, Neti* demonstrates a recurring theme in diasporic writing: that the new “home” is a haven of cultural freedom in contrast to the inescapable conservatism and claustrophobia that are inherent in one's place of birth. The fact that diasporic literature repeatedly emphasises emancipation as a particularly advantageous trait cannot be overlooked, even though this perspective of emancipation is occasionally criticised as essentialist. Irene Skovgaard-Smith and Flemming Poufelt in their article “Imagining ‘non-nationality’: Cosmopolitanism as a source of identity and belonging” argue that cosmopolitan identity projects are socially and relationally accomplished using cosmopolitanism as a cultural resource (2). This is predicated on the idea that cosmopolitan identities are just as cultural and collective as national, ethnic, or ethno-religious identities (3). The collective here does not refer to an abstract notion of humanity as a whole or a global culture, but particular situated modes of belonging contingent on shared social spaces, circumstances and a set of collectively held understandings that represent a discourse of cosmopolitanism. This collective identity, categorised as “non-nationals,” is constructed in the context of diverse social spaces and shared circumstances. It equally involves boundary drawing to establish who does not belong and what the “non-nationals” define themselves vis-a-vis, namely national (mono)culture and parochialism.

In a manner reminiscent of diasporic literature, the novel delves into identities shaped by multiple cultures and cities. The diasporic^{iv} struggle of Sophie regularly reverberates throughout the narrative as she tries to find a sense of identity and belongingness. Anjum Hasan navigates the complexities of hybrid cultural identities and their interactions with national issues, which are frequently marked by conflict and contestation (Nayar 217). This is why Sophie's character seems to embody a cosmopolitan identity^v in contrast to an identity bounded by ethnicity and culture. The capacity of the characters to seamlessly integrate into other cultures can be linked to a globalised environment and cosmopolitan attitudes. In *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*, Neelam Srivastava argues that cosmopolitanism as "an intellectual reaction [is] a response to excessively restrictive notions of identities and identitarian politics" (157). Hasan's novel offers an alternative spatial understanding of indigenous people's "localism" through her counter-vision of cosmopolitan experience. Yet, she remains preoccupied with the ideas of identity and belonging made available by a geographically defined sense of the region.

Shillong, seen as a Third Space, fails to offer a space where elements from different cultures can engage in meaningful negotiations. Renowned social anthropologist Bengt G. Karlsson describes modern Shillong as a "tribal city," characterised by nostalgia and an inability to reconcile with its present. This establishes Shillong as a new socio-spatial form, where the idea of the city has shifted towards a more exclusive understanding, suggesting that only certain people belong there (Karlsson 33). The novel does not illustrate a negotiation between two cultures or cities—one tribal and the other cosmopolitan. Sophie's stories are not merely personal but rather a collection of social and political impressions. Her fantastical ideas of being adopted by a Khasi family to gain acceptance or having a Khasi lover to feel a sense of belonging are not only reflective of broader politics but are also integral parts of it. Thus, the primary conflict of identity in *Neti, Neti* is not merely a veiled critique of the authorities, but rather a response to encoded political interests expressed through personal microcosms. In her analysis of the novel, Anita Balakrishnan has commented that:

By avoiding any exploration of binaries such as small town vs. metropolitan life, east vs. west, global vs. local culture, Anjum manages to steer clear of any novelistic clichés. (Balakrishnan 8)

On closer reading of the text, Balakrishnan's observation is not quite true because the narrative does not transcend the spatial boundaries of ethnic versus national binary. Hasan has stated that, as far as her writing is concerned, she viewed Shillong as a "minor, forgotten place" and saw herself as bringing it into fiction (Hasan 5). According to Deleuze and Guattari, for a piece of literature to become "minor," everything must acquire a collective value, forming a "collective assemblage" of subjects (Deleuze and Guattari 17-18). They write:

It is (minor) literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of scepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (Deleuze and Guattari 17)

The emergence of "another possible community" and the forging of "another consciousness" and "another sensibility" can, however, not necessarily lead to negotiation but separation. This development is reflected in Sophie's final decision to envision herself as part of the broader national identity in response to regional identity politics.

Although Sophie had felt the pain of being an émigré, and the enforced sense of foreignness in her hometown Shillong, her filiation is projected primarily toward being a mainstream Indian citizen. The definition of "Indianness" given by Sophie excludes the marginal from the mainstream. Her description outlines the idea of India through her affiliation with the "values," "cultures," and histories of mainland Indians in contrast to the Northeast:

Somewhere in the depths of her childhood she had formed the idea that India was an exact feeling, a series of things in contrast to everything else in her environment which was simply what it was and had no relation to India. . . . The words of Rabindranath Tagore's poem— 'Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake'— sung during the school assembly on Independence Day were India. The yellowed pages of her history book when she was eight, filled with stories about King Harshavardhan and scenes from the Mahabharata, were India. The little flags with their dripping orange and green watercolours . . . were self-evidently India. ... At school, the girls who oiled their hair and worried about exams reeked of India, as against those who wore their skirts short and who, already at thirteen or twelve, understood the mysterious workings of sex. . . — all of these were uniquely and indisputably India. (Hasan 125)

Her conception of India as "a fixed series of things in contrast to everything else in her environment" becomes a kind of ultimatum that stands in opposition to the supposedly Northeast's indigenous people's "search for purity and aloofness." This realisation made her "foreignness" in Shillong strange as she finds herself more relatable with her mainland counterpart as the narrator says:

As far as Sophie could tell, this was the only legacy of having lived in Shillong—the sense that India was far away even though it managed, now and then, to manifest itself. When Sophie moved to Bangalore, she'd expected to be overwhelmed by the excess of India, and for the first few months she had approached everything with caution—the alien-looking mangoes, [. . .]. *But over the past year, she had by implication herself become India and now the opposite seemed strange—the idea that she could have lived the first twenty-four years of her life believing in her foreignness.* (Hasan 126, emphasis added)

Anjum Hasan's privileging of Indian metropolitan cities as the geographical and ideological locus for personal and cultural metamorphosis can be read as either naïve or complicit with neocolonialist values and practices, given the threat posed by Indian hegemony at the present times. In the novel, there is no meeting point between the two cultures where negotiations can be achieved. While the strength of the narrative lies in depicting the lives of migrants who strive to achieve a reframed sense of what home is, the failure to negotiate a common ground with the "other" is its limitation. Rather than bridging the fissures between the self and the other, Sophie, in a cathartic realisation of that elusive space called 'home,' finds herself becoming an embodiment of "India" itself.

In her essay "Review: Imagining Rooted Cosmopolitanism," Kalyan Nadiminti highlights how "Rushdie's cosmopolitanism fails in the Bombay novels because the individual can never supersede the group" (359). For instance, Saleem's suppression of Gandhi in *Midnight's Children* reflects an aversion to heroic figures in nation-building. This is because national heroes, no matter how inclusive they intend to be, cannot include everyone. Citing Trousdale, she shows how this issue also underlies the "immense real-world repercussions of nationalist imaginings of community" (Nadiminti 359). These imaginings seem to leave readers unable to reconcile the competing demands of cosmopolitans and communalists, offering instead "a vision of the absorption of the narrator into the surrounding crowds" (115). In *Neti, Neti* too, the absorption of Sophie into the mainstream culture is made evident as she fails to reconcile with the insider-outsider conflict in Shillong. Shameem Black has made a significant argument that "cosmopolitanism should be less invested in a traditional idea of feeling 'at home' in the world and more committed to recognising 'the world through the home'" (Black 45). Perhaps, taking Bhabha's notion of the "unhomely" where the traditional division between the world (public sphere) and the home (private sphere) becomes blurred, Black argues "how (domestic) homes can mimic the exclusionary tactics of nationalism and communalism" (49). In *Neti, Neti*, the disintegration of Sophie's family is a symbolic representation of the failure of cosmopolitan ethics at home and the societal level.

While Sophie's position as a non-tribal/outsider in Shillong is placed alongside the cosmopolitan and overpowering space in Bangalore, the novel also touches upon the narrative of Northeast India as a marginal location from the mainstream. Even today, the mainland's perception of the Northeastern region is viewed as "spatially distant and frontier-like" (Baishya 176). In a section of the novel titled "Don't Stop the Noise," Sophie's vulnerable situation is presented through the conversation between her and Shiva from Bangalore:

'I hear you're from the Northeast. What a tragic place,' said Shiva. . . .

Sophie said nothing, never quite sure how to live out this role as someone from the tragic Northeast — that amorphous, eternally misty region whose people apparently spent their lives either fighting each other or resisting the bullying arm of the Indian state. . . . (Hasan 124)

Dialogic interactions with Indian co-nationals like Shiva's character demonstrated that the latter seems to have a more certain sense of belonging. The character of Shiva can be read as a representative of the unassuming, ignorant and yet mindful individual of the mainstream society. He appears to be strongly established in his identity as distinctively "Indian," and unaffected by the notion that it is something constructed.

The stigma of rejection and alienation becomes apparent in the numerous interactions between individuals from the Northeast and those from mainland India. The exodus represents a reversal from migration from the hills to the plains, indicating to some extent the success of the government in fostering a sense of pan-Indian nationalism. However, the challenge lies at the grassroots level, where individuals from the Northeast often face the most difficult experiences in attempts at assimilation. In the novel, the character of Uncle Rock represents people from the Northeast who find it hard to connect with mainland Indians. On being asked by Sophie why he does not want to go back to Bangalore, he replies:

‘Something about the feel of the place – it’s not right. I didn’t get the right vibe. No one really has the time to have a conversation. And whether you’re from Shillong or Assam or Nagaland ... the whole damn Northeast – it’s all the same to them. They can’t handle us – our strange names, our strange languages, our strange accents. ... Uncle Rock’s not coming this way again...’ (Hasan 183)

The traditional cultural symbols that represent India are not shared by the “tribal” Northeast. In “North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis,” Balmiki Prasad Singh pointed out that despite their numerous variations, various parts of the Indian nation can relate to the major Hindu epics, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. But the epic is viewed more as a category of distance than of closeness by many Northeastern Christians who never professed Hinduism. While this also applies to other minorities in India, like Muslims, other Christians, and the “tribals” of the “mainland,” there are still linguistic continuities and caste-related affiliations among these latter groups, which allow for a degree of integration. This applies to Sophie’s character. In stark contrast, through the character of Uncle Rock, we witness how tribal people from the Northeastern region become marginalised as “outsiders” within the same national context. Thus, the violent ethnic and conflicting politics of the insider-outsider dichotomy are not restricted to the ethnic groups in the Northeast region but are a production of a larger political identity contestation vis-à-vis the Indian state (Bosco 588).

Conclusion

Since the early 20th century, the British have attempted to homogenise the Northeast for easier colonial administration, often treating it as an appendage rather than an integral part of the mainland. Baishya and Moral argue that the Northeast’s history of militarisation, ethnic violence, and rash political decisions has significantly contributed to an “incipient Northeast Indian identity” that engages with the heartland of India as a binary on issues of inclusivity and belonging (2). These issues not only highlight the

failure of the post-colonial pan-Indian discourse but also emphasise the ethnic and social conflicts in various regions of India that have influenced the modern Indian narrative. Hasan's novel highlights the fragility of human belonging by illustrating how individuals become alienated from the socio-political discourse, where the ethos of non-inclusivity and non-belonging becomes a defining characteristic of the region. *Neti, Neti* aptly articulates the experience of homelessness which is as much psychological as it is physical. The novel becomes minor on account of its role in reshaping conventional narratives and re-contextualising the modern Northeast. The liminal narratives from the margins deserve recognition as they seek to explore the uncharted territories of "imagined communities."

Endnotes

- i. Building on Kwame Anthony Appiah's idea of "rooted cosmopolitanism," which describes a person who appreciates the value of community and the benefits gained from belonging to it, and broadens their sense of self-interest to encompass the preservation of that community viz-a-vis the world at large, Kalyan Nadiminti identifies a "missing piece" in Appiah's concept by reading the works of Trousdale and Rushdie's works: rooted cosmopolitanism can also result in the formation of new identity categories and competing loyalties, making it difficult for individual identities to entirely rise above group affiliations. The close connection between rooted cosmopolitanism and national belonging calls for a thoughtful approach to nationalist sentiments, alongside advocating for cosmopolitanism's inclusive, progressive values. This perspective helps explain why characters like Sophie in the novel (a migrant) hold onto national identity as a way to counteract the alienation and instability caused by local/regional communal conflicts.
- ii. The derogatory terms "dkhar," "outsiders," "infiltrators," etcetera, are often applied, particularly to Bangladeshi migrants attempting to enter India through the porous border with Northeast India. This labelling has fueled resentment and fear among tribal populations, who feel under constant threat of losing not just their land but also their language, culture, and

customs. This pervasive anxiety and fear of infiltration, termed the “Tripura Syndrome” by Duncan McDuie-Ra, describes the fear of assimilation and destruction by non-tribals settling in tribal lands, exemplified by the plight of the tribal population in Tripura (69). The term “infiltrators” emerged in official discourse in 1962 when the Indian government identified immigrants in Tripura and Assam as such and initiated expulsion measures (Hazarika). Since then, it has been consistently used to describe migration inflows into India, especially from Bangladesh.

- iii. The term “dkhar,” while currently carrying a negative connotation to signify foreigners or non-tribals, originally referred to individuals belonging to an adopted clan. These clans were formed to include those who married outside customary Khasi practices, marrying non-Khasi individuals. These adopted clans, known collectively as the Dkhar clan, were created to distinguish them from indigenous clans. Many members of these clans use the prefix “Khar” before their adopted names to denote their identity. The term “Dkhar” was initially used by the Khasi to refer to people inhabiting the plains area near their territory, hence the common title “Dkhar.” In its original context, the term was not necessarily derogatory. As clarified by Diengdoh, there are many Khasi clans with the same title. The usage of the term's derogatory nature depends on the context of the conversation or the political environment in which it is used. (See also Valentina Pakyntein, “The Khasi Clan: Changing Religion and Its Effect” (2010), 354. Available at: <http://dspace.nehu.ac.in/handle/1/2042>. See also Tiplut, Nongbri, "Problems of Matriliney: A Short Review of the Khasi Kinship Structure," *Journal of NEICSSR*, 8.8 (1984), 6.)
- iv. The term “diasporic” space is not used here in the sense of Walker Connor’s definition of “living outside their homeland.” Rather it is used only in the context of her fictional characters living an “inland diasporic existence.” This concept is relatable with William Safran’s extended notion of the diasporic existence of people who “believe that they are not — and perhaps cannot be — fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it” (86). Although writers such as Floya Anthias have criticised the idea of essentialising the notions of “homeland,” “origin,” or “roots” in the context of diasporic studies, since it homogenises the

diaspora populations and overlooks the ideas of trans-ethnic bonds, nevertheless the concept of home remains an intrinsic motif of diasporic narratives.

- v. A cosmopolitan individual is at ease interacting with people from diverse cultures and regards the world as their home. The core concept of cosmopolitanism revolves around interconnectivity, mobility, and experiences that foster cross-cultural solidarity and advocate for a world free from discrimination. Martha Nussbaum, a prominent advocate of cosmopolitanism, defines it as the capacity to “recognise humanity wherever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance and respect” (7). Cosmopolitan cities are characterised by diverse cultures and cohesive urban cultures that unite people of various cultural identities and languages. They embody diversity, civility, sophistication, economic vibrancy, quality of life, creativity, and tourism.

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“Sanctioned Trespassing”: Rhythmanalyzing Rome in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Roman Stories*

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Abstract

Henri Lefebvre, in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (1992), established rhythmanalysis as a potent tool to engage with urban space. To analyse the rhythms of the city, the rhythmanalyst has to be one simultaneously within and outside the grasp of the rhythms. Migrants possess the potential to be ideal rhythmanalysts in that they are within the rhythms of the city they call their new home, while being simultaneously being outside them by virtue of their status as ‘trespassers.’ John McLeod, in *Global Trespassers* (2024), characterises migrants as “sanctioned trespassers,” (5) playing on the double meaning of the word ‘sanction’ as ‘permission’ and ‘restriction.’ As subjects ‘allowed’ to flourish, but within the limits laid down by the mainstream, migrants possess a unique vantage point from which they can observe and analyse the rhythms of the new homeland, while negotiating with urban space as insider-outsiders. My paper is a rhythmanalytic study of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Roman Stories* (2023), through the eyes of migrants engaging with urban space in the city of Rome.,

Keywords: Urban Space, Cities, Migrants, Insiders and Outsiders, Rhythm.

“Rhythms. Rhythms. They reveal and they hide. Rhythms: the music of the City, a scene that listens to itself, an image in the present of a discontinuous sum.”

—Lefebvre 36

Introduction

Urban space is marked by a multitude of rhythms that intersect and engage with each other constantly, shaping, and in turn being shaped,

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by the lives that unfold with the city. Rhythms are fundamentally constituted by the intersection of space, time and energy. All spatio-temporal systems are inevitably constituted and marked by rhythms, which enable the territorialisation of space. In “Territories, Environments, Politics” (2022) Brighenti and Karrholm assert that “rhythms are spatialized times and, simultaneously, temporalized spaces, so territories are no less temporal than spatial” (2). This becomes particularly significant in the case of “migrant cities” (Panayi 2) where there is a high concentration of migrants who contribute to the growth and development of the city. The territory of the city becomes a problematic one for the migrants, caught between the familiar rhythms of the homeland and the novel ones in the host city. John McLeod, in *Global Trespassers* (2024), characterises migrants as “sanctioned trespassers,” (5) playing on the double meaning of the word ‘sanction’ as ‘permission’ and ‘restriction.’ As subjects ‘allowed’ to flourish, but within the limits laid down by the mainstream, migrants possess a unique vantage point from which they can observe and analyse the rhythms of the new homeland, while negotiating with urban space as insider-outsiders.

Rhythmanalysis, as envisaged by Henri Lefebvre, can serve as a potent mode of analysis to understand locales populated by liminal entities such as migrants, who enable transnational rhythms within the space of the city, even as they mould themselves through existing rhythms in the new country. Rhythms possess the capacity to unveil hidden ideologies and power dynamics inherent in their sites by incorporating alterations in pace and style. This is particularly significant in the case of cities with large migrant populations, where racial violence and micro aggressive practices against ‘outsiders’ abound, and often obtain quasi-legal sanction. My paper is a rhythmanalytic study of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Roman Stories* (2023), through the eyes of migrants engaging with urban space in the city of Rome, negotiating and renegotiating their identities as “sanctioned trespassers” (McLeod 5) in the global city. Rome, which had, from its inception, been a city of migrants, housing refugees, slaves and exiles (McIntyre), functions as the locus around which the narratives in Lahiri’s work revolves. The aura of ancientness associated with Rome, along with its status as a modern capital city, makes it a potent

venue for the study of rhythms centred on spatio-temporal intersections and energy.

The study employs rhythmanalysis as a methodological framework to comprehend the dynamics of urban rhythms depicted in Lahiri's *Roman Stories*, through the perspective of migrant subjects. It is primarily a textual analysis involving a detailed reading of the primary text against the background of urban studies scholarship, with specific reference to the theoretical contributions of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault. Since the investigation is centred on the experiences of migrant subjects, significant inputs have been drawn from the field of mobility studies. The analysis focuses on the intersections of urban rhythms with the quotidian life of migrants, who function as rhythmanalysts observing and engaging actively with the city as 'trespassers', who have, nevertheless, been 'permitted' to flourish. Through this methodology, the study aims contribute to the discourse on urban mobility studies, utilising rhythms as a mode of engagement.

Rhythmanalysis was established as a method of analysing the city by Henri Lefebvre, who, in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (1992), defined rhythms as being created by "the interaction of space, time and an expenditure of energy" (15). For there to be a rhythm, there has to be differentiated repetition. Lefebvre maintained that daily life is constituted by multiple rhythms which co-exist, sometimes in harmony and at other times, in dissonance with each other. He identified various kinds of rhythms including the linear and cyclical rhythms, as also various states in which they co-exist, namely eurythmia, arrhythmia, polyrhythmia and isorhythmia. Lefebvre foregrounds corporeality as central to any rhythmanalytic project, since the body as a polyrhythmic site is essential to measure and analyse external rhythms. The paper takes into account the various aspects of rhythmanalysis as expounded by Lefebvre in order to comprehend the rhythms of Rome, constituting, and in turn, being constituted, by the presence and movement of migrant subjects, liminal entities constantly 'trespassing' into the city with 'sanction(s).'

The Migrant Flaneur as Rhythmanalyst

The rhythmmanalyst listens to the City, with her/his body as the metronome to measure not only the sounds and “noises,” but also the “murmurs” and “silences” (Lefebvre 19) in the city. The body functions as the metronome against which the rhythms of the metropolis are measured. The rhythmmanalyst must be simultaneously within and outside rhythms in order to perceive and assess them. Lefebvre asserts that “in order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely; it is therefore necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside (27). The rhythmmanalyst, thus, has to be one who is able to observe and listen to the rhythms ‘from outside’ even while remaining within them.

The diasporic subject thus becomes the perfect rhythmmanalyst in that (s)he is both a part of the city’s rhythm and yet, essentially outside it. He/she contributes to it, yet, (s)he can be a spectator, gazing at the street and the city from a location that is unique to him/her. The everyday spectacle of the street, the music of the city, can be perceived in all its complexities by the diasporic subject with her/his ability to be both internal and external to the city. The city as a text unfurls itself before the diasporic rhythmmanalyst, thereby making it possible for him/her to perceive an alternate vision of the new ‘homeland’.
(Koshy, *Rhythmanalyzing New York* 126)

The status of the migrant as a “sanctioned trespasser” (McLeod 5) permitted to flourish within invisible conditions laid down by the mainstream enables her/his to be within the rhythms of the city even while remaining external to them. In Lahiri’s *Roman Stories*, located in the city of Rome, the narrators are mostly migrant subjects negotiating with the space of the new homeland, trying to integrate and assimilate, despite being aware of their perpetual status as ‘outsiders.’ Their acute consciousness of their situation prompts them to observe and analyse the city in order to devise strategies and “tactics” (De Certeau 37) to appropriate its space and feel ‘homed.’ The rhythms of the city dictate and modify their daily lives, as well

as the migrant consciousness within them, transforming them into rhythm analysts constantly in negotiation with the movements, noises and silences within the city.

The migrants in the stories – the “*moretta*” (Lahiri 19), the protagonist of “Well-Lit House,” the mother in “Notes” and the maid in “The Delivery” are all immigrants, possibly from Asian countries, as stereotyped descriptions of their appearance and food habits reveal. They are flâneurs, navigating the city, watching the urban spectacle unfold before them. Being immigrants, the ‘pleasure’ of watching the city seems to be lacking in the narratives, with the characters encountering the space of Rome as a potentially dangerous site where their existence is precarious. Nevertheless, they measure the rhythms of the new city, often engaging in comparisons with those of their homeland as insider-outsiders, thus becoming rhythm analysts grasped by, and yet beyond, the rhythms of Rome.

“The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’” (De Certeau 93). The migrant subjects in Roman Stories, most of whom belong to the lower rungs of the social ladder, resort to walking as a means of comprehending the rhythms of the city. The Muslim migrant in “Well-Lit House” takes his wife on walks in the park, so that “she could get to know the city” (Lahiri 68). However, it is interesting to note that their walking remains mostly confined to the relative safety of the park. The insults hurled at them in the public sphere renders ‘walking in the city’ unsafe for the migrant. As sanctioned trespassers, ‘allowed’ to flourish within norms laid down by the mainstream, the husband and wife, who are doubly marginalised owing to their status as Muslim migrants, finds *flânerie* outside the boundaries of the park dangerous. The ‘joy’ that the mainstream associates with *flânerie* is unavailable to the migrant subject, making the idea of the flâneur as a “passionate spectator” (Baudelaire 24) or a relaxed observer of the urbanscape, untenable in the case of subjects rendered marginal. The rhythms of the city are perceived as threatening rather than enjoyable for those accused of trespassing. This is further illustrated in the case of the maid who walks to her employer’s house, taking in the sights the city offers.

I decide to walk back . . . I stop on the bridge for a moment to look at the river. . . The river is green. On the wall, just by my elbow, I notice a mass of ants. They're transporting a dead fly . . . And as usual I notice a young couple slowly kissing . . . A light push, perhaps even a gust of wind, would be enough to send her backwards over the edge. After crossing the bridge, I walk beneath a derelict archway sprouting weeds. (130)

Unlike the privileged flaneur conceptualised by Baudelaire, Benjamin and Simmel among others, the sights in the city are all marked by an aura of pessimism for the maid, reflecting her awareness of her own precarious existence. The awareness reaches its culmination when the Italian boys hurl racist slurs at her and shoot her in the shoulder. Walking the city becomes a dangerous act for the immigrant lower class subject, whose *flânerie* enables her to perceive rhythms of pessimism rather than the much-celebrated 'urban spectacle.' De Certeau argues that walking is a means through which pedestrians appropriate the topographical system. However, for the sanctioned trespasser, the migrant, the city remains ever-elusive. The hostile rhythms of the new city, engendered by communal and racial violence, renders any appropriation of the city difficult, if not impossible, for the migrant. The agency attributed to walkers in the city by Western theorists such as De Certeau and Baudelaire, do not hold ground in the case of 'secondary' subjects within urban space. As such, their perception of urban rhythms is grounded in fear and caution rather than the desire to "manipulate spatial organizations" (De Certeau 101) or assert their agency, as the characters in the stories indicate. Nevertheless, walking the city is an emotionally loaded act for the characters since, "to walk is to lack a place" (De Certeau 103) and they are subjects with no place, caught between the rhythms of the homeland and those of the new city. Through the act of walking, they attempt to comprehend urban rhythms as insider-outsiders, although it is an act fraught with complications.

The Migrant City as a Site of Arrhythmia

In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre discusses the various modes in which rhythms co-exist in polyrhythmic spaces. When they "unite with one

another in the state of health, in normal (which is to say normed!) everydayness,” it is called eurythmia. When “they are discordant, there is suffering, a pathological state” (16) which is called arrhythmia. The influx of migrants is viewed with suspicion by the natives of cities who believe that the ‘trespassers’ would damage the equilibrium in the social order, by bringing with them new modes of living and thinking. On the other hand, the migrants who wish to integrate with the mainstream and maintain their uniqueness in equal measure, find themselves caught in the entangling rhythms of the new homeland and their original place. When they carry their belief systems and traditional practices into the new spaces they inhabit, polyrhythmic sites are created. However, these sites often become sites of conflict between the mainstream and the new entrants, leading to the emergence of arrhythmia. The existing rhythms of the city are ruptured by violent ones emerging from ethnic and racial violence. The ensuing arrhythmia renders the city a potentially dangerous site for the migrant subjects, for whom the rhythms of the new city become the cause of anxiety rather than leisurely enjoyment.

The sense of alienation, combined with their relegation to the margins by the mainstream social order, leads to the migrant rhythm analyst reading the rhythms of the city as existing in dissonance with each other. Alhadeff-Jones, in “Beyond space and time—Conceiving the rhythmic configurations of adult education through Lefebvre’s rhythm analysis” (2019) maintains that arrhythmia may be “subjectively perceived, represented or lived as a feeling of incongruence and disconnection, a lack of harmony or a disagreement that expresses dissonance” (173). The migrant remains a perpetual outsider in the city, alienated and discriminated against, by virtue of her/his nationality, language or culture. As such, rhythm analysis through the lens of migrants would inevitably reveal the dissonance and incongruent rhythms in the space of the city.

Roman Stories features the city functioning as an arrhythmic site as experienced by migrant rhythm analysts. The cyclical rhythms occurring at “large and simple intervals” (Lefebvre 30) and the linear rhythms “consisting of journeys to and fro” (30) intersect with the daily lives of the migrant subjects, shaping their encounters and experiences within the city. Lefebvre describes the two kinds of rhythms thus: “The cyclical is social organisation manifesting itself.

The linear is the daily grind, the routine, therefore the perpetual, made up of chance and encounters” (30). For the migrant, both cyclical and linear rhythms remain sites of discrimination, alienation and the source of arrhythmia in the new city.

The mother in the story “Notes”, goes to drop her children to school every day by bus. The linear rhythm created by the daily movement to and from school is one where the migrant subject becomes acutely conscious of her status as an unwelcome outsider. “. . . [I] cram myself on the bus with the twins, standing the entire way to that distant and sleepy neighbourhood you passed on the way to the airport. No one ever gave up their seat, and if we spoke in our own language, the elderly passengers would stare” (162). The rhythms of the ‘trespasser’s’ language renders them objects to be gazed at, pointing to how the intersection of novel rhythms with the existing ones created by the ‘insiders’ leads to arrhythmia and dissonance. The seemingly calm neighbourhood which the narrator passes by in the bus, becomes a site of trauma for her owing to the contrast between the serene rhythms outside and the tense rhythms inside the space of the bus. Even as she “settles into a rhythm” (Lahiri 164) after accepting a new job in the same school years later, the rhythms are ruptured by the xenophobic notes she finds in her pockets. Her initial excitement about going to the school vanishes with her awareness of her status as a ‘trespasser’ and she begins to dread going there, creating secret rhythms of paranoia and fear in her psyche. Her already-strained relationship with the city breaks apart completely due to her perception of dissonant rhythms which refuse to accommodate her.

Similarly, in “The Boundary”, the secret physiological and psychological rhythms of the migrant is ruptured when the protagonist’s father, who used to sell flowers in a central location, is attacked by racists who tell him to “go back to wherever you came from” (12). The rhythms of the new city and the psychological rhythms tying the migrants to their homelands enter into a conflictual relationship, creating psychological strife and xenophobic attacks. “Well-Lit House” showcases a Muslim migrant couple chased away from their residential area owing to their religion and racial identity. The woman, “with her dress that hung to her feet and her head draped by a veil – the only way she felt comfortable going out” (Lahiri 66)

becomes an object of suspicion. The presence of the Muslim woman asserting her agency through the niqab creates paranoia in the psyche of the mainstream, who fear that “in twenty years, they’ll all be that way” (Lahiri 76). Their fear of the rhythms of the liberal city being ruptured by the influx of new religious identities get reflected here. The reluctance of the migrant to let go of the rhythms of the homeland and their status as sanctioned trespassers in Rome, combined with the secret psychological rhythms of paranoia in the mainstream, renders them vulnerable to xenophobic attacks. The Muslim couple is denied a space to live in, forcing the woman to return to her war-torn nation, and the man to seek refuge in the ‘abandoned’ city space of the underpass. The cyclical domestic rhythms of their daily life are ruptured, finally leading the man to commit suicide.

In “The Girl”, the protagonist taking a swim in the river under the guidance of a man becomes a cause of shame for the migrant family with its strict rules and taboos centred on sexuality, and she is chastised. The strictures laid down by the family make it impossible for her to integrate with her Italian counterparts, leading to subtle acts of exclusion and microaggression aimed at her. Innumerable instances of racial violence and discrimination create a fear of the city in the migrants who gradually withdraw to their homes or shift to the countryside where they feel ‘safer’. The arrhythmia created by their outsider status transforms both the migrant subjects and the city, creating a pathological situation where racial violence gets normalised.

Linear rhythms created by chance meetings and planned encounters abound in the city as depicted in *Roman Stories*. There are frequent meetings of friends, regular parties and events where people meet and interact. In the case of migrant subjects, such meetings become arrhythmic sites where their ‘outsider’ status gets highlighted, since the urban crowd that renders them invisible in public spaces is absent during such encounters in trattorias, cafes and domestic spaces. In “The Re-entry,” the two friends who meet in a trattoria symbolise two racial groups rather than two individuals in that, they are acutely aware of the degrees to which they ‘belong’ to the city. The migrant professor who works on ancient Roman history “knows the city well and loves it,” (16) staying in Rome for long periods of time, while the Italian woman has left Rome for another

city. Nevertheless, the irony emerges in the way the staff in the trattoria treat them. While the white woman is accorded respect and dignity, the migrant woman is rendered nameless and labelled “*la moretta*” (“the black woman”) by the Italian owners of the trattoria. ‘*La Moretta*,’ a black mask worn by Venetian women in the 17th and 18th centuries, and later used in carnivals, has another name – ‘*la muta*’ or ‘the mute.’ The racist slur thus not only denies her a name or an identity, but also a voice or the capacity of articulate herself. The migrant is rendered a ‘mute’ subject, a mask, rather than a human being with agency. She becomes a subject vulnerable to being humiliated owing to her status as a migrant. While her Italian friend who had long abandoned Rome still finds friends and acquaintances in the streets and café, the professor, despite her loyalty to the city, remains isolated in the vast urban landscape of Rome. Although she tells her companion that Rome is the only place where she feels at home, the encounter at the trattoria creates new rhythms of realisation in her psyche, forcing her to confront her own status as an outsider who will perpetually be denied a sense of ‘belonging’ by the city she calls home.

As she says this, however, she fears that her relationship with the city is actually quite tenuous. In the end, she has no personal link to the history she studies, nor will she ever experience the comfort of having lunch in a trusted restaurant that forms part of her family’s history, that holds within it memories of countless lunches between father and daughter, a space that soothes her friend even after such an immense loss. (22)

The rhythms of the city, which, till then, had seemed welcoming for the professor, suddenly turn threatening as she makes the realisation that she is a trespasser only ‘allowed’ to flourish within the unwritten laws laid down by the non-migrant Italian mainstream.

The cyclical rhythms engendered by work and play, with families going on vacations and parties at the beginning of holidays, lead to the forging or rupture of romantic relationships and friendships in the city. Parties also become venues where people from diverse backgrounds meet and interact, promising to meet later. In

“P’s Parties,” the writer establishes a romantic relationship with a migrant woman who he met at the party, and his wife strikes up a friendship with the same woman, leading to domestic strife. The protagonist’s romantic relationship with a man she meets on a holiday in “Dante Alighieri” and the homosexual relationship established by the father in “Two Brother” lead to the complete rupture of the fabric of the normative family, setting new rhythms in motion in their lives spent between the city and the countryside. The non-normative relationships thus established and the consequent arrhythmia mark the city for the characters, with specific locations serving as repositories of unpleasant memories. Although those who ‘belong,’ such as the narrator’s friend in “The Reentry” and the wife in “Two Brothers” have the privilege of escaping from such sites, the migrant subject, already caught between two worlds, finds a complete break from the new city impossible. As the Professor in “Dante Alighieri” remarks: “Rome switches between heaven and hell. By now it’s choke-full of things that have been broken, mistaken, bent, tossed, killed, but I can’t cut my ties” (202). The lack of agency stems as much from practical considerations pertaining to citizenship and work, as to emotional bonds forged with the rhythms of the city.

Although vacation spots and parties serve as seemingly carnivalesque locations within the city where rhythms coexist harmoniously in a state of eurythmia, the encounters in these spaces are marked by racial tension. The narrator in “P’s Parties” observes how the migrants and non-migrants gradually move into separate cliques during the course of the party, with the latter being transient visitors invited so that the host seems inclusive, rather than out of any genuine friendship, and often excluded from important events.

You’d encounter two distinct groups like two opposing currents . . . forming a perfectly symmetrical shape, only to cancel each other out a moment later. On one side, there were those like me and my wife, old friends of P and her husband who came every year, and on the other, our counterparts: foreigners who’d show up for a few years, or sometimes just once. (28)

The 'us-them' dichotomy becomes more conspicuous in the ensuing lines where the narrator draws clear distinctions between "them" and "those of us born and raised in Rome" (28). The subtle privileging of the latter and the perception of the migrants as a "nomadic population - prototypes for one of my future stories" (28) reveals how urban rhythms as perceived by non-migrants, function as cadences of privilege, transforming 'outsiders' into dehumanised objects to be dissected and analysed. The discordant notes established when the two groups intersect create arrhythmia in the space of the seemingly inclusive city.

Even as the city accommodates migrants and provides them opportunities to build a life, the rhythms of discordance within the urban space render it impossible for the subjects to flourish beyond the limits laid down by the mainstream. The urbanscape, dominated by the rhythms of the mainstream, becomes a potentially dangerous site where the migrant is constantly at risk of being attacked – verbally or physically. The micro aggressive practices directed against such 'liminal' subjects not only prevent the integration of their unique rhythms into the urban space, but also create problematic cadences that ultimately rupture the fabric of the city and the family.

The Migrant City as Rhythmic Heterotopia

Michel Foucault introduced the concept of 'heterotopia' in 1967, to indicate places and institutions where "existing places serve as counter-sites where the other sites of everyday existence are represented and contested" (Koshy, *Mapping the Postcolonial Domestic* 132). They "create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled" (Foucault and Miskowiec 8). Foucault terms it "the heterotopia of compensation" (8). The new city serves to compensate for the disorder and chaos, the lack of opportunities, or any other absence, in the homeland. For the migrant, the city is a new version of their homeland, while at the same time, it functions as a contrast to the latter at multiple levels. For instance, in "Well-Lit House", the narrator finds Rome to be a city which accepts them, albeit reluctantly, and when he shifts to the new house, he gains some semblance of 'belonging' as might have been the case in his

homeland. However, the peaceful ambience of the city stands in contrast to the war-torn country from which he has escaped. The compensatory heterotopic rhythms of Rome make it a counter-site where the migrant negotiates with his dual identity.

Rome is located between the Foucauldian “crisis heterotopia” and “heterotopias of deviation” (Foucault 4-5). It becomes a place where the migrants, who have left their homeland willingly or unwillingly, due to socio-economic or political crisis or even psychological crisis, recuperate. They are given the opportunity to begin again, although such opportunities are severely proscribed within stereotyped notions of migrant. At the same time, they are perceived as ‘deviant’ by the mainstream social order, and considered as potential threats to the ‘ethos’ of the city. In Lahiri’s work, the Italian couple’s concern that the migrants will overtake their city, and the old woman’s refusal to get “her groceries delivered by some boy from another country” (91) are clear indications of how migrants are perceived as deviant imposters. As such, there are conflicting rhythms within the heterotopic space of the city, which is reflected in the psyche of the migrant subjects as well.

Another principle of heterotopia is that access to such sites involve rites of opening and closing. Foucault asserts that:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public space. Either the entry is compulsory . . . or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in, one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. (7)

The migrant is merely a ‘sanctioned trespasser,’ who, in order to enter the city and obtain access to its resources, have to submit to rites involving legal procedures and a literal or symbolic purging of ties to the homeland. It is only with the permission of the law and even the mainstream subjects that the migrant can enter the city. The migrants in *Roman Stories* are ‘sanctioned’ in both senses of the term - they are ‘permitted’ inside and at the same time, they are ‘under sanctions.’ The near impossibility of a migrant obtaining a house with

government support, and the way in which the mainstream ensures that such spaces are wrenched away from the migrant even if s/he receives access, are highlighted in the stories. Even the rites and purification do not seem adequate for them to 'belong' to the heterotopic space of the city. As such, the heterotopic rhythms as experienced by migrant subjects are always premised on the condition of their subjugation to the cadences created by the mainstream.

Foucauldian heterotopias "inject alterity into the sameness, the commonplace, the topicality of everyday society" (Foucault and Miskowiec 4). The migrant city thus becomes a Foucauldian heterotopia by functioning as a counter-rhythmic site where novel rhythms are created by the existence of 'trespassers.' For there to be a rhythm, there has to be differentiated repetition. The monotonous repetition of the same sound does not create a rhythm; there has to be some alterity, some change in the sound or movement. The heterotopic space of the city, by introducing the alterity, enables the creation and proliferation of multifarious rhythms, moulding, and in turn, being moulded by the 'trespassing' consciousness of the migrant.

Production of Urban Rhythms through Dressage

Lefebvre asserts that most rhythms are determined by dressage or the breaking in of human beings. Subjects deemed 'deviant' or 'different' are brought 'under control' by the state and the mainstream by teaching them to behave in a certain way and to accept strictures without objection.

To enter into a society, group or nationality is to accept values (that are taught) . . . but also to bend oneself (to be bent) to its ways. Which means to say: dressage. Human break themselves in. They learn to hold themselves. Dressage can go a long way: as far as breathing, movements, sex. It bases itself on repetition . . . One presents them with the same situation, prepares them to encounter the same state of things and people. Repetition . . . is ritualized in humans. Thus, in us, *presenting ourselves* or

presenting another entails operations that are not only stereotyped but also consecrated: rites. (Lefebvre 39)

The migrants in *Roman Stories* are repeatedly exposed to the same circumstances and experiences of marginality, so that racial attacks and discrimination, constitute the 'everyday' and not the 'extra-everyday' for them. The mother in "Notes" remembers the bus rides to the school as "a pleasant memory," (Lahiri 162) despite the discrimination she faces in the bus. Being exposed to xenophobia on a daily basis, she learns to bend herself to suit the interests of the mainstream. The dressage that occurs through repetition makes her a docile subject, obedient to the state and the mainstream. She "has no desire to file any kind of report" (167) regarding the xenophobic notes she receives, precisely because she has been conditioned to accept racial discrimination as 'normal.' Neither her sons nor the school protects her since her migrant status renders her a '*homo sacer*,' who can be persecuted with veiled legal sanction. Agamben describes the *homo sacer* as "one whom the people have judged on account of a crime," (71) the crime here being the mere fact of the subject being a migrant who is within, and at the same time, outside the law.

Again, in "The Delivery", the maid does not object to the rudeness of the employee in the post-office; nor does she express any visible anger or resistance. Instead, she "feels terrible and hopes the *signora* won't be too angry" (130). The young man who shoots her dismisses his friend's objection to his act, saying it was "only to scare her" (134). The perception of the migrant as a *homo sacer*, who can be attacked with no threat of legal action, becomes evident here. Such acts are passively accepted by the migrants as 'normal,' indicative of the way in which they are 'broken in' to accept any kind of treatment and any kind of opportunity available to them. In Lahiri's work, there are innumerable instances of migrant subjects passively accepting menial jobs despite their educational qualifications. Lahiri mentions a man who had studied Chemistry in his homeland but worked in a pizzeria in Italy. Most of the migrants engage in menial jobs or assist Italian shop-owners for low salaries. The only instance in the work where a migrant raises his voice against the injustice meted out to his family is in "Well-Lit House" where he discusses the issue with the media and attempts to get the legal system involved. The newspaper

does not publish his interview and the police gradually withdraw from the site of trouble, pointing to the modes in which the dominant rhythms subdue the voice of the migrant, condemned by his dressage.

The state colludes with the citizens in order to bring the pathological figure of the migrant under control. S/he is broken in with complete sanction from the state and the law, with violence against migrants being tolerated, and even encouraged by the mainstream, who are aware of the latter's status as subjects within, and at the same time, outside the purview of the law. The biopolitical power of the state extends to the psyche of the migrant, who is forced to accept her/his dehumanisation as 'normal.' Any possibility of resistant or visibly discordant rhythms are thus crushed by the mainstream, through the dressage of the migrant.

Conclusion

Rome, as depicted by Lahiri, in *Roman Stories*, thus functions as a polyrhythmic site inhabited by subjects from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, who negotiate with each other and with the city, creating multifarious rhythms in the process. Migrants, being perceived as 'sanctioned trespassers' by the state and the mainstream, are exposed to and forced to accommodate the rhythms created and maintained by the mainstream to protect their interests. The violence that would ordinarily be perceived as the 'extra-everyday' for the normative subject, becomes the 'everyday' for the migrant, forced by her/his dressage to accept the norms of the new land without resistance. Rhythmanalyzing the migrant city inevitably involves an unearthing of the hidden rhythms of micro aggressive practices and discrimination directed at migrant subjects, who are valued for their labour power, even as they are rendered invisible and 'dirty' by the mainstream. The arrhythmic urbanscape thus becomes a dangerous site for the migrant, who is denied human dignity and basic rights within the city, becoming the "sacred (wo)man" or "the *homo sacer*," (Agamben 71) an ambivalent entity vulnerable to being persecuted, and even killed, with impunity.

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Divya Srinivasan Breed's *Meru*: A Paradigm of Disability-Conscious, Postcolonial, Gender-Neutral Posthumanism

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Abstract

This paper studies the various ways in which disability, gender, postcolonialism, and posthumanism intersect in Divya Srinivasan Breed's (pen name S. B. Divya) science fiction novel *Meru* (2023). How does S. B. Divya delineate questions of reproductive autonomy for disabled and non-heteronormative bodies? How do ableism and colonial rhetoric come together to oppress an entire race? How does S. B. Divya expose this oppression and what does a resistance grounded in posthumanism look like? How does Divya envision posthuman relationships and a society that is considerate of differently abled, gender non-conforming, and alternately sexual bodies? This paper thus postulates S. B. Divya's *Meru* as a new, creative paradigm for subversive posthumanism that is conscious of the various axes of oppression in human society—disability, gender, and colonisation.

Keywords: Posthuman, disability, chronic illness, postcolonial, gender, *Meru*

Introduction

As a theoretical framework that incorporates post-anthropocentrism, post-humanism, and post-dualism, posthuman studies offer a uniquely fertile ground for challenging the prevailing status quo in human society as well as for imagining inclusive alternatives to it. This paper looks at Divya Srinivasan Breed's science fiction novel

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Meru as a posthuman challenge to the heteronormative, ableist, and colonialist discriminations upon which human society is built. It deals with the following questions in *Meru*: How does Divya decentre humanity as a species and their ableist, heteronormative society? How can a posthuman approach subvert colonialist agendas? Can posthumanism offer a modality that creates space for alternative sexualities and non-heteronormative motherhood?

Meru is set over a thousand years from now when genetic engineering has led to the post-human descendants of humanity—alloys and constructs—being in charge of the universe. Humanity’s attempt to control evolution led to the creation of alloys – conscious life forms made of metal who believe that “all forms of consciousness have equal value in the universe” and that “all Beings should minimise harm to other forms of consciousness, with priority given to other Beings” (Divya). After destroying Earth and Mars through the process of terraforming, humans give authority over the entire universe to the alloys who need only water, sunlight, and bhojya (a nutrient solution) to survive. Reproduction is generally done via artificial “wombs,” structures with their own medical constructs which have the equipment for genetic editing, gestation and birth of humans as well as alloys. Sexual reproduction exists too, but is considered old-fashioned and looked down upon due to the arbitrary mechanism of genetic heredity.

Within this society, two alloys Kundhina and Vidhar choose to spend their lives on Earth raising their human daughter Jayanthi. Jayanthi is born with Aspiration and Avarice Disorder and sickle cell anaemia, but refuses to get gene therapy for either despite being of consenting age. When she hears that an Earth-like planet, Meru, has been discovered but will be forever forbidden to humans, she volunteers to be the test subject of an experiment to see whether humans can thrive on the planet without causing any harm to its environment. With the support of Hamsa, now a politician in favour of humans, she goes to Meru with Vaha, a pilot alloy capable of space travel with human habitable chambers inside zir body. The novel narrates their journey as the two beings find a fulfilling romantic relationship with each other and dream of a life together on Meru.

***Meru* as a Paradigm of Disability-Conscious, Postcolonial, Gender-Neutral Posthumanism**

The universe of *Meru* is posthuman in many ways. This is first evident through the depiction of a post-human race of alloys and constructs whose physical bodies differ significantly from those of present-day humans. For example, Vaha, an alloy pilot, is described as having “blue-black skin, violet eyes, and golden solar wings shaped like a bird’s, rectangular with rounded corners. . . . Zir body tapered into a long, elegant tail with split fins” (Divya 54). Such embodiments make the population of the Constructed Democracy of Sol post-human at a very material level. But Divya’s posthuman engagement in this text goes far deeper than surface-level physical changes. The use of queer pronouns like “zie,” “zir,” and “they” for various characters throughout the text—Vaha, Kaliyu, Sunanda, etc.—shows that in addition to bodily variations, this society also has a proliferation of genders. The gendered multiplicity is not remarked upon as being atypical, deviant, or anomalous in the text—this normalisation is an incisive critique of the rigid dualisms that currently ail human society. The overcoming of human binary structures like gender is another manoeuvre that makes *Meru* a posthuman text.

Divya’s corporeal imagination of the post-human creatures in *Meru* is a feminist take on the male-authored female robots of science fiction literature and films as well as reality. Female androids in popular culture are often seen as objects made to fulfil male fantasies of feminine submission and sexualisation. The female robot Rachael Rosen in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), for example, “is docile, child-like, unemotional and detached, but also very sexual. . . . She is the protagonist’s object of desire, and represents the woman who says ‘no’ but really means ‘yes’ when it comes to sex” (Wegert 111). Kate Devlin and Olivia Belton, in a highly nuanced analysis of the films *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Blade Runner 2047* (2017), note the attention paid to the sexuality of the female androids even when they are in a disembodied form (357). Though Samantha in *Her* may not exactly be a sex fantasy, she is certainly a love fantasy inspired by the desire of men to possess an object that will love and desire them (369-70). Stuart Murray gives the example of Pepper, a companion robot

manufactured by Aldebaran robotics and the Softbank mobile network in Japan and France. He describes how Mark O'Connell, in his book *To Be a Machine*, addresses Pepper:

O'Connell alternates pronoun use, with Pepper being 'it' when basic presence and function is described ('a four-foot humanoid'), and 'her/she' when focusing on the *role* he understands she/it/he has been designed for (a 'customer service humanoid' designed to serve a 'social and emotional' function). . . . When robots become emotional or subservient in any way, it appears that they 'become' female." (Murray, "Design, Engineering and Gendering" 78)

As evident from the above examples, the creation of artificial beings is often marked by "a male fantasy of the female form" (Wosk 154) in androcentric science fiction. Divya counters this ideation of female robots through the depiction of post-human characters such as Vaha and Chedi in *Meru*. It is also never revealed whether the incarn (a second, human-like body of an alloy) Vaha creates to spend time with Jayanthi is male, female, or androgynous, even during the scenes depicting their intimacy. Divya's ability to write intimate scenes without focusing on sexual organs thus offers a new paradigm for depicting posthuman sexuality and relationships. Zir incarn bears a close resemblance to zir alloy body, and both of them are used to thoroughly decentre humanity. To Vaha, everything about humans feels so "strange and nonintuitive" (Divya 80) that zie has to watch human entertainment to familiarise zirsself with them. Zie is perplexed at "the feet that stayed perpetually bound to a surface" (80). Vaha's experience of life as a humanoid incarn creates further cognitive dissonance between readers and the human body they take for granted:

Zie hadn't realized that living with gravity would pose so many challenges. . . . Equally confounding was learning to use the sense of smell, a modality zie had experienced only through taste in the back of zir throat. . . . The single eyelid posed challenges, too. Not only could zie not fully block bright lights, zie

had to remember to keep dropping the lids to keep zir eyes moisturized. (130)

The attempt to learn human speech, gait, and behaviour in general, shown in humorous detail through Vaha's incarn, also defamiliarises and exposes the normalisation of ableism in human society. Divya's foregrounding of a posthuman disability consciousness is thus evident from her portrayal of alloys. Another element adding to the post-humanism of alloys in *Meru* is that they are conceived by Divya as having the option of multiple embodiments. Vaha, for example, has the body zie is born with, along with a humanoid incarn that zie creates for the mission to Meru. This incarn plays a key role later in integrating zir memories with Vaha's alloy body after the injuries zie sustains from zir fight with Kaliyu. Vaha is then able to remember zir life with Jayanthi and the future zie envisioned with her and their child. This process deconstructs the "singular, normative and coherent self" espoused by humanism (Murray, "Design, Engineering and Gendering" 117). At the same time, the interaction between Vaha's alloy body and the incarn, and the relationship between Vaha and Jayanthi, epitomise the "interconnections, messy histories, blurred origins, borrowing and adaptations, cross-overs and impurities [and] dependency and mutuality across species" that are paramount for any critical posthumanist methodology (Nayar 30).

Chedi, a conscious megaconstruct that can house up to fifteen hundred humans, is another example in the text of a posthuman creature that defies all human constructs. Her preferred pronoun is "she," and she is frequently described by Sunanda as a "mother hen. She likes to pick up stray humans and give them a home" (Divya 247). The juxtaposition between her clearly mechanised body and motherly nature is striking. On the one hand, "Chedi has a nested-cylinder design. A massive block of ice formed her outermost layer, then came the level Jayanthi was on, and finally, above her at Chedi's core, an artificial sky and light source" (248). On the other hand, she feels "like a living biome" (248). This portrayal of Chedi is a posthuman alternative to the normative construction of motherhood steeped in the binary gender stereotypes of human society.

In addition to gender, sexuality, material body, motherhood, characterisation, and narrative, as discussed above, *Meru* is also a

posthuman text at the level of language. Not only does Divya use a multiplicity of queer pronouns, parents are not labelled as mothers or fathers. Alloy parents are referred to as “makers,” while human parents are referred to simply as “parent.” When Jayanthi finds out that she is pregnant, for example, an “internal chant” begins in her brain: “*I’m going to be a parent. I’m going to be a parent. I’m going to . . .*” (255; italics in original). This gender-neutral vocabulary for parents is another step towards a posthuman community that defies human constructs.

The management of Earth and humans by alloys in *Meru* has clear neocolonialist overtones. The alloys take resources not available elsewhere in the Solar System from Earth in exchange for taking care of their human ancestors and restoring the planet’s environment. While humanity voluntarily handed over leadership to atone for their mistakes, the alloys regulated humanity to the point of making them ambitionless and non-greedy over centuries of genomic editing. The prohibition of space-related and genetic studies careers to humans confines them to a life of agriculture, art, reproduction, and raising children. Rather than ruling by force as happened in historical colonial projects, the alloys literally create the perfect docile subjects through biotechnology. Transhumanist ideology has thus created novel forms of colonialism in *Meru*.

Jayanthi’s evolution from wanting to be like alloys to standing up to them for human rights is a postcolonial journey. The necessity of leaving room for random mutation to avoid genetic stagnation, no matter how advanced alloys become in genetic engineering, means they can be subverted. By refusing to take gene therapy for her Aspiration and Avarice Disorder and sickle cell anaemia, Jayanthi defies the alloys’ attempt to keep humanity subservient. Though her chronic illness causes her suffering, it also provides her a different vantage point into her society. She is an outsider in her society not only due to her chronic illness, but also due to the technologically enhanced features her parents designed her with. She has a “bodym” like alloys – an information network that provides the body’s metrics to those who have access. Her parents also gave her an emchannel – which is the natural, nonverbal form of communication for alloys. It allows her to understand rudimentary phoric (the language of the alloys) and connect her brain directly to devices. Being neither

completely human nor completely alloy, Jayanthi is largely shunned by both. She understands clearly that her radically different embodiment is seen as a transgression in her society:

They had never felt comfortable with her circumstances—a human child born to two alloys, given emtalk capabilities, and lacking a surname. . . . she occupied a liminal space. Of Earth but not like other humans; of alloys but unsuited to life in space.
(Divya 16)

Jayanthi is posthuman in more ways than one. She is ostracised for having a non-normative body, disabled due to her chronic illness, and ambitious in a human society that has virtually erased disease and ambition. This posthuman existence “generates valuable experiences, insights and often unexpected modes of access to cultural discourse and critique” (Barker 4) that eventually give rise to Jayanthi’s postcolonial consciousness and disillusionment with alloy governance.

At the age of twenty-two in the beginning of the novel, Jayanthi is an adult by human standards. However, Hamsa sees her as a child “compared to [his] two hundred and eighty-seven years” (Divya 5) of life as an alloy. Due to the difference in mortality, technological advancement, and value systems, all alloys perceive humans as ungrateful, self-destructive children dependent on alloys for survival and protection. As Pushkara tells the Meru Exploration Committee, “I saw firsthand the damage humankind will do if left to unfettered consumption. . . . We have expended so much effort to provide human beings a good life on Earth, a balanced one that respects the planet” (338). This equation of humanity with children is upheld till the end of the text, where Jayanthi acknowledges the past mistakes of her ancestors:

In the previous millennium . . . humankind committed terrible mistakes. We hurt ourselves; we hurt other forms of life and consciousness, including Earth and Mars. . . . Like children, we needed protection from our own behavior. . . . We needed to remain constrained until we learned new values. (394)

Children grow into adults and become independent, but that development is denied to humans by the alloys in *Meru*. Their childhood is seen as perpetual, so the alloys adopt a paternalistic and condescending approach to humans. This was precisely the justification used by European colonialists, as Barker observes: “By naturalizing colonial subjects as ‘permanently childlike’, European imperial powers were able to assume the role of ‘permanent guardians’, masking their rapacious ambitions to achieve global sovereignty under the rhetorical banner of a duty of care” (7). Sunanda, one of the rogue humans who live on the megaconstruct Chedi capable of sustaining humans during space travel, explains this colonialist rhetoric to Jayanthi:

As long as [alloys] have humans on Earth to take care of, they continue to have unlimited access to Earth’s resources. If we leave . . . the population on Earth will shrink. Fewer alloy services will be needed, and unless they amend the compact further, they’ll have to proportionally reduce what they extract from the planet. (Divya 270)

The alloys live on the principle that all matter is conscious and has equal value. Accordingly, planets have consciousness too, and harm to all forms of consciousness must be minimised. With this logic, the alloys refrain from actively modifying any new planets they find in the universe, especially if they harbour any kind of life. However, this refrain from extracting resources from other planets is possible only because they take the resources they need from Earth. The principles that alloys use to justify the condescension of their ancestral humans are therefore based on an extractive economy targeted towards Earth. This extractive colonialist structure is sustained by the parent-child rhetoric they impose on humanity.

The colonised child was medically represented as physically and/or mentally disabled, which meant that this child would not be able to mature. The absolute pathologisation of ambition for humans and its complete normalisation for alloys in *Meru* reduces human impact on the planet, but at the same time “consolidate[s] the conditions required for ongoing [alloy] dependency” (Barker 8). The Alloy Era is thus constructed by pitting humanity as the degenerate

other against which alloys are civilised, rational, and superior in the same vein that the colonising self is constructed against the colonised other. Moreover, “the body that needs to sleep, be fed or that can be subjected to violence and feel pain . . . is seen as inferior to a posthumanist consciousness of pure thought” which the alloys believe they possess as a race (Murray, “Design, Engineering and Gendering” 114).

Though Hamsa is in favour of expanding human settlements into outer space, he too harbours the same paternalistic attitude towards them—just to a lesser degree. His condescension and patronising are evident when he is telling Jayanthi off for demanding more freedom for humankind: “by your biological nature, you need to consume material goods to survive, and you have a deep-seated instinct for accrual. We’ve worked hard to help you overcome that. How would we control this additional freedom granted to you?” (Divya 347). Alloys see themselves as rescuing humanity from themselves, much like the saviour myth used by Western colonial forces in history. In spite of all the misgivings he has about humanity, Hamsa still uses Jayanthi for his political campaigning. For him, the rhetoric of treating humans as children under alloy care translates into charitable support. He makes Jayanthi the poster girl for his campaign to allow human settlements on Meru due to her sickle-cell disease, just like “the figure of the non-western disabled child [is] repackaged and redeployed by charities and news media as an image of pathos . . . that draws attention to ‘Third World’ crises” (Barker 10).

In a society where the utter lack of ambition and eradication of disease from humanity is forcefully normalised by the alloys, Jayanthi’s Aspiration and Avarice disorder and sickle-cell anaemia disrupt the colonial regime of alloys. Despite the pathologisation of human ambition, Vaha is able to recognise the similarities between alloys and humans easily. When Jayanthi shares her “ambitions, dreams of being a tarawan, contributing to the Nivid” with Vaha, zie responds that it “sounds like a reasonable goal, one that many people I’ve met would share with you” (Divya 97). Contributing a discovery to the Primary Nivid is, in fact, a goal shared by most alloys including Vaha. In addition to denying gene therapy for her Aspiration and Avarice Disorder, Jayanthi also refuses treatment for her sickle-cell anaemia—a disease that has been eradicated from human society. She

is satisfied with the treatments she receives as they make her life manageable, illustrating that disability does not need to be debilitating with access to the right resources. Further, her disease is precisely what makes her a good fit to live on Meru because the excess oxygen in its atmosphere would mean her cells are not oxygen-starved. The alloys are against human settlement on Meru despite knowing that it would not need to be terraformed if it was populated with humans who had sickle-cell disease. Thus, it is through Jayanthi's disability and transgressions that the ruptures "in hegemonic or authoritative renderings of 'nation', 'power' and 'normalcy' [in The Alloy Era] are made visible" (Barker 14).

Throughout her journey in space, Jayanthi understands the extent and pervasiveness of the alloy prejudice against humans. She realises "her parents had never taken her off-planet. Hamsa had indulged her tarawan studies, but not her ambitions. They only let her go to Meru because it was an easy way to advance Hamsa's agenda" (Divya 271). Apart from displaying her Bildungsroman, this scene also depicts her disillusionment with the alloy regime: "*maybe alloys are just as selfish and flawed as humans*" (271; emphasis in original). Her journey throughout the universe therefore nurtures her postcolonial consciousness. Rather than proving the alloys right, she subverts the stereotypical associations of dependency and neediness with children. When both Vaha and Kaliyu abandon her on Meru, the alloys assume she would die within days due to the lack of alloy support. Instead, she manages to get herself off of Meru while being pregnant and survives when the megaconstruct Manib leaves her to fend for herself in a spacesuit with limited oxygen in the vacuum of space. She stays on Chedi, a friendly megaconstruct that houses several rogue humans in space, for a few months, but goes to the Primary Nivid despite knowing the hostility she will face there. Moreover, when no one is able to find Vaha, she is the one who convinces Kaliyu that they can find zie together. Her actions throughout the text dispel the myth of childlike dependency of humans on alloys.

Jayanthi successfully questions the colonial regime established by the alloys in the public statement she makes during her trial at the end of *Meru*: "Who decides when children no longer need constant oversight from their guardians? If our protectors . . . continue to

restrain us in the name of misdeeds long past, then like overbearing parents, they are abusing their power. I believe that alloys have fallen into this trap” (Divya 394). Jayanthi’s own conduct and belief that the evolved humanity of her time can proceed in a more sustainable, respectful, and caring manner than her ancestors make her posthuman. She represents Divya’s imagination of the value system of a truly posthuman humanity. She takes the utmost care not to contaminate Meru in any way and follows every protocol given to her to ensure the planet’s safety.

Despite his claims of concern for Meru if humanity were allowed to settle there, it is Pushkara himself who, aided by a gullible Kaliyu, ends up contaminating the planet in an effort to sabotage the experiment. He orders Kaliyu to launch a device containing organic matter on Meru and blame it on Jayanthi to ensure that the Meru Exploration Committee will shut down the project for violating the safety protocols. When Jayanthi comes across the device, however, she seals it along with the contaminated soil in sample bags and puts them in Vaha’s womb.

Jayanthi’s refusal to take gene therapy challenges the stereotypical representation of disabled characters in fiction. Because disability disrupts the norms of bodily perfection which must be complied with to qualify as a human citizen, disabled characters typically either die or are cured by the end of the text to restore the status quo. In line with postcolonial fiction that refuses to provide a narrative resolution in defiance of the Western literary canon, Jayanthi neither dies nor gets cured in *Meru*. She faces the consequences of her actions while continuing to advocate for humanity. This narrative can therefore be seen as decolonising disability.

Despite having all the ability in the universe, Vaha is not able to live up to zie’s full genetic potential due to the environment of zie’s upbringing. Vaha’s injuries further show that ability is highly transitory even with all the technoscientific advancement at zir fingertips and thus cannot be taken for granted. Zie comes to peace with being disabled as the experience freed zie from the traumatic clutches of zir maker’s disappointment. Rithu’s patience and support during Vaha’s recovery and relearning how to fly instils confidence

in zie. Zie tells Jayanthi: “The exoskeleton, the broken wing—they’ve freed me . . . I know what I want for myself, and that’s to help you and, one day, all of humankind. (Divya 385).

Rather than a dreadful and pathologised impairment, Vaha’s disability then becomes “a source of embodied revelation” that offers zie an alternative perspective with which to approach zir life (qtd. in Barker 24). Vaha’s story in *Meru* is one of continuous disablement—first as zie learns how to live as a human within a human incarn, and then as zir original body is severely injured which results in loss of some function. Although it is humans who are seen as frail by the alloys, Vaha’s portrayal ruptures that narrative and depicts the impermanence of an able body, no matter how technologically advanced a society may be. Similarly, despite struggling with a chronic illness, Jayanthi is able to achieve a huge feat for humanity—mainly because she found the support she needed. The plurality of “physical, cognitive, sexual, social” forms that exist in *Meru* therefore make it evident that “disability is defined by the practice of prejudice rather than the straightforward fact of difference” (Murray, “Design, Engineering and Gendering” 113).

The things that count as a disease among humans show the extent of the restrictions placed on humanity by alloys under the guise of caring for them. Rather than expelling deviant bodies from society, alloys have the technology to force them into conforming, but making it seem voluntary—much like manufactured consent. Amidst all of the constraints enforced on humanity, a body with Aspiration and Avarice Disorder exposes just how disruptive non-normative bodies can be to the narrative of the necessity of human confinement to Earth propagated by the alloys. From a larger cosmological perspective, Jayanthi is not disabled but rather uniquely able for survival on the planet Meru without needing to terraform it. Her material difference in the form of sickle-cell anaemia allows her to witness the hypocrisy of alloys when it comes to ambition and care, providing her with inimitable knowledge not accessible to normative bodies. This knowledge plays a crucial role in her bildungsroman, as she ultimately refuses to abandon her community even for love. When Vaha suggests running away, she tells zie:

Alloys are fallible. Constructs, too. You're not better than humans; you're just better suited to living with less. There are other human beings who want what I want. . . . If we run away, then I'm abandoning them all. I—I can't be that selfish. Not even for us. (Divya 377)

Jayanthi and Vaha, therefore, “are active, not passive, participants in the narratives that surround them, and shape their lives, on their own terms, on a daily basis” (Murray, “Disabling the Human” 29). The romantic relationship between Jayanthi and Vaha can be seen as a posthuman vision of how relationships and romance might flourish in a society with multiple embodiments, while accommodating for disability, chronic illness, and plural genders. It defies compulsory heteronormativity in its rejection of a binary gender for Vaha as well as Jayanthi's clear rejection of heterosexuality. In fact, her sexuality is left ambiguous in the text as she is depicted in sexual relationships with Vaha and Sunanda, both of whom are gender non-conforming. Jayanthi's skills in genetic engineering also enable her to bypass heterosexual reproduction and conception as the reproductive process is completely separated from sexuality.

Jayanthi's time on Meru makes her certain that a human population with the same sickle-cell mutation as her can thrive there, just like her. Pushkara and Kaliyu's attempts to sabotage the human survival experiment on Meru, however, push her into accelerating phase two of the project, which was meant to evaluate whether a second generation of humans can flourish on the planet. Combining Vaha's and her own DNA, she designs an embryo which would inherit her disease via uniparental disomy. There are twenty-three pairs of human chromosomes, and a healthy baby inherits two copies of each chromosome pair—one from the father and one from the mother. Uniparental disomy is the abnormal condition in which a baby receives both copies of a chromosome from the same parent and none from the other parent. In some cases, this genetic state can lead to untreatable disorders such as Angelman syndrome—characterised by impaired speech and intellectual disability, and Prader-Willi syndrome—characterised by obesity and chronic overeating (Bethesda).

In an essay titled “Prenatal Diagnosis: Where do We Draw the Line?” Anita Ghai and Rachana Johri draw on three studies that interviewed mothers. They cite one such interview with Sudha, the mother of a four-year-old boy, who was certain she would have chosen abortion had she found out that the foetus might be disabled. Having seen her mother’s friend with an intellectually impaired son, she realised how much the child and the mother have to suffer (105). Another mother was told by her doctor that the baby’s heart might be defective. According to this mother, “To bring up that child is the responsibility of a lifetime. No one else will take care [of the disabled child] especially after you die. . . . If you don’t know, then you cannot help it; but once you find out, then don’t take up the responsibility” (qtd. in Ghai and Johri 106). Since the blame for birthing a disabled child and the brunt of caregiving work falls on the mothers in a patriarchal society, they prefer to terminate the pregnancy if they can help it. Drawing upon another study which interviewed visually impaired girls from the ages of sixteen to eighteen years, Ghai and Johri delineate upon their contrast in opinion from that of mothers of disabled children. When asked what advice she would give to a woman who might have a disabled baby, a seventeen-year-old visually impaired Radhika said in the interview: “There are good and bad traits in everyone. I would tell her not to abort the child, but help the child to develop an identity, to teach him/her how to live in this world” (qtd. in Ghai and Johri 109).

Jayanthi clearly affirms Radhika’s viewpoint in *Meru*. Having been provided access to the best available treatments and resources, Jayanthi lives a fulfilling, productive life that underscores the pitfalls of an ableist society. In choosing to give birth to a child with the disabling chronic illness of sickle-cell anaemia, Jayanthi issues a direct challenge to “dominant social constructions of both motherhood and childhood” (Ghai and Johri 101). This challenge is all the more disruptive to the society she lives in because of the pervasive practice of genetic engineering and artificial gestation of every new being that is born in it. The desire to abort a defective foetus is engendered by the normativity of able-bodiedness. Jayanthi’s disillusionment with the alloy society, along with her experiences on Meru, foregrounds the embedded ableism in alloy society. Her action of genetically designing an embryo that will

inherit her illness fractures the narratives of human inferiority and frailty propagated by the alloy society. She tells Vaha: “I have sickle cell disease. On Earth, it was a burden, and I had to manage it. On Meru, it keeps me healthy, and someone without this genetic variant—like you—has to deal with constant hyperoxia” (Divya 174). The improvement in her health on Meru shows Jayanthi that disability and chronic illness are highly contextual and not always inalterable – in her case, it is literally a matter of where she is living. Residing on Meru overturns the negative connotations of disability for Jayanthi as she is able to experience for herself the alternate possibilities that could be, if only she was not constrained by the alloy laws. As she says in her public statement to Mithva, the judicial construct:

Perhaps if released from their fetters, humankind will come up with a fourth alternative. . . . and not commit the same errors that we made as a younger society. . . . that human beings are capable of more than they are presently allowed. . . . that human genetic variance will allow us to adapt ourselves to the environment of planets like Meru, which have a sufficiently similar ecosphere to the habitable zones on Earth. (Divya 394-395)

Divya thus explores through her speculative fiction the possibility of a posthuman society where gender and ability do not become limitations. Jayanthi’s experiences enable her to make a well-informed reproductive choice—a choice that she reaffirms when she comes to terms with the possibility that she might have to raise her child on Earth and watch them suffer the same way she did. She asks herself at first: “Didn’t she owe her child a better life than that?” (Divya 272). But she soon realises that humans “should have room to grow and change and explore,” (273) rather than be defined by their physiological limitations. And this maturity is evident in Jayanthi herself, as she manages to keep her child safe throughout pregnancy while working toward her ambitions, with the required resources to manage her biological restrictions. Through this realisation, Jayanthi resolves one of the major reproductive decisions faced by disabled and chronically ill women—whether to have children who would inherit their condition or not.

Jayanthi's journey stands as a sharp critique of the stereotype not only of human inferiority in *Meru*, but also of disabled people as being unproductive members of society and therefore perpetually dependent in general. Subverting the criteria of eligibility for becoming a tarawan, Jayanthi finds "a way to insert disability thinking into the processes of engineering," (Murray, "Design, Engineering and Gendering" 91) and thus critiquing "the material realities of disabled people's interactions with technologies" (Kafer 105). Kafer notes that cyborg discourses, like that of Haraway's, "universalise the experience of disability, removing it from the realm of the political" (106). Instead of renouncing the cyborg altogether, however, she "argue[s] for a continued struggle with the figure, using it to stage our own blasphemous interventions in feminist theory" (106). In having a child with sickle-cell anaemia, fathered by gender non-conforming Vaha, Jayanthi "suggest[s] the possibility of crip futurities, futurities grounded in something other than the compulsory reproduction of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness" and heteronormativity (106). By taking the agency to include herself in the genetic engineering process, Jayanthi embodies a grounded critical posthumanism informed by feminism as well as disability studies.

Conclusion

Divya's *Meru* offers a new creative paradigm for posthuman studies that engages with contemporary debates on gender, sexuality, body, reproductive autonomy, ableism, and colonialism. It challenges the assumption of human exceptionalism, while simultaneously portraying a posthuman society that transcends beyond rigid socially constructed binaries. Jayanthi and Vaha, as individual characters struggling with disability and chronic illness, as a non-heteronormative couple, and as a non-human family unit, postulate a posthumanism for Indian English speculative fiction informed by disability consciousness, gender neutrality, sex positivity, and postcolonial resistance.

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Dubbing as Another Art of Failure: Re-Reading John Ciardi

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Abstract

The idea that translation is a process under the constant risk of ‘failure’ was forwarded by translator-editor John Ciardi. Walter Benjamin also understood translation as an incomplete form of production. This paper borrows this idea of ‘failure’ to explain dubbing, which in the field of audio-visual translation has been critiqued for imperfections which arise due to the discrepancy between the physical act of speaking by the acting body and the speech production by the speaking body; imperfections which cannot be done away with completely, despite synchronisation. The unnaturality of this discrepancy has been pointed out by Antonin Artaud using the folkloric figure of the *dybbuk*. Given that for the audience, dubbing involves not merely the mind, which understands the relation between languages but also the eyes, which discern the non-relation and the non-cohesion between the singular body and the multiple languages, the paper postulates the rejoicing in imperfection as another cinematic “suspension of disbelief” by the audience.

Keywords: Translation, Dubbing, Failure, Cinema, Body, Language, Synchronisation.

Introduction

This paper builds upon John Ciardi’s dictum that the act of translation is an ‘art of failure.’ It attempts to extend and extrapolate the views onto the process of dubbing, which as a kind of audiovisual translation (AVT), is a more immediate act and offers lesser chances of retraction and correction due to the speed of its distribution in the present world of globalisation. In describing ‘failure,’ the paper proposes that it is constituted by discrepancies and gaps, which being

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integral to the corpus of a work, become un-formed parts of the same work, that borders on being interpreted as deformities.

John Ciardi's 'Translation as Art of Failure'

John Ciardi titled his 1961 essay as "Translation: The Art of Failure," in which he describes the process of translating *Divine Comedy* by Dante in an American English verse rendition. His distress about the translation was that he undertook it to find a sense that best fits his understanding of the work. But it was also an effort to find a better version than those by others for, as per Ciardi, the other translators seemed to "*fall* into literary language, the very sort of thing Dante took pains to avoid" (18; italics mine). He used what he calls the 'dummy *terza rima*' which has proximity to American English, than the *terza rima*, calling his version "reasonably English, reasonably poetry, and reasonably faithful" to Dante's original (18).

While acknowledging the 'essential failure' of his translation in his dissatisfaction with it, Ciardi finds it reasonable to invest in it because he believes in it being "a good enough failure" (18). His reasoning is that a translation is usually the result of the translator's 'feel' of the translated work. For Ciardi, no theory sustains a translator. Rather, it is "by itch and twitch" (19). His thesis is that translation begins at a point where it looks forward to be completed and attain a final structure in the likeness of the source text (ST) and hopes to be acknowledged and received as a 'text' in and of itself. The likelihood of a translated text (TT) to find completion is bleak almost amounting to Roman Jakobson's untranslatability (1959).

In explaining his act of translation, he acknowledges that he let 'the rendering remain ragged' when the intent was intact. But it was difficult when the 'law' of poetry was not being followed in principles like when a passage is written as poetry, it must be rendered within metre, rhyme, and in a language sufficient to its emotional intent; and that when a rhyme the translator wants has been used in a preceding tercet, it may not be repeated too soon. Therein he calls this an "essential failure," but with it, that version "feels enough like the original, and feels enough like English poetry (or at least verse)" (19) which makes it some sense 'final'.

Ciardi's dictum has been used by Anthony K. Webster for the translation of a Navajo poem by Rex Lee Jim. Webster notes the three focal points which become the points of orientation for the translation to be rendered in its final version— register, history, and muscularity — that create the 'best possible failure' (10), or as Ciardi calls it "a good enough failure to be worth investing in" (18).

Referring to the discussion of the 'untranslatability' of poetry begun by Roman Jakobson (1959), Webster refers to him again to define 'failure' as Jakobson did, as a 'creative transposition'; an 'interlingual transposition'. Webster reasons for the untranslatability to happen at all by citing Rosemarie Waldrop (2009), for whom the impossibility of translation of sound in poetry happens "because the union of sound/sense will not be the same in any other language" (11; Waldrop 60), reiterating that translations are either exuberant or deficient. Yet the idea of the physicality of expression has long been a concern in the literature concerning ideophony and expressives.

In identifying particularities and peculiarities of sound's rhyme, assonance, and symbolism to the context, translation has to either give up the rhythm invoked by the source language's (SL) sound entirely or substitute it with an unfamiliar or strange rhythm of the target language (TL) for the ruptured rhythm of the original. The idea by sociolinguists like Dell Hymes (1960) is that there needs to be a "[r]ecognition of a social-identifying function [of speech acts] motivates an independently controllable articulation [which would] otherwise [be] left unintelligible" (70). Moreover, "the rights and obligations, roles and statuses, of the participants" (70) in a communicative context informs the status of a sentence whether it is a speech act or not.

Walter Benjamin understood translation as that which can only represent purposefully the intimate relationships among languages through its incomplete form of production. He wrote, "no translation would be possible if, in accord with its ultimate essence, it were to strive for similarity to the original" (155). Even fidelity to ST's words could not possibly bring TT any closer to ST's meaning, and fidelity to ST's form renders TT's meaning incomprehensible. His proposed solution was to make them look as fragments of a larger language, as fragments of a broken vessel that fit together but not looking similar.

Dubbing and Translation

Dubbing is a major revoicing practice in AVT, involving replacing the original soundtrack (OST) containing the actors' dialogue with a target language (TL) recording that reproduces the original message, while ensuring that the TL sounds and the actors' lip movements are synchronised in such a way that target viewers are led to believe that the screen actors (SA) are actually speaking the TL. Dubbing, was nicknamed as *traduction totale* (Cary 1960; quoted in Díaz Cintas and Orero 442) because of its nature, technique, and approach towards translation. Itsvan Fodor (1969) gave the three types of synchronies: lip synchrony, character synchrony and isochrony (quoted in Díaz Cintas and Orero 443).

Though countries and studios differ in the way they carry out dubbing, the standard industrial practice is that first, a rough translation of the script is carried out by a translator who knows the SL and then, a dubbing director adapts the script to be enunciated by the voice actors (VA) cast for the roles. Then, it is passed on to a sound engineer, who is responsible for synchronising the translation with the audio and the visual cues of the ST. Given that the OST is delinked from the visual track, the viewers do not usually have the possibility of comparing the ST and the dub. So, the professionals involved need not make the translation as literal as is done for subtitling. Therefore, they have, in principle, more latitude to play with the matter and form of dialogues.

For VAs, the task is not always an on-the-spot translation. They are often cast for roles as per the script according to the voice categorisation done by suppliers and managers. Only few projects, which are often on a very small-scale and often only meant for artists who are also translators, require VAs to translate and dub the dialogues for a product. In case of dubbing for advertisements, VAs often attempt a spontaneous translation according to the ST to save on production costs. For larger projects, the amount of fidelity to the ST is often determined by the clients who have commissioned the project (Díaz Cintas and Orero 442–43). Companies may either allow an audience-friendly translation, wherein the cultural references are accordingly either literally translated as per the equivalence theory or are substituted for a familiar reference, or companies may give out a

list of cultural referents to be either retained as they are or are to be translated only as the words which they provide.

In dubs, the first translation happens on the literal and verbal level done by the script translator. Then, the dubbing director turns the translated script into a lively dramatisation and conversation so that it becomes like ST in its treatment of the message that the audience receives. Then, the VA brings the dubbed script into enactment and enunciation. This is the phase visible to the audience when they pay attention to the difference or discrepancy which is present in the spoken-ness of the dialogues by the VAs and the lip play done by the SAs. In this phase, the sound engineer edits out rough edges and makes the dubbed soundtrack overlap ‘seamlessly’ onto the visual track of the original.

In the last phase, the smoothening process or synchronisation has been made easier by the digitalisation of the audiovisual (AV) texts. Early processes included manually cutting and pasting of the ‘tracks’ in specially designated rooms. Lea Jacobs outlines “how the functions of dubbing [that] evolved within studio practice across the 1930s can help explain how the track was gradually reconceived as a synthetic compilation of sounds rather than a straightforward recording of an event or performance” (6). Now in the digitised track, the cutting, separating, and rejoining has been optimised by and for the engineers using the binary language of the computer. Software possesses inbuilt options to separate the sound and video track, to re-record the soundtrack to another language as per the video timing, and finally to rejoin the two tracks to convert it into a final file format.

The dubbed track is thus a composite track wherein the audio and the video are integrated to function as one. In early soundtrack, this integration was actual because there was no technology which could capture sound separately from the video being shot. So, there were simultaneous shoots by various VAs and sometimes with changed SAs for each language. Over time with the improvement in sound technology, the separate recording of the OST made merging of tracks an important post-production stage. Again, a change in filming occurred with digitisation, when not merely separation of the two tracks is possible by replacing one with another, but there is also a possibility of tweaking the image or the sound as per requirements.

Dubbing as an act and form of AVT has undergone transformation over cinematic history, like silents turning talkies, image turning colourful and change in the formats of recording. Yet dubbing, being an act of translation and of creating cultural proximity, has been as an ‘art’ of translation.

The Art of Failure in Dubbing

The idea borrowed from Ciardi is that translation is incomplete and insufficient; despite being a deformation and failure, it is final. This can be extrapolated to dubbing, making it too a work always in progress and always remaining unfinished from its limits within the verbal nature of AV texts. Despite its popularity, dubs are critiqued for the discrepancies it engenders between the physical act of speaking by the acting body and the speech production by the speaking body. These discrepancies or imperfections can never be done away with completely, despite advanced techniques of synchronisation. The argument is to view the imperfections as deformations and rename them as Ciardi’s ‘failure’.

The discrepancies include those made at the cultural, the oral, and the linguistic levels. At the cultural level, dubbing involves verbal translations of phrases, idioms, and words which might not have any direct equivalent in the TL. Instead of making quirky translations through equivalence, translators choose to adapt cultural metaphors, phrases, or idioms. Retaining direct translations oddly distances the spectator from the dialogue and makes them look for explanations in places other than the cinematic text.

To address the oral aspect of dubbing, it is necessary to address the term ‘muscularity’ used by Ciardi. The argument is that it is the feel of the spoken-ness of the poem that is impossible to be translated, rather merely the sense of it is carried over through the words. The ‘physicality of expression’ is an important part of the musicality, and very difficult to recreate through the TL.ⁱ This muscularity or physicality which arises in the recitation is understood as based on the orality of words and the smoothness which is once achieved in the ST and is mimicked or imitated insufficiently, incompletely, and crudely in the orality of the TT. It is a result of speech patterns which make a speech act rhythmic in one language but not such in another.

As per classical theories of translation, to be rhythmic in TL, the speech act of translation needs to conform to the rules of speech and utterances of TL for its own sounds to produce the rhythm of their own, rather than borrow sounds and rhythm from SL. C S Venkiteswaran notes it in “Dubbed out” (2015) as proliferation of Hindi serials as pan-Indian takes over local definitions in the Tamil domestic sphere. Discrepancy in the flow of the speech production and in the muscular changes around the mouth are an intrinsic part of the act of dubbing – agreeable or not.

As Jessica Taylor writes in “Speaking Shadows” (2009), for the film audience, a “unity of body and voice was a desirable thing, but only when there was a ‘match’ between the social meanings of the voice and those of the image” (2). Thomas Rowe too, in his “The English Dubbing Text” (1960), proposed that film audiences are “concerned more with lip movement than with high-quality texts” (39) while traditional “translation standards [are] of fidelity and quality” (116). Dubbing stresses on the synchronisation of the timing of the SA’s voice and presence with the VA’s completion of the dubbed dialogue. Itsvan Fodor (1960) called this ‘lip synchrony’ which constitutes the belief that the spoken voice belonged to the SA integrally and is not a cinematic trick on the audience.

At the linguistic level, dubbing involves two distinct languages which are foreign to each other in many physiological terms, but are presented physically in TL, despite the speech organs enacting/ enunciating the speech production of SL. Lydia Hayes writes that “[d]espite best efforts, ideological and psychological demands are imposed on dubbed-version viewers who must reconcile the visualisation of foreignness (people, places, cultures, and labial movements pertaining to another language) with the acoustics of domestic language (invoking a new setting and giving rise to imprecise lip synchrony)” (4).

This discrepancy between physical act of speaking which seems to produce sounds—a physiological act done by SA—and the actual speech production heard in the final AV product—a speech act done by VA—is understood as a failure. The act is not merely one that is attempted and made possible at the verbal or linguistic level, but is attempted and must be made possible at the physical/ physiological

level, by involving speech organs of both SA and VA. For speech production, dubs attempt to balance TL's spoken aspect and SL's muscularity and expressiveness.

In "Problems of Translation," Samhita Sunya refers to an argument forwarded by Martine Danan in the 'dubbing versus subtitling' debate that "suppressing or accepting the foreign nature of imported films is the key to understanding how a country perceives itself in relation to others, and how it views the importance of its own culture and language" (34). Following Antje Ascheid, Sunya notes that a break in "cinematic identification, the suspension of disbelief and a continuous experience of unruptured" (36; qtd. in Ascheid 33) would not happen in dubs "whose aural properties – including, of course, the language(s) of audible dialogue – are successfully naturalized to the films' visual properties" (36), which happens in films that are racially, linguistically, and, in some ways, culturally closer. But he posits that there would be a 'marked different turn' in the effect where differences vary in ways in which mouths speak.

According to Robert Spadoni (2007), it is only the 'medium-consciousness' of the audience with the advent of 'talkies' that led to the development of the gothic genre of cinema, made possible by the newness of the sound element in cinematic viewing experience. A similar turn occurred with the availability of dubs in official and unofficial/ fan versions. Dubs offer a transcoded version of AV products in a language chosen by viewers. The uniqueness of dubbing lies in viewer's use of mind-eye co-ordination, particularly to accept the possibility of a 'strange' body speaking a 'familiar' tongue.

This is especially true for English films and drama series in dub for a homogenously defined Indian audience that speaks in colloquial Hindi. In Ganti's interview with Shakti Singh, the veteran VA reveals that audience needs to believe that the screen actor can speak Hindi, and stops being seen them as racially different (54). I propose in section 5 that this 'suspension of disbelief' is a notable point in the commercial success, popularity, and continuity of demand for dubs inherent in the 'acceptability' of synchronisation.

Not only films and drama series, but advertisement,ⁱⁱ cartoons and animated films are dubbed for an explicit purpose of reaching the

local audience or a viewer base which is not particularly literate or old enough to read (Ganti 49). Despite commercial success due to global reach, dubs in their ontological buildup and production techniques are not monolithic. Rather, they are an amalgamation of two channels – the audio and the video of the AV – making their constitution as a Frankensteinian product.

The unnatural nature of this discrepancy has been pointed out by Antonin Artaud using the figure of *dybbuk*. *Dybbuk* was a living person's body inhabited by the spirit of dead person who speaks through the mouth of the 'living' person. This ghost engages in actions to torment the living, forcing him to blaspheme against his will. In the figure of the *dybbuk*, the voice of the deceased continues to inhabit a living body. For Artaud, as Yampolsky simplifies, in dubbing, "the film star divests the live actor of his voice" (58) and the voice continues to reside in someone else's body.

In using the monstrous metaphor, involving "the snatching of the personality, of the soul" (58), Artaud directs attention to the inherent discrepancy in the physical translation of the language of voice and the language of the mouth. The voice is, in one way, a metaphor of human agency; in another, as Weidman suggests, the voice in its materiality, relates to "sound itself as well as with the bodily processes of producing and attending to voices" (235). Dubbing is immediate and apparent, given that, the audience involves not merely the mind, which understands the relation between languages, but also the eyes, which discern the non-relation and the non-cohesion between the singular body and the multiple languages.

Dubs bring a linguistic shift and a vocal shift—in the enunciation act. There is an actual disruption in the audio and the video which is only overcome using technical means to achieve synchronicity. Given that, in AV media, audio forms as important a part as video, a reason that makes the viewing experience 'unnatural' is when the audio is turned 'off.' In dubbing, the OST is separated from the video and attaches a new soundtrack. This disjoint and conjunction is seen as unnatural, presuming only the OST goes 'naturally' with the video. Dubs are considered inherently not smooth—and thus, un-natural—in their critical audience receptionⁱⁱⁱ due to this technical mismatch.

Discrepancy, Popularity, and Suspension of Disbelief

Mismatch or discrepancy is a significant failure of translation in dubbing. Dubs retain a meaning closest to the ST and allow the simplest transition of the meaning onto the syntax of the TL, while aiming to most closely imitate the syntactical formation of the ST. By technical standards, a lack of synchrony at any of the three levels given by Fodor (1969), and especially of lip synchrony, would be a matter of disorientation and confusion in meaning-making of the text.

In cases, where the video or the audio plays a second or half fast or slow, dubbed dialogues do not match the lip movement of screen actors. This discrepancy is visibly disruptive with humans on screen. In animations, lip movements are different as the drawings of the characters only involve two simple mouth positions which are of open or close. In human characters, mouth movements are complex and involve different manoeuvrability for producing specific speech or non-verbal sounds. These movements, informing the ‘muscularity’ or physicality of expression, are not easily reproduced in dubs due to differences in speech production in different languages.

As Ganti (2014) notes in English to Hindi dubs, the process involves an actively pursued “effacing of the traces of dubbing” (54) to make it “appear as natural and conversational as possible” (53). There are attempts to make it “closer to a Hindi sensibility [so as] to reduce that sense of rupture and disjuncture caused by dubbed film” (54). Her discussions with screenplay and dialogue writers suggest that whether the dub becomes a transliteration or a transcreation, it must carry over the emotion with the regional cultural flavour of TL. The garnering of social elites which has the ‘choice or preference’ to watch the original and the dub is determined by what I propose is the continuity of the ‘suspension of belief’ as the narrative demands.

When the original happens to evoke and appeal to the disbelief, it is assumed that the audience has a particular set of sensibilities (often following logic or not) about certain possibilities and realities in a space-time continuum. So, the success of dubs is determined by the socio-cultural constitution of the viewership. For a dub to come to pass, the condition is that the socio-cultural constitution of its viewership is different from the original audience imaginary.

For commercial success, relevance and popularity, dubs cater to a bilingual audience that needs to make a conscious choice—economic and linguistic—of viewing the dub. It also needs to appeal to the monolingual audience who depends solely on the dub for their understanding and enjoyment of the narrative. Therefore, the struggle is mainly of retaining the ‘sense’ of the ST while plating it (to use a culinary metaphor) in the cultural slang and nuances of the TL.

It is the carryover of the willing suspension of disbelief of the narrative from being in one linguistic parlance to other. Ganti (2021) remarks that dubbing or ADR (automatic dialogue replacement) work in similar ways to playback singing in its production of a single character which requires its distribution over three physiological entities, namely, the speaking voice, the singing voice, and the actors’ on-screen body (76). The suspension of disbelief necessitates the belief that the acts on screen as not implausible, allowing meanings to emerge in the symbolism of the actions. Coleridge’s term allows an entrenchment and involvement in the narrative which might often defy or negate scientific or moral laws.

In dubbing, the suspension must happen, in addition to the special effects in audio or video, at the linguistic level. For instance, in crowd scenes, Debashree Mukherjee (2014) writes, efforts are to make plausible what the crowd was picturised as doing while ascertaining the sound quality of such large groups on the shooting ground. VAs fill in gaps in the cacophonous or unclear audio and give it a superimposed linguistic clarity, demanded by the video, making the scene relevant to the audience. Dialogues, in their overlap and confusion of simultaneity, are each translated in its entirety.

Failure as a Kind of Rejoicing

There lies a rejoicing in the imperfection of dubbing as a cinematic “suspension of disbelief”. Though translation rejoices in incompleteness and non-imitation of ST, it is important to ask how acceptable the rejoicing is in dubbing, specially while analysing dubbing as a process, where despite inaccuracies in lip syncs, the purpose of globalisation is served by bringing cultures in aural-oral-visual proximity of each other. Dubbed dialogues offer familiarity despite the foreignness inherent in the physicality of speech.

As Nan Hu writes in context of 1950s Soviet films dubbed for a Chinese audience, foreignness is not an obstacle to understand the narrative of a 'strange' film always. It changed "the audience's way of interacting with the film, and encouraged the workers' transnational identification" (27). He brings to attention the ways "[t]o overcome this split and make the spectators believe that the voice comes from the actor on the screen, or in other words, to achieve audiovisual realism, sound films must try to match the moving image with the voice" (27). AV realism requires the viewer to follow the Coleridgean principle.

If dubbing "sutures the voice back to the body," then despite the improbable and overly visible nature of the "weld," a kind of semblance to what is *really* possible. Despite this imperfection or incompleteness or de-formation, which seems unnatural, and which further renders translation itself unnatural, dubbing as an art of failure becomes an imperfect work; it is an incomplete, and thereby, a de-formed project. The incompleteness brings out that what was too foreign and by turning it into something familiar, however inappropriately dressed (to use a sartorial metaphor), the failure turns into "the best possible failure" which Ciardi proposes as the aim.

In re-reading Ciardi, who advocates for the 'best possible failure' so that their readability or musicality carries forward into the target language's linguistic rhythmic meter, the interpolated proposition is to measure the success of the literal translations and of dubbed cinematic texts using this. The determination of such a success is in acceptability; in the rejoicing in the production of a non-literal and a non-equivalent translation wherein the original is as much part of the broken 'vessel' as the translation. The ontological acceptance of the imperfection inherent in the final allows it to find its place alongside the original. The postmodernist rejoicing and celebration of semantic surplus, present in the imperfection and de-formation of dubbing as translation, is part of the consumption process. Without it, the ontological continuation of dubbing would be superficial and taut.

Dubbing allows the imperfect and the un-/de-formed to carry on forward into another culture to bring about a communicative continuity. As Leonardo de Vinci said, that art is never finished, only abandoned. The layer of meanings which become a part of the

translation via the script translator is one among many and, in this semantic surplus, there are many layers which get only an imperfect inclusion. In re-reading Ciardi, we extrapolate it to the translational aspect of cinematic dubbing. In hailing dubbing, the point is that the act of dubbing in being an art of translation brings in a sufficient rejoicing in its discrepancy and imperfection.

Endnotes

- i. The physicality of expression has been dealt with in vocal anthropology and linguistic anthropology according to Webster. Readings are Amanda Weidman's "Anthropology and Voice" (2014) and John Leavitt's "Words and worlds" (2015).
- ii. Two instances are the advertisement for DOVE in Punjabi on YouTube (youtu.be/KOUZkCvnS8Q?si=2grTpicZty9Wwvse) and Maitreya Bapat's dub for Meesho's ad in Gujarati available on her Instagram page (www.instagram.com/reel/Cfntg7WKVWt/?igsh=dDdpMml4cGxpOHY5).
- iii. Studies conducted on various linguistic and national groups provide an insight into the critical reception of dubbed versions focusing on the un-natural aspect of translation for dubs. Some are Ameri and Khoshsaligheh (2019) – Persian; Nan Hu (2020) – Chinese; Ganti (2014), Venkiteswaran (2015) – Hindi.

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Crimson Realities: Navigating the Body Politics in *Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia*

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Abstract

Menstruation, an intrinsically biological phenomenon, is frequently considered negatively by society. It stems from global myths, superstitions, and taboos. Farah Ahamed, a human rights lawyer and activist, effectively collated the varied menstrual experiences in her anthology "Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia." The anthology includes poetry, interviews, artwork, and other works by diverse writers, sheds light on the stigma associated with periods, and the challenges women face from menstruation. This paper focuses on the theory of the techniques used by patriarchal societies to manage the human body, particularly that of women. It examines the experiences of numerous menstruators in the book "Period Matters" through a body politics lens. The study also tries to document the reality in which men objectify and control the female body. Furthermore, it investigates how numerous women have embarked on a quest to dispel stereotypes about menstruation.

Keywords: Menstruation, Women, Body Politics, South Asia, Objectification, Stereotypes

Introduction

The phrase 'body politics' gained a lot of traction in the latter part of the 20th century, specifically in the 1970s during the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States. The phrase alludes to the methods and laws that social authorities use to govern the human body as well as the conflict regarding the extent of personal and

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societal bodily control. This rule is the result of numerous authorities. Nadia Brown, an American political scientist, asserts in one of her articles that bodies become venues where social constructs of difference are imposed on humans. These power structures establish the structuralist concept of binary opposition by placing the body in hierarchised dichotomies, such as masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, pure/impure, and able-bodied/disabled, where one is always considered dominant or superior and the other inferior.

The creation of power structures in society places the male body at the top of the hierarchy. This inevitably places all other groups of people, particularly women, under them. If we connect this structure to menstruation, we see the non-menstrual male body on the pedestal, reinforcing the belief that all menstruating bodies are feminine and impure. Such a classification impacts not only women but also the queer menstruation population, which does not identify as women or does not fit within society's gender boundaries. Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born* sums up this struggle when she says:

I know of no woman—virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate—whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves—for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripening.
(Rich 284)

Cutcha Risling Baldy, an associate professor of Native American studies who studies Indigenous feminisms, has observed that the menstrual taboo' in the colonies, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere, was part of a larger "politics of taboo" created by Western scholars to normalise Western patriarchy by labelling women and their bodies as taboo. Menstruation has always been linked to body politics for power – a societal power that exclusively accommodates the qualities and wants of male, heterosexual bodies from dominant racial and ethnic groupings. Society excludes and marginalises everything that comes under this category. Body politics

entailed fighting against the commodification of the female body and, more crucially, advocating for women's reproductive rights. 'The personal is the political' became the term that expressed the feeling of how winning domestic rights, or rights within one's home, as well as rights over one's own body, was critical to gaining equal rights in the public arena. It also highlighted a woman's strength and control over her own body. A woman's figure was supposed to appear 'feminine' as opposed to 'masculine.' She was expected to be fair and attractive to males, to apply makeup, to keep their body hair clipped, and to always dress in body-fitting and revealing clothing. The feminist practices of rejecting makeup, not shaving body hair, especially on the legs and underarms, and even dressing in loose, comfortable clothing were some of the first attempts to challenge such social constructs about what a woman's body should look like.

Katyayni Sharma, a writer, describes militant feminists who have painted with their menstrual blood. Vanessa Tiegs, an American artist, and Petra Paul, a German artist, have had a distinctive impact in both the creative and feminist realms with their menstrual blood paintings. Their paintings are distinguished by elaborate patterns of crimson swirls on white backgrounds, replete with feathered brush strokes. Jen Lewis is another well-known name in menstruation design, with her 'Beauty in Blood' collection. She argues that her 'bioartography' project aims to challenge social taboos around menstruation and the female body through macrophotography of menstrual fluid. She challenges the concept that menstruation is 'gross,' 'vulgar,' or 'unrefined' by sharing candid, real-life images of her monthly blood, forcing people to see and think about menstruation in a completely new light. She says that when blood joins water, an abstract artistic aspect emerges that deserves more examination not only by women but also by society as a whole. While a few brave enthusiasts have commended the creativity and coarse depiction of these paintings, the vast majority of people have voiced outrage and revulsion at this visual display of bodily art. Many of them have referred to them as 'tasteless excuses for artwork' and medical biohazards. Such negative responses raise important issues about why menstrual blood elicits such strong social evaluations rooted in aversion, disgust, and terror. "Please excuse Farah from swimming today, as she has female problems" (5), said

Farah's mother to her swimming coach and he decided to send her to a tree to sit by herself. Although it was Farah's body, other people made decisions about it. Although Farah's body belonged to her, other people made decisions about it. Farah Ahamed recalls this early event in the preface of her outstanding book "Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia," released in 2022. This anthology uses a variety of literary and artistic genres to highlight the differences and similarities between the menstrual experience. The book covers a wide spectrum of viewpoints, including those of academics, politicians, artists and entrepreneurs, as well as the voices of the underprivileged, such as the homeless, transgender people, and inmates. It focuses on the experiences of menstruation in South Asia. Ahamed finds no time experience too insignificant, whether it is in the harsh landscapes of Pakistan's Baluchistan, at nunneries in Bhutan, or in years of Taliban rule in Afghanistan or corporate headquarters in Bangladesh. Menstruators share a sense of empathy and kinship, permeating every perspective. A thorough reading of the book sheds light on the power dynamics that underlie menstruation in various South Asian societies.

Tishani Doshi's poem "I Carry My Uterus in a Small Suitcase" opens the collection. Her poem "Advice for Pliny the Elder, Big Daddy of Mansplainers" is included in the book as well. As shape poems—the former in the shape of a vagina, the latter in the shape of a menstruation cup—the poems are self-explanatory. The second poem is a humorous yet biting critique of the ancient Roman physician Pliny the Elder's depiction of menstruation, while the first verse deals with the hysteria of menstruation. He makes such ridiculous and nonsensical remarks about the catastrophic power of menstruation in his encyclopaedic-style opus "Natural History," remarks that were accepted as fact for many centuries. According to him, women who are menstruating sometimes perceive a detachment from reality and socially acceptable behaviour. Additionally, he asserted that a menstruating woman is perceived by men as less feminine. He went on to say that they destroy entire crop fields and vegetation, drive bees from their hives, and force caterpillars, worms, beetles, and other rodents to fall to the ground. Doshi's technique of drawing comparisons to Pliny the Elder and then recasting him as the "Big Daddy of Mansplainers" is a clever way to highlight how men

perceived women who were menstruating, preventing them from going about their daily lives and painting them as wicked witches who could destroy everything with their blood and bare touch. While Victoria Patrick sheds light on the struggles encountered by women during the horrific days of Partition,

The realities of Patrick's poetry are reaffirmed by the discussions Farah Ahamed conducts with these ladies in Pakistan. While older women who have gone through menopause assert that they are unrestricted and hygienic, younger generations of girls and women continue to be victims of the same. They continue to utilise ash bricks for absorption and rags made from old cloth that are frequently wet in the winter. The girls she spoke with were unable to discuss their living situations honestly since they were under the men's authority and were terrified of them. The females tell Ahamed that they have never experienced any constraints regarding their menstrual cycle, demonstrating the influence that culture has on an individual's perception of their own body. Since their bodies are unholy and shrines are holy, they find it perfectly normal and fail to see the political ramifications of forbidding them from entering places of worship when they are bleeding. Amina, a young gypsy woman, was similarly misled into thinking that her body was cursed. She was shunned by a society that believed that women should only be responsible for bearing children because she was unable to conceive after two years of marriage. She had little concern for diseases, hygiene, or blood. Her greatest worry is that her spouse will desert her in favour of a woman who can conceive. Amina's story is a prime illustration of a patriarchal society in which women are constantly blamed for their inability to conceive, rather than men.

“What If,” the final poem in the book, was written by the editor. According to Farah Ahamed, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “What If You Slept” inspired her own poetry. Ahamed’s poetry is a dramatic contrast to the latter, which is a dream poem in which the sleeper believes herself in heaven where she chooses a strange and lovely flower, and upon waking finds the flower in her hand. Ahamed's poem describes the living nightmare of a poor sweeper lady. In her hand, she finds a broom instead of a flower. She got the idea when reading an article in the anthology by Ayra Indrias Patras

regarding the working conditions of Christian women sweepers in Lahore. In the poem, Ahamed muses on the miserable living and working circumstances faced by the Christian women sweepers. The poem tackles the issue of menstruation that they deal with at home and work by posing several rhetorical questions. There is no shortage of circumstances in which a woman feels that her employers, moms, or spouses are exerting external control over her. Due to both gender and caste discrimination, the misery of menarche is doubled for these sanitation workers in Lahore. When a girl talks about her concerns of bleeding to her mother, she is advised to use rags and avoid touching 'this food', taking a bath, talking to friends especially boys. As soon as a girl gets her menarche she is married off, where also things aren't different. The poet very clearly depicts the attitude to and the power men exercise on menstruation when she says, "He said, be grateful for what you have/ And when you complained to your boss, and asked for a female toilet/ He said, sleep with me here and now, and I'll make it better for you later" (54). The men see women only as objects for their own pleasure; women can survive only as long as they conform to the desires, rules and regulations set by men.

In her discussion of male fiction writers, Farah Ahamed provides examples of how these authors have suggested that there is a physical or mental issue with their female characters. She quotes, for example, a passage from Milan Kundera's book "The Unbearable Lightness of Being." His main character Tereza's outrage and hatred against her mother for not having the dignity to cover them up when she discovers that her sanitary napkins are stained with blood are similar to a man's feelings in the same situation. When Tereza remarks on a dog's menstruation, the author-narrator conveys his opinion that women are repulsive, wicked, and inferior to dogs. Dogs are never banished from Paradise, so although her dog's period makes her feel light-hearted, hers makes her uneasy. Additionally, there are other literary works where menstrual blood is sexualised, such as the cases of boys who taste the blood and find it attractive because blood is dripping down her thighs. These examples show that either menstruation bleeding is socially taboo or occurs only to satisfy a male character's need for sensuality. The short novella "Behind the Braided Coconut Leaves" by K. Madavan subverts such masculine-

centric ideas about menstruation. Siba Barkataki translated the work from its original French to English. The novella, which is set in Pondicherry, narrates the innocent tale of Guna, a little child, and his thoughts and uncertainties when his sister begins to menstruate. Guna is raised in the customs and culture of a regular Indian family. As a result, everything in his interpretation of the phenomena stems from local mythology and beliefs.

So far, the topics of discussion have only touched on a few of the typical issues that most people who menstruate encounter. Instead of stopping there, though, Farah goes on to write chapters about the experiences of the imprisoned, the crippled, and the transgender community. The chapter “A Caregiver's Perspective on Menstrual Hygiene” painstakingly describes a mother's concern in raising her mentally challenged daughter and shielding her from the ugly and greedy gaze in society. To gain greater insight into the menstrual management strategies of mothers with challenged children, Ayra Indrias speaks with Fazilat, Soraiya, and Shariffa. While managing one's period is easy for a normal woman, it can be quite challenging for someone like Reshma, who has no understanding why she bleeds every month or how it relates to pregnancy. All she knows is that it's embarrassing to discuss with others but there's nothing to be afraid of. The moms are left to shoulder the duty of periodically cleansing their children's body and inspecting their clothing. people living with disability in Pakistan are largely isolated and relegated to the shadows because of the associated stigma. The government is also not proactive with legislation to promote the needs and rights of those with disabilities.

There has been a major uprising against the menstrual politics of power in recent times. Women started battling against the existing power systems and claiming their menstrual power everywhere. As always, the best medium for spreading this self-statement was art. According to Farah Ahamed, her intention in incorporating the art was to demonstrate how menstrual art, or menstrala, was being utilised for menstrual activism. The book's front cover page features a quote from Lyla Freechild's “Aadya Shakti,” also known as “Primal Energy.” She radically created art by using her own menstrual blood to create the artwork. Dancer and political activist

Amna Mawaz Khan explains her concept for a menstrual dance called "Raqs-e-Mahvaari." For her, the dance serves as a means of both self-expression and self-discovery. Furthermore, women's dance is a long-standing custom in South Asia that is nearly as ancient as menstruation. The dance is inspired by the moon cycle's symbolic meaning, which is linked to the menstrual cycle. To further emphasise her maternity bond, she dressed like her mother. Her dance challenges societal norms by painting her feet in red, a colour typically connected to menstruation and frequently seen as a sign of humiliation and embarrassment.

Working with the Santal tribe in Jharkhand exposed Srilekha Chakraborty to a tribe enmeshed in antiquated practices and rituals. She suggests installing wall murals as a way to alter the way people view the different eras in the area. In one artwork, a female is depicted wind surfing on a pad and floating along a river of menstrual blood with assurance. The message of the paintings is that a woman's menstruation is a sign of her strength rather than a problem. Comic books are the ideal medium for teaching children about the world. Literature is another means of reaching a large audience. "Menstrupedia," a comic book written by Aditi Gupta, explains menstruation in an entertaining and educational way for young readers. The far-reaching outcome of the book was that it made the subject of periods 'cool' and it has been used to educate more than 13 million children. In addition to art, Farah also discusses certain governmental policies and innovations that have helped overcome period poverty as well as help women break the chains associated with menstruation. For instance, Shashi Tharoor discusses his Menstrual Rights Bill which he introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2018. The Bill seeks to establish legally protected menstrual rights for girls and women in an unprecedented way. Though there have been debates regarding it even amongst women, the policy for menstrual leave is also instrumental in fighting the stigma around menstruation. By institutionalising paid period leave we can realise one of the current feminist goals of an unbiased and accessible workplace. Menstrual workshops can go a long way in informing and educating the poor and the uninformed about the phenomenon of menstruation as well as make them aware of how institutionalised hierarchies exercise power on their bodies. One such workshop was held in

Balochistan, where there exists a highly patriarchal system of governance, by Granaz Baloch which was the first of its kind. It helped her defy the traditional notions of tribal honour or 'Baloch mayar.' The workshop offered a safe space for the participants to learn, discuss, and share.

Apart from art, Farah talks about other government initiatives and policies that have assisted in eradicating period poverty and assisting women in escaping the constraints imposed by their menstrual cycles. Shashi Tharoor, for example, talks about the Menstrual Rights Bill that he introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2018. Through the Bill, women and girls will have menstruation rights that are guaranteed by law in a level never seen before. The menstrual leave policy is crucial in combating the stigma associated with menstruation, despite discussions about it even occurring among women. We can actually achieve one of the current feminist objectives of an impartial and accessible workplace by institutionalising paid time off. In addition to supplying reusable pads made from repurposed cotton and distributing undergarments, they also have increased women's self-confidence and dignity and made them self-reliant. As the saying goes, modern times require modern solutions. In this fast-moving technological world, digital technologies are instrumental in providing solutions to the shame of menstruation. Women are drawn to period-tracking apps to keep track of their periods, PMS, and other related subjects. It helps women in a greater self-understanding and produces spaces that are supposedly liberating, educational, and private. However, privacy cannot be guaranteed because the information that we enter on the app is often leaked to third-party apps. Thus, on the web, a woman's body data becomes everybody's data. Period matters are structured in such a manner that it ends with an experience of menopause. In the final chapter, Lisa Ray talks about how she managed her early chemo-induced menopause. She asserts that the end of fertility is not the decline of a woman- instead it is a passage to stature and empowerment. Thus, Farah Ahamed is successful in describing every aspect of menstruation- the biology behind it, the taboos, traditions, and stigma associated with it, the exercise of power on menstruating bodies by the patriarchal society, and even the activities

and methods of challenging those power structures in her book *Period Matters*.

As stated by feminists all over the world, the time has come now to stand up and speak out on behalf of menstruation. We need to accept that it is a natural, messy but beautiful part of life, and just because it is not a shared experience doesn't mean it needs to be a divisive topic that aids gender inequity. It is in this light that the slogans of 'Personal is Political' echoed all over the world; to make people realise that the seemingly personal issues related to the body were affixing their position in the political discourses. The patriarchal society has been exercising their control over the woman's body ideologically and tactically through the establishment of tacit as well as implicit norms and customs since time immemorial. Eventually, the term body politics has been adopted by the feminist and queer discourse to signify the politicisation and emergence of seemingly personal body issues- including pregnancy, contraception, and menstruation- into the public discourses.

Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia has been rightly composed and published by Farah Ahamed at such a time when the discourses surrounding menstruation are out in the open. She has done a remarkable job in bringing together a whole range of experiences within one single book. It's not just women who express their concerns, even the queer community find their voice in the war cry 'Not all women menstruate, and not all who menstruate are women.' Similarly, she has included every menstrual experience, both oppressive and radical, traditional and progressive and even discusses the necessity of menstrual dignity, or the dignity of the 'self.' She interviews not only the established business class, but also the labour class, including the sanitation workers, and the homeless. Each of these experiences are relevant in understanding the politics of menstruation.

The reality of how the society tends to control or even disregard anything associated with women is exceptionally portrayed in Gloria Steinem's very famous satirical essay "If Men Could Menstruate: A Political Fantasy." In such a world where men menstruated instead of women, menstruation would become an enviable, worthy

masculine event. The topic would never be one discussed in whispers, but something that would be openly acknowledged, nurtured and celebrated; it would be something that men would brag about. But like she says, it will only happen if we let it be. Reclaiming menstruation is essential if we are to overthrow the politics of it. Hence, as Farah Ahamed observes, there is a long way to go in removing the stigma from menstruation and normalising it. Meanwhile, the menstruators must ensure that they embrace the femininity of it, respect it and honour their cycles because, menstrual blood is not one that alienates us, but one that reinforces our connection with our Mother Earth.

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Alternative Rationality and Agency: Schizophrenia as a Case of Narrative Resistance

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Abstract

Among the disregarded narratives, schizophrenic ones are peculiar since they defy the fundamentals of rationality and meaning-making practices. I aim to look at the particular case of publishing first-person accounts in *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, written for the academic community studying schizophrenia, to facilitate learning. I contend that schizophrenic writing ought to reveal an 'alternative reality' through the lens of an 'alternative rationality,' but this gets compromised when these accounts are bound to follow the publication rules. This study analyses two accounts, one which resists the rules and the other which complies with them. The paper aims to demonstrate how the patient's writing resists the general demand to make sense to a larger audience by conforming their narratives to the standards set by common sense and clinical interventions. Thus, through this paper, I attempt to contextualise the narrative resistance exercised by the extensively marginalised community of people with schizophrenia, studying the language, images, coherence, and rationality in the respective texts.

Keywords: Irrationality, Common Sense, Schizophrenia, Narrative Resistance, Alternative Rationality, Agency.

Introduction

The prevalent marginalisation of individuals with schizophrenia owing to a homogenised perception of the illness in society has paved the way for dehumanization and discrimination. Their narratives are

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not deemed adequate for conceptualizing their experience since they are often associated with incoherence and irrationality. Hence, clinical or scientific narratives overshadow the nuances of their reality and deprive them of their agency. However, publishing personal stories of their illness experiences facilitates a re-establishment of agency and resistance against the dominant medical discourses. This paper aims to look at the particular case of publishing first-person accounts in *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, written for the academic community pursuing scholarship in schizophrenia. The paper contends that schizophrenic writing can reveal an ‘alternative reality’ in the light of an ‘alternative rationality’, but this possibility gets endangered when publication rules are made a mandate for these accounts. Therefore, I argue that it jeopardizes the purpose of such an activity; which is to learn from these narratives about the alternative perspectives they can offer, making it a mere academic facade. To defend my argument, I will study two accounts, one which resists these rules and the other which complies with them. Taking into account the scholarly records of all the debatable arguments concerning schizophrenic narratives, the paper attempts to foreground the foundation upon which human thoughts are evaluated through narratives. Based on an understanding of the rationale behind forming and interpreting narratives, I would study the first-person accounts in *Schizophrenia Bulletin* that are supposed to be deviant, distorted, incoherent, and consequently, neglected and devalued.

Among many disadvantaged groups in society, people with schizophrenia and their narratives are believed to be non-functional on many levels. However, through analysing their first-person accounts, I attempt to problematize this notion by demonstrating how they negotiate with these prejudices and re-establish their narrative agency. According to Angela Woods, the concept that schizophrenia is anti-narrative developed across five domains, the first being psychiatry—with its understanding of dementia, degeneration and deterioration—it deems that no coherent storytelling is possible. Whereas, in neuropsychology, the same is asserted through studies investigating schizophrenia’s impact on the cognitive and affective underpinnings of narrative capacity, and in the philosophy of psychopathology, they emphasize a breakdown in narrative identity and the dialogical self. Even in the aesthetic realm, the ‘mad

narratives' or anti-narratives of schizophrenia are celebrated for their failure to conform to the humanist conventions of either nineteenth-century realism or literary autobiography, and finally in the socio-political domain, stigma and discrimination seem to muffle stories of schizophrenia (38-39). Contrary to these notions, with advanced treatments people with schizophrenia have published accounts of their experiences as memoirs, autobiographies, and short essays, all written with different purposes. Therefore, this paper will examine ideas about irrationality in general and schizophrenia in particular to arrive at the concept of 'alternative rationality' in first-person accounts of the *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, which embodies resistance towards the widely accepted notions about schizophrenia.

Irrationality

Scholars from across the disciplines have pondered over the concept of rationality. Their attempts resulted in diverse theories and concepts that enriched the understanding of 'human thinking.' However, rationality turned out to be a multifaceted phenomenon which cannot be understood or explained with a single concept (Djulfegovic and Elqayam 920). Conversely, it is possible to ponder on how irrationality is understood generally. Albert Ellis attempts to describe the biological basis of human irrationality thus:

By irrationality, I mean any thought, emotion, or behavior that leads to self-defeating or self-destructive consequences—that significantly interferes with the survival and happiness of the organism. More specifically, irrational behavior usually has several aspects: (1) The individual believes, often devoutly, that it accords with the tenets of reality although in some important respect it really does not. (2) People who adhere to it significantly denigrate or refuse to accept themselves. (3) It interferes with their getting along satisfactorily with members of their primary social groups. (4) It seriously blocks their achieving the kind of interpersonal relations that they would like to achieve. (5) It hinders their working gainfully and joyfully at some kind of productive labor. (6) It interferes with their own best interests in other important respects. (4-5)

He argues that all humans ubiquitously and constantly act irrationally though some considerably more than others. This probably implies that they do so naturally and easily, many times against “the teachings of their families and their culture, frequently against their own conscious wish and determination. Although modifiable to a considerable extent, their irrational tendencies seem largely ineradicable and intrinsically go with their biological (as well as sociological) nature” (5). Mental illness and irrational behaviours are often equated with each other. However, through this paper, I argue that it is essential to look at alternative ways of interpreting such behaviours before dismissing them as irrational. Nonetheless, the fundamental motive of these deliberations is to understand how human beings make sense of reality and navigate through it. At this juncture, it is important to take into account that narratives are often the object of study in these kinds of research. The observations and theories are also rationalized narratives or attempts to rationalize the narratives, actions, and behaviours. Based on all these concepts, I would argue that rationality is conceived as the ability to achieve a goal in the best way possible with the least number of consequences. Therefore, it becomes significant to decipher the kind of rationality that schizophrenia permits or hinders, but before addressing that the relationship between narratives and rationality has to be dealt with.

Narrative and Rationality

David R. Olson foregrounds the open-endedness of narratives in his essay “Narrative, Cognition, and Rationality,” in his attempt to “examine the relation between language and rationality in terms of modes of discourse or genre in which distinctive ways of thinking and reasoning are called for” (604). He differentiates between literary and scientific modes of discourse (narrative and paradigmatic, respectively). Drawing on Stanovich, he lays the basis for further arguments. He says, “Stanovich distinguishes low-level, automatic “algorithmic” processes from “higher level” reflexive processes, further claiming that failures on such high-level tasks indicate that people are often, if not basically, irrational” (604). On the contrary, Olson says low-level and high-level information processing models:

... overlook the possibility that deviant answers are actually a rational solution to a different problem. By appeal to the understanding of the alternative modes of discourse mentioned above, we may be able to fill in that gap. Specifically, it is proposed that a class of reasoning failures occur when formal reasoning tasks are disguised as conventional narratives. Narratives, like ordinary informal oral discourse, are radically open to context and to prior knowledge in determining the meaning of a word or expression; paradigmatic discourse, of which reasoning tasks are exemplary, require attention to a narrowed and specialized “literal” or logical meaning of terms. (604)

In addition, fictional narratives are meant to be more connotative than non-fiction. According to Olson, non-fictional prose enjoys the status of a serious narrative which is considered ideal for a more rational interpretation. Academic prose is mainly associated with scientific and philosophical discourses; therefore, literary narratives are often deemed inadequate for analyzing truth, validity, and rationality. Nevertheless, Bruner problematizes the claims made by two groups with “two” contrasting attitudes to story. In one camp he places the “fabulists,” those who point out the importance of story in understanding ourselves, others, and the world, and in the other, the “antifabulists,” who worry about the ways that stories mislead” (11-12). According to him, the fabulists “describe the virtues of story not only for its power to entertain, but also for its ability to “subjunctivize” experience, to bring experience out of the ordinary world of doings and happenings into the world of the possible, the hypothetical” (Olson 605). Imagination unravels a world of innumerable possible outcomes. Therefore, “stories allow one to adopt a more reflective and self-conscious attitude to experience, thereby liberating the mind” (605). However, on the flip side, “the imagination gives rise to error as often as to truth. Modern critics are equally suspicious of stories, claiming that people spin themselves into stories that are clearly at odds with scientific and logical truths” (606). For psychological laws, there is a mandate to pay attention to personal narratives and the veracity and validity of these narratives are a serious matter of concern. Olson points out that the medical field

has adopted a narrative approach, treating patients as agents rather than objects (606). Thus, he concludes:

And one cannot think in terms of narrative discourse without appeal to notions of agency, intentionality, and, most importantly, disruptions to the expected. As mentioned, in his earlier writing on narrative Bruner saw narrative as one out of two equally important modes of representation: the more scientific and logical form, which he dubbed the “paradigmatic mode,” and the less formal mode, which he called the “narrative mode.” Both were seen as essential to understanding the mind—one tied more to the sciences, the other to the humanities. (606)

Olson deems it essential to have a proper understanding of the rational uses of both discourses. Unlike scientific approaches, humanities do not have a method to ensure *Ceteris paribus*, a Latin phrase which denotes that all other things are equal. He further explains, “In a story, things are conspicuously not equal, nor can they be systematically ruled out as they may be in a scientific laboratory. In a story the unexpected occurs” (607). Thus, he says that narratives are important to explain the human mind. He further opines that “this is a world in which it may be unrealistic to expect strictly causal laws; it is impossible to assume, for any real, naturally occurring event, that all other things are equal” (607). Polletta et al. in the article, “The Sociology of Storytelling,” discuss this in detail bringing in ideas of many scholars. It states, “symbolically aligned with common sense rather than science, stories seem engaging and concrete rather than abstract. They seem democratic (“everyone has a story,” we often say) rather than monopolized by elites” (110). Conversely, the article also ponders on the prevalent concerns about stories being “deceptive” and a “creative ploy.” A story is often equated with weak credibility owing to its nature of being subjective. The following statement from the article encapsulates the general notion about stories, “people trust stories as normatively powerful and dismiss them as politically trivial, as entertaining but unserious” (110). However, the focus of this paper is on the first-person accounts which are supposed to be authentic. Schizophrenic narratives blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction as delusions and reality

co-exist. Hence, the credibility of their first-person accounts in terms of what is real and unreal is considered to be precarious. According to Pollette et al., “Disadvantaged people are often less well trained in the requirements of telling an institutionally appropriate story, they are less likely to be seen as narratively competent, and their very experiences make them less able to tell the kind of story that is required” (123). People with schizophrenia are disadvantaged on many levels and their process of telling a story has to be studied as a peculiar case with characteristics typical of the nature of their illness, medical experiences, and society’s perceptions. Conversely, it is imperative to ask why their stories always have to be institutionally appropriate.

Rationality and Schizophrenia

As already discussed, the medical community has started paying more attention to patients’ narratives, but it is essential to look at how their narrativizing ability is affected by the illness, and how it changes at different points in time. It is also important to not disregard the attitude of the medical community or other scholars in the field towards comprehending their narratives, and their approach towards the patients when they are incomprehensible. Drawing information from certain studies, I will examine how the patients and the scholars deal with alternative rationality or meaning.

Logical reasoning is an integral part of being rational. Syllogisms are often used to test this ability in people. People with schizophrenia often undergo these tests so that their thinking can be evaluated. In a report published by Gareth S. Owen et al., they “show that under conditions where commonsense and logic conflict, people with schizophrenia reason more logically than healthy individuals” (454). They used “syllogisms that were deductively valid or invalid, and common sense using syllogistic content that strongly conformed to or departed from practical knowledge. Two types of syllogism were constructed, in each of which there was a conflict between deductive truth and commonsense truth” (453). Aaron L. Mishara in “On Wolfgang Blankenburg, Common Sense, and Schizophrenia” narrates his experience which implies that it is common sense that is lost and not every other mode of rational thinking. He states: “I

recently interviewed a patient with undifferentiated schizophrenia who spontaneously reported that she had lost her “common sense.” I asked her what she meant. She replied that it is something that “children learn” but she has lost it. She reported that it interferes with her sense of agency and ability to spontaneously partake in activities with other people” (321). However, other than the feeling of having lost something, there is an inability to comprehend the exact nature of what is missing. Even the scholars of rationality and reasoning would offer multiple interpretations for the experience of having common sense. Giovanni Stanghellini attempts to compile all such observations to give us a picture of common sense as it is experienced. He elucidates how common sense is a tool for adaptation as argued by Horton, Locke, Heider, and Plotkin in their respective works. It is the quintessential element that helps us in doing anything in everyday life rather than knowing. This sense is characterized by the ability to attribute cause-and-effect relationships to events that happen around human beings which is highly useful on a pragmatic level (778). Evolutionary psychologists also observe that “our literal survival depends upon a finely tuned knowledge of the causal texture of the world” (Plotkin 185). Further, Stanghellini enunciates that common sense is an old inheritance where the knowledge is gained by others which are available as reports and teachings. Thus, it is a socially derived sense with a high social value (778). Nevertheless, it differs among different groups. One of the most significant aspects of common sense and its lack in schizophrenic patients is discussed by Pierre Bovet and Josef Parnas. They state, “Common sense reflects our pre-conceptual attunement to the world. It reveals not so much what is evident but how it is evident, the constantly present and tacit frame of experience. The defect in common sense can manifest itself in a lack of taste and feeling for what is adequate and a lack of the sense for the “rules of the game” of human behavior” (583). Stanghellini elaborates on this phenomenon as follows:

In everyday experience, we feel familiarly related to the environment and to current social situations. At a perceptual level, objects in the world and persons appear familiar (i.e., as we expect them to be according to our past experience). In social situations, the movements, expressions, and

utterances of others also appear typical and understandable. There is a break with ordinary experience when objects or persons disagree perceptually with expectancies (e.g., when colors are too bright or details magnified—perceptive aberrations). But one can also have this feeling of strangeness without any change on the perceptual level, that is, when the meanings of objects in the world (e.g., "What is this chair for?") and of the actions of others (e.g., "Why is he laughing?") appear uncanny. The attunement concept refers mainly to this second level of experience, which involves the intuitive attribution of meanings to objects and situations, and of intentions to other people. (779)

Schizophrenia disrupts this function and it is one of the early symptoms. Blankenburg finds that this is exemplified in their actions as reported by their relatives that, "in the initial stages of schizophrenia, the patient asks questions about the most self-evident issues, whereas the ability to solve abstract and intellectual problems remains intact. In such cases, it is sometimes apparent that the lack of common sense is compensated by a hypertrophied devotion to logical solutions" (Bovet and Parnas 583). Thus, this problem can be read along the lines of Olson's conventional narratives and deviant narratives. As he asserts in his writing, a deviant narrative might help you arrive at a more rational solution in certain situations. Schizophrenic narratives are considered deviant, but according to Olson, they might have a separate rationale pertinent to their situation or context. Therefore, I propose that a schizophrenic world with a lack of access to conventional narratives possesses an alternative rationality. This alternative rationality is revealed through narratives such as oral narratives like therapy tapes, printed memoirs, autobiographies, and records on different media. Since scientific discourses have started giving more importance to the narrative mode, Humanities can also make use of both paradigmatic and narrative modes in research. Thus, I will examine first-person accounts written for the scholarly journal *Schizophrenia Bulletin* rather than autobiographical works written for common readers through psychological and philosophical lenses.

Understanding Narrativised Schizophrenia in Writing

To further the argument, it is important to give a glimpse into the years of work done on interpreting and understanding schizophrenic worlds through their narratives. Keith Doubt et al. in the article, “‘Mother Is Not Holding Completely Respect’: Making Social Sense of Schizophrenic Writing,” indulge in comprehending a piece of writing written by a person with schizophrenia. Given below is an excerpt from the transcription used for analysis. “The bracketed insertions identify crossed-out words and describe particular graphics of the letter” (Doubt et al. 91):

mother is not holding completely respect, that I'm actually
embasse[r]de, ashamed, and raped over it. there not my type
or style I don't like the idea [of my being dea relationship]
eval[a]uate before there chance to of a relationship [ship in
bold] to has a chance to be, but take the stepfather
[r]lationship is cause problems in my life though this legal
guardianship there both using it exploit me. there force a
family. (91-92)

The article devotes its attention to each word and it unravels the nuances involved in the study of a narrative that defies the conventional rules. The article says, “‘Holding’ is not an unintelligible substitution for ‘showing’ since we could say that we ‘hold someone in high regard.’ The phrases ‘hold in high regard’ and ‘show respect’ are semantically similar ... ‘holding’ is a maternal word and could express the frustration of having a mother who neither ‘holds’ one physically nor ‘holds’ one in respect” (93). Similarly, they attempt to translate a whole sentence as in, “I don't like the idea of being evaluated before there is a chance for a relationship” (94). The article comments that “such a remark suggests how the author might feel about the way that people categorize and dismiss her because of her illness. If relationships with others had a chance to grow before evaluation and judgment took place, the author would have the right to speak for herself and the opportunity not to have her illness speak for her” (94). However, it is impossible to overlook the way “evaluate” is written in the handwritten document with a “d” beside the “u” so that what we have is “evaludate,”

suggesting a link between the words “evaluate” and “validate” (94). Implying that “In her relationships, the author may feel offended by this linkage of evaluation and validation; she may feel offended by the judgmental response of society to her afflict” (94). Through this word-by-word analysis, the authors are putting forth an idea that how understanding people with schizophrenia should be a concern for everyone. They also emphasize the purpose of such a study as he opines drawing on the ideas of Rosenberg that “Insanity is constructed according to the normal member's inability to take the role of the psychotic” (103). However, this raises the question of whether the existing problems will be resolved if we understand them completely. Taking the role of a patient and speculating the possible meanings will not solve the problem. Nonetheless, the authors think that the “process of role-taking is curative for society's narrow grasp of someone experiencing schizophrenia” (103).

This has been the concern of scholars of different disciplines who wanted to study the experience of a person with schizophrenia. The latest studies on Schizophrenia and Language also point in a similar direction. The loss of the inherited common understanding about things that force them to attribute estranged or alternative meanings to the events happening around them would explain many kinds of delusions if not all. The book *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl: The True Story of “Renee”* by Marguerite Sechehaye, supports this viewpoint. For instance: “When, for example, I looked at a chair or a jug, I thought not of their use or function – a jug not as something to hold water and milk, a chair not as something to sit in – but as having lost their names, their functions and meanings; they became ‘things’ and began to take on life, to exist” (Sechehaye 56). Valentina Cardella in her book, *Language and Schizophrenia: Perspectives from Psychology and Philosophy*, looks at these experiences and breaks down the process involved with the excerpt which says, “looking around my room, I found that things had lost their emotional meaning. They were larger than life, tense, and suspenseful. They were flat, and coloured as if in artificial light” (Anon 167). Cardella calls this ‘the phase of delusional moods’ that leads to full-blown delusions in the future. The philosophical explanation she gives is that the patient loses the semantic, pragmatic, and emotional components attached to these. There is a sense of artificiality because

of a suspension of meaning (68-69). Subsequently, when the delusions become an intense experience, the exact opposite happens, which is an overflow of meanings. The rationale behind this process is philosophized by Cardella as follows:

When reality gets less and less familiar and the world seems to lose its meaning, where is it possible to regain what is getting lost? The answer is only one: in the inner world. It is not accidental that only when the delusion rises schizophrenic subjects succeed to get out from this intolerable situation of suspension. The dawn of delusion comes together with the most severe phase of Wahnstimmung, and it literally reverses the situation, converting the suspended meaning into an overflowing meaning. The delusion puts everything in its right place and attaches meaning to every single thing. Before the appearance of a delusion, every possibility of comprehension is suspended, while after it, everything can be understood. (69)

Therefore, the situation changes such that every irrelevant thing is attached with a meaning. Consequently, they are always preoccupied with decoding these meanings and it becomes strenuous. In addition, every information or sentence is linked to the already existing delusional thread. The world inside us is revealed through language, hence, whatever is revealed is the reality of that person. Rather than labelling it as irrational, the current scholars look for a rationale peculiar to the schizophrenic person. All these studies reinforce that there is a loss of commonly accepted meanings and narratives which force them to attribute new meanings to everything according to the alternative rationality they possess.

These attempts to interpret a schizophrenic world are commendable, but as a literary scholar, the concerns are regarding the extent to which these activities and genuine efforts are actually happening, the effectiveness of such an endeavour in helping the patients, and the expectations of a patient. First-person accounts published in *Schizophrenia Bulletin* encourage people to share their experiences and insights into living with schizophrenia to help the

medical community or any other research community interested in this field. Even though it sounds to be an empowering act, it is imperative to analyze the differences between publishing a full-length personal account like a memoir, an autobiography, or any short account in a non-scholarly medium. The objective of these accounts is to help the professionals in this area of study to learn more about the schizophrenic experiences. Hitherto, the paper has discussed the general understanding of rationality prevalent in medical discourses and how schizophrenic patients are different. Narratives reveal the reality as already mentioned; therefore, as far as learning is concerned it is important to consider the circumstances in which they are writing and what their personal goals are in doing such an exercise. Nevertheless, this paper will particularly look at two first-person accounts published in *Schizophrenia Bulletin*. Unlike the narratives that were used to study the rational narrativization skills in people with schizophrenia, these narratives are expected to follow the rules of the journal to get published. This is expected in any other kind of publication since the readers are mostly common people without any previous knowledge of this subject. To cater to a wide reading community, writing and editing are crucial. On the contrary, when it is for the medical community or any scholar who studies the reality of such experiences, a strictly guided personal account does not serve the purpose. Ironically, first-person accounts published in scholarly journals such as *Schizophrenia Bulletin* are most likely subject to scrutiny on a different level other than a genuine examination of the content with the intention to comprehend the incomprehensible through the ways that have been discussed in the paper.

The Clinical Gaze and the Disregard for ‘Alternative Rationality’

Angela Woods in “Rethinking ‘Patient Testimony’ in the Medical Humanities: The Case of *Schizophrenia Bulletin’s* First Person Accounts,” proposes this concept of clinical gaze where a patient Marcia is supposed to speak in front of the medical community adhering to the conventions set by them in the context of a recovery. Marcia’s concerns as portrayed by Woods are: “Will I be able to communicate my view of recovery? Will I be allowed to say what is important to me? Will they hear and be convinced by my story?” (46).

However, clinical gaze can come in many forms, where all their actions and speech would determine their treatment in terms of the dosage of medicines, restraining orders, and physical violence in certain situations. Even though these are inevitable, the patient's discretion on the right treatment that he or she deserves or yearns for would hinder the necessary transparency between the patient and the doctor. In another case, clinical gaze could also mean the interpretation of their experiences only through the lens of medically familiarized narratives. In other words, limiting their experiences into a bundle of symptoms. The experience of each individual being unique and unconventional even the medical diagnostic templates cannot fit the whole of it. Susan A. Salsman echoes this concern when she begins her account by asking this question: "Wouldn't it be great if all mental health professionals were required to have a mental illness?" (6). Even though she adopts a jovial tone, she puts forth this idea that to help mentally ill, one should be mentally ill. However, this is not a thought after immense deliberation on the viability, practicality, efficacy, or effectiveness of such a case. Instead, I argue that it is an emotional and instinctive response to the constant trial of getting misunderstood and the need to explain.

In Marcia's case, the clinical gaze is performing the role of a judge who has the power to decide whether the patient fits in society after all the treatments and training. The major requirement in such a situation is to prove that you are rational in the commonly understood sense. Therefore, assisted writing is advised as described in "Supported Reporting of First Person Accounts: Assisting People Who Have Mental Health Challenges in Writing and Publishing Reports About Their Lived Experience," by Rudnick et al. The major suggestions from them are:

Reports, including first person accounts, benefit from some structure, which can be formal, as illustrated in separate sections, or informal, as illustrated in a coherent flow of the text from start to end. Whatever the preferred structure, it is best to determine it in advance, even if roughly, and fine-tune or radically change it as needed during presubmission revisions if needed. This should be done in a particularly collaborative manner, as content expertise and process

expertise come together to determine the coherence and hence the structure of a report. In our case, one report was more formally structured, due to a more cognitive emphasis in the report, whereas another report was more informally structured, due to a more emotive emphasis in the report. (2)

Further, the rational aura is also created with the following rules in terms of language. They say that “process expertise can be helpful here by guiding content expertise in relation to standard ways of writing that may be most acceptable for publication, such as avoiding overly technical or idiosyncratic jargon and using grammatically and syntactically correct language if the content expert is not versed in writing for publication” (2). This is an attempt to make the patients or survivors surrender to the clinical gaze. An imposed rationality rather than an alternative one as suggested by the scholars who studied their narratives. Most of the first-person accounts follow these rules with so little liberty. Hence, re-emphasizing the motive of publishing such accounts as described by themselves becomes a necessity.

Knowing the lived experience of people who have mental health challenges is considered instructive and hence potentially helpful for other people who have mental health challenges and for other stakeholders, such as their significant others and mental health care providers. Publishing such lived experience in journals that are read by psychiatrists and other mental health care providers, policy makers, clinical researchers, and non clinician scientists (who do schizophrenia research but are not commonly exposed to individuals who experience schizophrenia) as well as by people who have mental health challenges and their significant others, may be an important way to promote learning from, and empathy with, people who have mental health challenges. (1)

This sounds ironic since encouraging the patients to rationalize their experiences and narrativise in a way that conforms to the conventions could be considered a recovery exercise where the responsibility of explaining and making it convincing is on the patients. However, this

is contrary to the objectives of the journal publications. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between two kinds of narratives in which there is an apparent acceptance of a breach of commonsensical understanding followed by its reclamation and another which defies this linearity. Valerie Fox's first-person account takes us into the nuances of rationality where she consistently strives to embrace the rationality of the outside world. Contrary to the many experiences of scary and troublesome delusions, she found peace and safety as Gods were the ones talking to her. Rationality of religious beliefs is another debate, however, in my opinion, it is unlikely for an educated human being with exposure to the happenings of the world to believe that God can actually talk to them, despite being religious. On the contrary, it should appear rational to a believer if they actually believed in all the stories in the scriptures of any religion. I would argue that it is common sense or the inherited common understanding that prevents them from easily falling prey to such narratives when they have not experienced it personally. The shared knowledge is that such incidents are unheard of and highly unlikely to happen. However, there are exceptions and one such case is schizophrenia. Amidst the debilitating and excruciating symptoms of schizophrenia, Fox's delusions gave her much-needed solace. She says:

In this world of homelessness and schizophrenia, when I was abused and violated my heavenly family said it was because I was mistaken for someone else. I faithfully believed this explanation. God and the Blessed Virgin were always with me. It was as if I could feel their presence. Before going to sleep on a dirty, cold floor or beneath the protectiveness of spiraling pine trees or in an abandoned building, I saw in my mind's eye Mary's picture as if she were standing guard so nothing evil would happen to me during the night. I did sleep, and I started each new day with Mary and our Father. While treachery abounded all around me, my core was peaceful. (364)

Her core was peaceful, but she was forced to embrace the rationality of the world because the people she loved belonged to that world and they could never access or fit in her inner delusions. Therefore, with the help of medicines she chooses to heal. The signs that show that

she has regained her common sense is her reluctance to the delusional experience, despite it being a peaceful place amidst the torturous symptoms. She concludes that the limited possibilities offered by a simple life are all she needs. She says, "I don't want God, Jesus, and the Blessed Mother to be in my conscious mind on an ongoing basis...I do believe in God and Mary and Jesus, and that is enough for me. I have a great respect for life and for the deadliness of my illness, yet I embrace life fully and am thankful for each day of health of mind" (365). Apart from her transition to the shared world, it is imperative to focus on the way her narrative also follows the structure and is coherent as per the requirements needed for publication. Nevertheless, I contend that it is a revised and polished picture of her story, which is indeed an authentic version but misses the ambiguities, uncertainties, constant flux of worlds, and incongruence of an ongoing experience of being a schizophrenic.

On the whole, change is inevitable if the objectives envisioned must be attained. Jaison Jepson writes an unconventional account of defying the rules in a conversational tone. The writing is such that it evokes questions in readers' minds at several points and the narration ends by showing a snippet of his everyday life, without giving us clinically approved or socially acceptable information, terms, or adjectives to make it a coherent narrative with a beginning and an end. Fox starts her account in this manner: "With this factual story of my descent into the world of schizophrenia, I want to show the insidiousness and deadliness of the illness" (363). This is a formal, well-structured, and scholarly sentence which might have been a result of an editor's intervention. There have been numerous discussions on considering schizophrenia as a disease of language. Therefore, their narratives quintessentially embody all the nuances of their experiences. However, Jepson's account says, "I try to walk every day. Occasionally I clean up the trash on the side of the road. You never know what you are going to find. Today I didn't take a bag to put the trash in, because I felt the sidewalk would be clean from the last time I picked up the trash. However, while walking along today, I found a hammer" (468). As already mentioned, it is casual in tone, and he never reveals what his whole journey was like, since it is ongoing, he does not present a philosophized outlook on

his life that has been overturned by schizophrenia. He matter-of-factly describes his delusion:

Usually when something different occurs in my life, it triggers my mind to start wandering. I wouldn't call it a hallucination, but just an image in my brain. In this case I saw a police car stop in front of me. A policeman tells me to drop the hammer and get on my knees. He also tells me to put my hands on my head. I thought all of this could be occurring while my neighbors were watching me. When images or thoughts like these show up, I ignore them but that doesn't stop them from happening. Maybe it is the product of being a quiet dreamer. (468)

There is a reflection on how he thinks and how he differentiates between real and unreal. However, the lack of academic seriousness in his writing makes us sceptical about the credibility of his words. The hammer itself might have been a part of his imagination. An unreliable narrator is typical of schizophrenia, but it should not lead to disregarding their content as irrational or meaningless. As pointed out by many scholars doing advanced research in schizophrenia, the goal of any scholar from any discipline has to be finding the alternative rationality or alternative meaning that characterizes the schizophrenic world. Jepson describes his current situation as follows:

These thoughts do not mean that my medication is not working. I understand that my meds may not take care of everything, all the time, and sometimes it doesn't take care of all paranoia. But I can ask myself questions to determine if this is reality or my "unreality." Schizophrenia is like a heavyweight fight, but it will not knock me out. It might cause me to have things to ignore or beat down inside me, but I will not react to a delusion unless I have real evidence that it is true. (468)

He does not disclose anything about his personal life other than his illness. However, the intriguing part is that readers are left clueless about how he finds the evidence and how he convinces himself

whether something is real or unreal. It embodies the ambiguities, uncertainties, and a movement between the real and the delusional world. This also appears to be an account written for himself rather than the research community. He is in conversation with himself and he asserts his agency in determining what is real and what to do about it. He reclaims his control over his own life without succumbing to society's expectations and without conforming to its rules. He displays his ability to deal with alternative rationality to navigate through a world that does not understand it. Nevertheless, it is revelatory rather than informative, hence, the knowledge is not readily available, which necessitates a deep and empathetic look at the conditions and their reality, along with a sincere approach towards thorough research to comprehend this illness.

Conclusion

Schizophrenia entails exclusion and incomprehensibility in addition to suffering and helplessness. Dismissing their narratives as meaningless or regarding them as useful only to check off the list of symptoms is a common practice as evident in many of the discourses discussed. 'Alternative Rationality' demands keen observation skills, thorough research and consistent efforts to embrace the deviant and radically nonconformist ways of thinking evading the trap of conventional narratives. This is expected of the people researching schizophrenia with direct access to the patients and their narratives. Medical Humanities offer plenty of opportunities to explore such illness narratives in the light of first-hand studies done by professionals to add to the knowledge, criticize the shortcomings, and cater to a wide audience in a more simplified form. The purpose of this exercise would be to familiarize with the alternative narratives despite the challenges in comprehension. Through this paper, I attempted to show the problems involved in narrativizing schizophrenic experiences in a way that conforms to the conventional rules. Even though it is inevitable when the readers do not know about the illness, it is perilous when the informed groups demand the same. Therefore, I contend that being institutionally appropriate should not be a necessity when it comes to publications for the research community. Though it might serve other purposes, it is essential for budding learners in the field and scholars without direct

access to them unlike psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists to further their research. Thus, Jepson through his account asserts his agency and resists the clinical gaze and their attempts to subdue the alternative perspectives he has to offer.

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**Laughter as Protest in Bama's *Harum-Scarum*
*Saar and Other Stories***

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Abstract

It is through the narratives of violence, rage, bewilderment and anguish that the Dalit protagonist is seen negotiating the inequities and inequalities of the world around her. In the works of the Tamil writer Bama however this anger is often turned into sarcasm, and bewilderment turned into mischief. In her collection of short stories, *Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories* (2006) Bama creates characters, who are not diminished by caste oppression or poverty. They deal with oppressive caste structures with wit, mischief and laughter. In doing so she creates Dalit men and women, who are never just “poor” and “oppressed” passive victims waiting to be emancipated. They understand not only their own historical oppression but also the oppressor’s machinations. They outrightly reject and ridicule the hegemonic culture of the upper caste through their subversive wit and bodily gestures. This imaginary is both a technology of the self and a means of political and cultural intervention.

Keywords: Dissent, Laughter, Dalit, Self, Sarcasm, Wit, Irreverence.

Introduction

The essential question is what is this ‘self’ that gets constructed through Bama’s stories? How does it negotiate its space in the caste-ridden power structures of Independent India? Not that independent India is an entity set off from its past in a clean break. Past has never been past in India. It is too much of the present and therefore never really past in the sense of being relegated to an archaic history. This

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is not to say however that archaic history does not have its uses. The founding parents of Independent India were oriented in the right direction and offered to course correct historical wrongs against the Dalit community through constitutional mechanisms. However, the task of building up a 'confident-self' for a community that was forced to live as untouchables was never going to be easy and constitutional mechanisms could only do so much. The remaining task was to fall upon the community itself to build its 'self' through resistance and in opposition to the dominant order of the caste hierarchy and in solidarity with its own fraternity. This was a task that was to be accomplished through social, political and cultural means. Literature was to play an important role in this reshaping of Dalit identity. B.R. Ambedkar said: "Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of villages is removed . . . Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives." (Ambedkar 8)

Most Dalit scholars see this call of Ambedkar as setting the stage for the emergence of Dalit literature in the first Dalit literary conference held in 1958. Through 1950s to the present, Dalit literature has tried to convey what Arjun Dangle calls its "differentness" through stories, autobiographies, poems and now films. This differentness is based on Dalit thinkers, writers' assertion that "the language, experiences and heroes of Dalit literature are totally different" (Dangle xiii). Carrying this thesis forward Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* says (2005):

The singular identity of Dalit literature is revealed through its rebellious, collective character; the Dalit writer's distinct experience, their use of folk language, their commitment to human liberation; and the influence of Ambedkar's thought. (37)

"Suffering and revolt" have long been the cornerstones of this new literature. This however is by no means the only definition of Dalit literature. Others like D.R. Nagraj have argued for the creation of an identity and literature based on not just anguish, rejection and revolts alone but of generating polyphonic "enigmas of irreducible

difference” (Nagraj 185). For Nagraj, anger, rage, bewilderment are not enough to contain the creative energies of the Dalit community, these need to be supplanted with cultural, spiritual, philosophical memories of the past as indeed a retrieval of other discourses of revolts against orthodoxy.

As can be seen, this picture of the emerging Dalit “self” is not a seamless one. On the one hand is the pull of the fiery and revolutionary Ambedkarite ideology, which wishes to submerge and erase its cultural past and on the other is the desire to reclaim one’s cultural and spiritual memory. Whatever their differences, the desire in both the thinkers is to construct a self that defies caste oppression to liberate the individual. It would be a mistake to see the two as binaries of one another. So, if modernity, as has been argued by philosophers, sociologists and political thinkers as Charles Taylor, Anthony Giddens, Sudipta Kaviraj and others, “imposes on individuals and communities an historical requirement of self-reflection” (380) and the “crystallization of an idea of the self which did not exist earlier” (Kaviraj 380). In the stories of Dalit writers this construction of the self is an ongoing process of becoming and is predicated on the primary condition of creating a fraternity. This is also a safeguard Ambedkar proposes against breeches of liberty and equality. His Biographer Dhananjay Keer says, “He did not believe that law can be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or equality. He gave the highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard” (459).

The Dalit ‘self’ as imagined by the Dalit writer is a self in opposition to the caste system of Hinduism: in all its manifestations of heredity, marriage restrictions, dietary rules, hierarchy, choice of occupation, all foster inequality and are used to exploit or humiliate the Dalits. This systematic denial of humanity and respect to the Dalit community was to be wrested back and to that extent dissent and defiance become vital in Dalit writings. Bama herself says so in an article “Dalit Literature” published in *Indian literature*:

The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits in particular and the liberation of the oppressed in general. It is fundamentally a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit

political liberation. It is cultural politics. It takes the form of protest. (97)

Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories: Constructing an Irreverent Self. If Dalit writing is as Limable says a “lofty image of grief” (30) then Bama’s characters in *Harum Scarum Saar* provide a certain comic relief. Laughter, and humour have not been used as much in the fight against the oppression of upper castes in Dalit literature. Bama is perhaps the first to turn anger into laughter and bewilderment into mischief in her fiction. She creates characters, who are not diminished by caste oppression or poverty. They engage with oppressive caste structures through wit, mischief and laughter. In doing so she creates an image of confident, self-assured Dalit men and women who are never just “poor” and “oppressed” passive victims waiting to be emancipated. *Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories* first published as *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) in Tamil translates as rebellious pranksters. The Tamil title as opposed to the English title is a clear indication of the spirit of the collection, which is rebellion through pranks, speech, gestures, and small acts of defiance.

For Bama Dalit literature is a means of political and cultural intervention leading to the creation of a ‘collective-self’ as opposed to the “wretched of the earth” kind of representation in mainstream literature. It would be instructive to look at what Bama herself has to say on this topic. She says:

Dalit literature should not be viewed as a mere story of the individual's tragedy. Instead, it should be the story of the Dalit struggle and its relationship with Authority. It produces a political reaction. It is provocative and unpalatable to the champions of the oppressive caste and class system. It should bring about chaos into the hierarchical relationships between the dominant and the dominated. It is singular in concept but plural in practice. (98)

The stories in *Harum, Sacruam, Saar* play precisely this role, they provoke, they challenge, they make you cry, they make you laugh

and they disturb the hierarchical order of caste. There are ten stories in *Harum Scarum, Saar* and within it are three sets of stories:

1. Immensely sad, tragic tales of cruelty and indifference that have parallels only in stories of slavery, stories as “Rich Girl,” “Half Sari” and “Freedom.” These are stories of devastating dominance of the upper caste in the village. The protagonists in these stories are children, who do not understand their conditions of slavery and die either unable to cope with the inhuman treatment meted out to them, or see a parent die as a result of the systemic abuse of the dominant castes; or they just run away from the houses of landlords, where they are house servants.
2. The second set of stories as “Pongal,” “Ponnuthayi,” are stories of outright defiance. Defiance here is not just against caste practices tied to the rural economy, but also within the community. Women characters, having suffered the harsh embrace of patriarchal practices and values attempt to escape it and, in the process, find a kind of freedom that allows them some relief from everyday brutality and torture.
3. It is the third set of stories as “Annachi,” “Harum-Scarum Saar,” “Chilli Powder” and “Old Man and a Buffalo” where the full range of the weapons of dissent, wit, laughter, defiance and mischief come into play. It is these stories that will be dealt with in some detail in this paper.

However, before undertaking the above analysis, a few words about the structure of the book: there are ten independent stories in the book. They are independent only in the sense that we meet a different set of characters from different villages as Kupayapatti, Nattiyakallu and Chinnakaruvelampatti in these stories. The physical geography of the place, its caste composition, language, physical labor that people engage in give the impression of the entire action taking place in one single space. All the villages named earlier and those that are not named are situated on the banks of the river Kamma. All action takes place around the Kamma, whether it is bathing, shitting, swimming, washing clothes, grazing the cattle, catching fish, or playing games. The villages and the river Kamma are a fictional construct reminding one of RK Narayan’s Malgudi

Days. The only difference being that the term ‘fictional’ only extends as far as the name of the village and the river go there is nothing illusory about caste atrocities. They are a daily occurrence. Incidentally, Kamma is a dominant caste in Tamil Nadu and in Andhra Pradesh. The word Kamma apparently has origins in both Pali and Sanskrit meaning *karma*.

The two castes that dominate the stories are those of the Parayas and the Naickers, where Parayas are the lower caste employed in the fields and houses of the upper caste landowners, the Naickers. In Bama’s stories all action takes place outside, in clashes between the lower caste workers and upper caste landlords. There is no inner psychological world of the characters. There is rumination and reflection on one’s condition, but it is not an individual’s suffering, it is the suffering of the collective that is at the centre of all these stories. To that extent these stories are stories of a collective self.

Annachi and Chilli powder: Antipodal Culture. In the two stories, *Annachi* and *Chilli Powder*, I wish to look at, following are the tools of laughter/humour employed to subvert the dominance of the upper caste landowners: 1. derisive wit, 2. mischief, 3. sarcasm, 4. irreverence, and 5 native humour, use of rustic language. In the story “Annachi” for example, the protagonist Ammasi is a twenty-year old, good-looking man with dark moustache and a good physique. When he smiles as Bama says his” teeth glittered like a Kenda fish thrashing about in the sun.” Bama creates these fresh images rooted in the local dialect to describe the beauty of a young man. It is almost as if a new vocabulary is required to talk about the beauty of the youth belonging to the Paraya community. The boy himself has a highly developed sense of personal grooming and he dresses up in spotless white clothes ironed diligently to remove all wrinkles even as he goes to the field of the upper caste landlord, to divert water.

Following is the exchange that takes place between the landlord and Ammasi:

“Do you look like someone who has come to work? You look like you are going to some office! Dolt! Didn’t that idiot find someone else, did he have to send you?”

“What is it to you? You only want to divert water, don’t you? What do you care about how I’m dressed?”

Elai, do you know what time it is? Look at this fellow showing up now, like some big shot going somewhere far away!”

Annachi, only you have a wristwatch, I don’t. Only you can tell the time Annachi. I will try and buy a watch soon Annachi, after that I will be able to tell the time.” (12)

As can be seen Amaasi reverses the order of things by wearing spotless white, ironed clothes for a work that requires getting dirty in the mud and threatens to even buy a wristwatch to get even with the landlord. Also, clearly visible in the above discursive encounter is the unease of the upper caste landlord on seeing the lower caste person dressing up in clean clothes and talking to him as an equal. The landlord’s immediate impulse is to dismiss him on that pretext. Clean clothes and impertinence destabilise the upper caste landlord’s entrenched sense of caste superiority for he only understands and feels comfortable with servitude and patronage.

The flashpoint in the story however is Ammasi calling the landlord ‘annachi’ or elder brother. This results in the landlord calling a panchayat (a village council) to discipline the youngster. However, even here Ammasi scores a victory over the landlord by saying:

I only called him annachi politely, respectfully and you raise hell? ...you ask me why I called a Naicker, annachi? It’s just what the old woman Poovathi, says, when a donkey shits is there a difference between what it shits first and what it shits last? Shit is shit. All men are just men.” So saying Ammasi walked away. And everyone watched him leave, awestruck? (14)

Ammasi is echoing Ambedkar's call for equality of all men. His genius lies in claiming his dignity by wearing spotless white clothes, aspiring for a wristwatch and claiming equality even as he disparages the Landlord by calling him a donkey and shit. The last line, "And everyone watched him leave, awestruck" is a coming together of impertinence and defiance leading to a liberating act. Hence, when Ammanshi does the seemingly impossible it is only natural that it should be awe-inspiring for the people of his community as well as for others. He does this with a flair that generates humour and fun at the expense of the oppressor and at the level of the text generates an aesthetic response to the systemic violence and oppression of caste structures. At the same time, it serves as an "improvisational counterpoint to laughing to keep from crying" (Hintze 5).

In fact, this fierce and free attitude of the protagonist is really the plot of the story. Not only does it set in action the movement of the story but also at the level of the theme it sets the tone for an aspiration to a life of dignity and equality. His rejection of the dominant-servile order by insisting on speaking on equal terms, his refusal to debase himself by wearing dirty and worn out clothes, to reject the language of politeness and deference, his rebellion against order and obedience these are all political acts of disobedience and constitute what has been described as 'Dalit protest culture' by Tamil scholars as Raj Gauthaman in his essay, "Dalit protest culture: The first stage"(263) published in *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012). A Dalit, he says is considered arrogant and disrespectful if he/she does not demean or debase himself/herself (236). Gauthaman remarks pertinently that:

When the Dalit talks back, the direct and opposite identities, the self and other get subverted, the Dalit gets relief from mental restrictions that bind him while the upper caste is indignant that his direct identities are lost. No dominant person would like to lose his identity. (268)

Bama is emphasising precisely this "antipodal culture" of protest through speech, body -language, gesture and the defiant attitude of her protagonists. Similarly, in another story "Chilli Powder" a feisty

fearless woman Pachayamma from the Paraya community makes it a habit to cut wild grass from the fields and orchards of a rich landowner, a woman called Gangamma, who is a much hated and reviled figure in the colony of the Parayas. Gangamma is portrayed as mean and cruel woman with a massive figure, moving like a malevolent elephant through the fields. The sight of her makes people run for life. One day as Pachayamma and two other women are cutting wild grass on the sly in the fields of Gangamma, she sneaks upon them and throws chili powder into their eyes. Not that the chili-throwing incident stops Pachayamma from cutting grass and thieving other items from Gangamma's fields. But Gangamma gets a nickname henceforth-molagappodi or chili powder, a name that infuriates Gangamma no end. One day as Pachayamma and four other women are returning after working in the fields they see Gangamma approaching from the other side. Seeing her Pachayamma provocatively calls out to her friends:

Heard that a chili powder machine has come to our village too. The wife of that teacher who lives in the street below isn't grinding chili paste anymore –she's using chili powder, just like the landowners.

. . . must be so convenient to store chili powder like that. We can use to cook and also throw into people's eyes. (33)

Hearing this Gangamma starts yelling furiously but runs for her life seeing that she is surrounded by five angry women and that no one from her household or community is nearby to take her side. Bama builds up the story with these details of daily skirmishes between the lower and higher caste. The high point in the story comes just like that suddenly and the revenge exacted by the wronged lower caste person isn't grand, but in the form of ridicule or embarrassment to unsettle the order of things. In the story Gangamma through her social and political connections gets the police to arrest Pachayamma and other women, who have been stealing cotton pods from her field. On their way to the police station in Gangamma's tractor a woman starts feeling embarrassed on being caught. She blames Pachayamma for this and calls her shameless. To which Pachayamma replies:

What's shameless about this? Are we stealing so we can build tiled houses for ourselves? Are we going to make some jewelry for our necks and ears? We steal because that is the only way we will not starve- even though we need only a little bit of kanji. Tell me with prices so high, can we afford to have our fill of kanji with the wages we get? We don't have a single coin on us today. Even when there is work and we get paid, we can have only broken rice kanji and rasam. Today I thought I would sell the cotton and buy some dried fish for a curry but that sinner's daughter came and spoiled it all. Pachayamma turned her attention to the policeman. "ayya just let me get down for a second. I'll pee and come running back. (37)

Poverty, rage, and humiliation does not cause Pachayamma to lose sight of her location in the caste/class structure of the society. She understands that the creation of wealth of the upper castes is no less a thieving of poor people's labour. She is not ashamed of her poverty. She is only trying to make ends meet to survive. Her impudence and sharp retort are her weapons against figures of authority. In the story the women laugh, taunt and mimic each other on their way to the police station even as the movement of the tractor makes it impossible for the women to control their bladder. The policemen in their viciousness refuse to let them get down to urinate. So, as soon as they reach the station:

Pachayamma quickly lifted her clothes and peed right there, standing up. The other women too did the same.

Pachayamma adds with a flourish after this act:

Ayya, one can hold back one's anger but not one's piss. That's why we asked you to let us down on the way. It is you who said we could pee only after reaching the station. (38)

The women refuse to pay the fine of ten rupees that is levied upon them and propose to stay back at the police station and ask for food to be arranged for the night. In the meanwhile, an inspector comes to

the police station seeing him the two policemen stand up in attention drawing up further rebuke from the old women Aarayi, “When an officer shows up they all hang on to their balls” (39). Eventually the women are allowed to go home with a stern warning.

The act of urinating in public in the police station is a political act of resistance and may be described as an act of “affirmative sabotage” a term coined by Gayatri Spivak and used by Sudhadeep Mukherjee in the article, “Women of the Dalit Unrest: Rewriting Bodies, Reinforcing Resistance.” She uses this term to highlight the resistance inscribed in Bama’s earlier work like *Sangati* (1994). Here too, there are characters like Sammuga Kizavi, who on seeing a little boy from her community being thrashed for simply touching the water pot of an upper caste man, silently urinates in the same pot, as an act of protest. Mukherjee says that “her act of urinating in the upper caste’s pot can be understood as being revolutionary when read in conjunction to the methodical and persistent infliction of violence on the Dalit woman and her body” (Mukherjee 13). This is not “mere anarchy loosed upon the world” as W. B Yeats would say, rather it is rebellion, a form of protest against the hegemonic culture of the upper castes. To quote Mukherjee again:

The Dalits, as is evident from *Sangati*, sabotage those very same markers by literally *using* them in/for their everyday survival, and thus rewrite the Dalit historiography from the vantage of resistance. (Mukherjee 13-14)

The body and its gestures become the site of rebellion against the oppressive Hindu code for the lower castes as “standing up when someone comes, wrapping the stole around the waist, touching the feet and prostrating as the bodily gestures that symbolize slave status and lowly position” (Gauthaman 269). Bama’s characters go much beyond defying this code of conduct they spit, they urinate, they bathe, they wear clean clothes and retort back when abused.

Conclusion

In focusing on derisive wit, mischief, sarcasm, irreverence, humour

and laughter in the above stories Bama creates a site for a new form of subjectivity that is located in the spontaneous quality of a collective laughter, thereby giving expression to the assertion of the self and a possibility of mediation between the personal and the public. This also allows Bama to reclaim for her protagonists even in dire circumstances a perspective on the absurdity of caste inequality and injustice. She herself identifies with the liberation literature of “black literature, the feminist literature and the communist-socialist (Bama 98). She harnesses laughter and mischief not merely as a defence mechanism against caste atrocities but as a political tool to create a shared “Dalit public sphere” that has “issues in common with Black and feminist movements” (Gauthaman 263). Thereby generating a space of resistance and the bold assertion of the ‘Dalit-self, Dalit-body’ but also making a common cause with the global fraternity of the oppressed as blacks and other marginalised figures of society. More so, the humour and laughter generated in the stories at the experience of the upper caste is an attempt by Bama to develop a change in the aesthetic experience of Dalit literature. By making wit and mischief as central embodied experiences of Dalit protagonists in her fiction she makes laughter an intentional weapon aimed at combating caste hierarchy.

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Plastic Landscape: Ecological Dystopia and the Disposability of Emotion in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to investigate environmental degradation, especially due to the prevalence of plastics and other toxins, and examine its psychological impact through an analysis of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). Drawing upon Timothy Morton's approach in confronting and addressing the dark recklessness inherent in all anthropocene activities and Rob Nixon's focus on the power of literature and storytelling as powerful instruments to seek justice on environmental concerns, the paper seeks to depict consumer culture as symbolically represented by the usage of plastic. In academic discourse, the use of plastic is not only perceived as environmentally harmful but also as a marker of consumerism and commodification. Thus, drawing further upon Jean Baudrillard's idea of the postmodern condition, the objective of this paper is to closely read Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise* (1985) and comment not only on the ecological degradation caused by plastic and toxic spills but also on how, similar to the disposability of plastic, human emotions have deteriorated into disposable commodities.

Keywords: Ecology, Dystopia, Plastic, Consumerism, Alienation, Postmodern Condition.

Introduction

In his essay, "The Morphology of Landscape," eminent geographer, Carl Sauer states that the objects in a landscape exist together in

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interrelation (321). He further contends that “a definition of landscape as singular, unorganized or unrelated has no scientific value” (323). Decades later, Tim Ingold in “The Temporality of the Landscape”, accentuates the argument by conceptualising that “in a landscape, each component enfolds within its essence the totality of its relations with each and every other” (154). Thus, the concepts of interconnectedness and relationality in landscape studies have always been central to the understanding of landscape as evolutionary, due to the intrinsic interdependence of the species that constitute it. However, contemporary landscapes, especially in the aftermath of the two devastating world wars, are alarmingly dominated by the extensive use of plastic and other toxins, as such, the relationality and balance are drastically disrupted by the prevalence of synthetic materials that do not integrate with the natural ecosystem. Such an ecological fracture precipitates the eventual creation of an ecological dystopia where plastic and other synthetic materials exceed their role as mere environmental pollutants, turning into a metaphorical symbol of modern consumer throwaway culture which values convenience over ecological harmony and outright disregards the need for environmental integrity and sustainability. These fragmented and fractured landscapes marred by plastic waste, have begun to epitomise environmental neglect, eroding the integrity and interconnectedness of the natural fabric of these landscapes, which have in turn, not only led to the disruption of ecological connection but have also perpetuated the severing of humane and emotional ties. The fragmentation has also led to the erosion of the culture of considering nature as an indispensable part of existence, creating a ‘brave new world’ where technological progress and mechanical stimuli have taken over shared human values, tradition and the emotional intelligence to weigh the impact of our ecological footprints.

Timothy Morton vehemently argues in his influential book *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016) that extensive utilisation of plastics and other synthetic toxins, pervasive consumer culture resulting out of capitalism and the striking human-nature dichotomy constitute the foundational catalysts of large-scale ecological destruction which have propelled humanity to sink into a state of ecological dystopia from which there is no return, if no

rigorous measures are taken. He coined the term “hyperobjects” in his book *The Ecological Thought* (2010) to refer to those factors which contribute towards the “end of the world” (2). In this regard Morton considers Climate change as a quintessential hyperobject due to its devastating impact. What we consider dystopia refers to the end of the world and to quote Morton again:

The end of the world has already occurred. We can be uncannily precise about the date on which the world ended . . . [it] was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in Earth’s crust. (7)

The question then arises as to what role literature plays in countering and combating the issue of ecological dystopia and colossal consumer culture. Rob Nixon in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), considers environmental catastrophes and climate change as a “slow violence,” which manifest itself over a period of time. In this regard, imaginative literature plays a significant role in raising awareness among people about such potential harm inflicted on our ecosystem. In the introduction to the same book, he writes:

In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. (15)

Similarly, Ranjan Gosh in his essay, “The Plastic Turn,” postulates that just as plastic, with its nature of ‘translocationality’ can transcend boundaries and contaminates the areas which are not directly affected by it, literature akin to plastic, has a spatial dimension through which it can transcend cultural boundaries and can permeate the human psyche (64–69). Thus, the inherent transcendentalism of literature makes it a powerful vehicle to address

the environmental catastrophes that have brought the world to the brink of its demise.

This paper thus aims to argue that Don DeLillo's *White Noise* serves as a scathing critique of the intertwined impacts of consumer culture and environmental degradation. Through an engagement with the idea of dystopia engendered by a threatening culture of commodification of not only the environment, but also the very essence of life itself, the paper contends how the pervasive use of plastics and toxins mirrors the disintegration of ecological integrity and human emotions, challenging readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment and each other.

The Projection of Dystopia in *White Noise*

Within the literary sphere, authors have taken upon themselves, the pivotal responsibility of projecting dystopia through their literary works where the characters find themselves amid an environmental havoc that they have wreaked upon nature. Hence, suffer from a feeling of alienation from their emotion as well as their sense of being which can be attributed to the pervasive consumer culture they are ensnared by. They find themselves in a dark abyss, grappling with environmental disasters as well as a profound existential crisis that compels them to reconsider the dystopian state that they have brought themselves into, due to their imprudence. Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, published in 1985, is looked upon as a postmodern tale of caution that throws light on the perils of a technological world, which is a culmination of the onslaught of the ecological balance. The narrative revolves around the Gladney family residing in the small town of Blacksmith which in the later part of the novel is seen to be engulfed in an ecological menace, that is termed in the novel as the "airborne toxic event" (DeLillo 107). DeLillo, like Thomas Pynchon adheres to a specific pattern of portraying a world characterised by interconnectedness, where thoughts, language, and actions are dictated by impersonal forces. This pattern is evident in his novels like *End Zone* (1972) and *The Names* (1982), besides *White Noise*. Although *White Noise* may not be considered by critics as a classic dystopian novel like Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), DeLillo weaves the narrative in a

way that blurs the delicate boundary between utopia and dystopia through the portrayal of his characters who have not only embraced the technologically advanced world wholly, but even feel superior and confident to conquer death-the ultimate truth of existence.

However, the contradictions of the characters are projected by the author in the novel, with subtle undertones, as modern beings who place unquestionable faith in the medical and technological progress of their times and yet grapple with the collective apprehensions of environmental disasters and a strong sense of loneliness and anxiety in their personal lives. This dawns on us the realisation that dystopia is not what awaits humanity in the future, as most modern and postmodern writers would have us believe, thus setting their dystopian novels in a far-away future. The world rather slips into a dystopian reality when a massive disruption occurs in the interconnectedness of the human and non-human elements in the universe, which once again reasserts Timothy Morton's idea that we have long ago set out on the journey towards the end of the world.

At the very outset of the novel, the readers witness the commencement of the academic year at the College-In-The-Hill with station wagons loaded with "birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut patties, Waffelos and Kabooms" (DeLillo 3). The consumer culture is vividly evident in the opening scene of the novel itself. We are a race of people highly influenced by the rapidly spreading consumer culture, which is intricately intertwined with the pervasive capitalism which was already beginning to spread its tentacles far and wide in the America of the 1980s. Borrowing J.H. Miller's idea of 'parasite' and 'host,' consumption initially appears to be the host, feeding and nourishing the humans who are metaphorical parasites who consume and exploit the finite resources of nature (Miller 273-280). As the consumption driven lifestyle continues to persist, the host then turns into the parasite it once sustained, annihilating the consumed things as well as the fundamental source of their production. Zygmunt Bauman in *Consuming Life* (2007), draws parallel between consumption and destruction. He argues there that excess consumption leads to the annihilation of the existence of the consumed commodity.

The novel is rife with instances of consumption of synthetic items enclosed in plastic packaging. The Gladney family's refrigerator is always filled with packaged or canned food including glossy bags of potato chips, food substances wrapped in plastic and plastic-wrapped slices of cheese, which Jack's wife, Babette munches on all the time. The presence of the shopping mall filled with canned food and synthetic products is also all-pervasive throughout the novel, projecting an overwhelming influence of consumer culture, so much so that people have significantly lost the true essence of all objects and merely perceive everyday phenomena through a collective lens. Jean Baudrillard in his work, *The Consumer Society* (1998), argues that excessive consumerism culminates into a hyperreal environment where all the signifiers and signifieds lose their original meanings and are detached from their original essence and experience. In one of the instances in the novel, Jack Gladney's colleague Murray, while they are watching the most photographed barn in America, reasserts Baudrillard's idea as he contemplates on the loss of individual perception, surrendering of spiritual autonomy and the relinquishment of the ability to envision situations and events in their original form and essence. Murray comments:

We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception . . . What was the barn like before it was photographed? . . . What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now. (DeLillo 12)

This overwhelming consumerist desire alienates us from our own essence leading to commoditisation of every aspect of our lives. In this regard, the rampant use of synthetic products and plastic packaging within consumer-oriented economies not only holds literal implications but also assumes a symbolic significance such that, similar to the disposability associated with throwaway synthetic products, genuine human emotions have eroded and have lost their

essence. In the novel, Jack and Babette, the seemingly ideal couple gradually unveil the fragility of their marriage and the history of both Jack and Babette's unsuccessful marital unions. Even the validity of Jack and Babette's marriage stands questioned when Babette admits to sleeping with the mysterious Mr. Gray in order to obtain the experimental drug called Dylar, to evade her latent fear of death. Jack and Babette's need for each other arises less out of love and more out of their inherent loneliness and utmost anxiety of their mortal conditions, perpetuating their desperate need to hold on to each other. The disposability of human emotions becomes more evident in the novel, when we examine Jack's apathy and his reluctance to take responsibility in various situations throughout the novel. A prominent instance in the novel of Jack's indifference may be observed during the catastrophic toxic event, when instead of maintaining a composed approach to ensure safe evacuation of his family, Jack prefers to remain in a state of persistent denial that such harm can be inflicted upon a privileged professor's family like his, asserting that such misfortunes only befall the underprivileged, thereby displaying a sense of detachment towards human emotions and experiences. Such tone of apathy brings in Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "Liquid Modernity," which states that the modern as well as the postmodern societies value the temporal over the permanent, the immediate rather than long term and measure all aspects of life in terms of its utilitarian value.

In such a state as this, human relationships tend to be more fluid and traditional notions of marriage, family and community are met with cynicism so much so that they fall apart. This phenomenon manifests itself in the disposability of human emotions as the society prioritises short term gratification over long term emotional investment, much alike the gratification of immediate hunger with conveniently available canned and plastic wrapped food. The utilitarian mindset in liquid modernity has also led to measuring of human values and emotions in terms of practical usefulness with enduring human connections fading to oblivion. Moreover, the rapid exposure to multiple stimulations and an inexhaustible plethora of information impedes full engagement to process the impact, thereby rendering emotions, disposable and transient. In the novel, the Gladney family engages in watching the television together which

concurrently broadcasts incidents of environmental disasters across the globe as well as contemporary sitcoms, proving difficult for the viewers to process one sensation amid others, rendering them as mere passive consumers of commodities without probing into the intricate value or nature of events and emotions.

The serious malady of consumerism not only depletes the vigour of individuals reducing them into mere utilitarian automatons, but also fosters a marked sense of detachment from the natural world, birthing a fallacious notion of superiority within consumers leading them to perceive themselves as transcendental enough to even conquer mortality. This nuanced relationship between consumerism and the overarching desire to conquer death prompt us to explore the pervasive anxiety of death lurking throughout the novel, bringing us again to Baudrillard's notion of 'hyperreality' that the detachment of the signs from their original meaning creates a reality where consumption becomes the means of not only constructing identities but also evading death.

The motif of death is intricately woven into the plot of the novel. Jack and Babette's lives revolve around the anxiety of death to an extent that Jack at times even begins to count his number of days on earth by comparing it with the years written on the gravestones of the dead. In fact, the title of the novel itself has been critiqued as the electrical sound of death. David Cowart, in his *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (2002), clearly observes that DeLillo attempts to juxtapose the metaphorical death with death as the pervasive presence of electromagnetic white noise in the surroundings. This idea is substantiated in the novel, through the conversation between Jack and Babette.

"What if death is nothing but sound?"

"Electrical noise."

"You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful."

"Uniform, white."

“Sometimes it sweeps over me,” she said.
“Sometimes it insinuates itself into my mind,
little by little. I try to talk to it. Not now,
Death.” (DeLillo 198)

The couple, however, adopts different approaches to cope with, or perhaps to evade death. Jack, aware of his eventual demise, initially copes by largely ignoring the topic, declaring: “There is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands” (DeLillo 6). He shuns the visits to his doctor, immerses himself in the company of children, finding solace in their youth, and derives comfort from studying Hitler. For Jack, Hitler transforms from a fascist responsible for the gruesome genocide of the Jews to a protective figure, someone larger than death itself, to ward off his fear of death. Babette’s fear of death has already been ingrained in her and has invaded her psyche to an extent that it has turned into a compulsive fear for her. This compulsive fear gets the better of her to allow her to succumb to the illusory promises of hope and help with which consumerism preys on the mind of the individual. In her desperate pursuit to conquer her fear of death, Babette comes across an advertisement in a tabloid which was looking for volunteers to participate in a secret research project for a trial of a drug named Dylar which claims to eradicate the fear of death from the human psyche. Her unwise decision to take part in the research project to consume the drug which manifests in the form of mild psychological issues over time, reflects not only Baudrillard’s idea of obsessive consumerist behaviour to evade death but also the demonic influence of consumer culture where even death is transformed into a product potential for generating profit.

The virulent consumer culture has invaded the human psyche in a manner that it engenders a deep-rooted anxiety and uncertainty, thereby compelling the individuals to not only deem superfluous products to be necessities but also to indulge in excessive overconsumption and resource exploitation. According to Roxane Cruceanu, “the postmodern consumer does not pursue the goods and services necessary for satisfying essential needs, but is rather motivated to acquire and access goods and services as concern to their particular significance in social relations” (82). The matrix of consumerism along with fabricating material goods, also creates an

illusion of power and comfort which renders the consumers with a sense of fallacious confidence to confront the bleak realities of existence. As Murray observes in the novel: “We feel the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products bring to some snug-home in our souls” (DeLillo 20). The adherence to instant gratification has driven postmodern society into a frightening dystopia where human emotions are easily disposable similar to throwaway plastic products and the ultimate truths of life and death are saleable communities manufactured with a profit motive such that the consumers are impervious to the plight of the environment that is at stake due to the exploitative practices of capitalism.

White Noise extensively explores the ecological dystopia that we have created out of the postmodern world by disrupting the natural world to satiate our need as well as greed. The characters in the novel specifically consume television images and advertisements as entertainment and validate their existential purpose by frequenting the shopping mall which, to borrow Baudrillard’s idea again, has become a simulacrum of their real world, such that DeLillo himself asserts in an interview that we have replaced nature with supermarkets or shopping malls (Chen and DeLillo 1). The classification of the supermarket as the natural environment for the characters of *White Noise* highlights the shift in relationship between man and nature as well as the shift in concern and empathy of the postmodern society. The novel disturbingly projects how the late capitalist society is pleasingly surprised by the images of environmental disasters on the television or by the glorious sunset which is actually an outcome of adverse climate change, “Ever since the Airborne Toxic event the sunset has become almost unbearably beautiful” (DeLillo 170), but turns unsettled and agitated when the order of the items is shuffled inside the supermarket. The regular shoppers “walk in a fragmented trance . . . trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they’d seen the Cream of Wheat” (DeLillo 325). In the dystopia that DeLillo depicts in his novel, consumer empathy has taken over genuine human empathy. Regardless of the adverse natural calamities and environmental catastrophes destroying lives and homes, consumerism conditions the society to place individual worth and need over community and environmental well-being. The perturbing

remark by Jack who is so educated and privileged, further reasserts the idea of dystopia: “Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (DeLillo 170).

As already established earlier, the hyperreal world of postmodernism is divorced from the original meaning and essence of the signifier and signified. In this regard, nature too relegates to a state of hyperreality losing its essence and being reduced to an object of mere aestheticism. In this context, Jack in the novel, purchases meticulously presentable oranges from the supermarket, their colour as vivid as a fruit found in photography guides and their organic quality and origin overshadowed by an aesthetic appeal (170). In the same way, we observe from the outset of the narrative till the end, a recurrent occurrence of the prevalence of plastic in all spheres of the characters’ lives. From consuming packaged products and frequenting the supermarket to the consumption of the drug named Dylar which is made of polymers, the element which is chiefly used in plastic and are stored in lightweight plastic bottles, there is an unwavering acceptance of plastic without being concerned about the harmful environmental impacts of plastic pollution, such as its contribution to the degradation of ecosystems, wildlife endangerment, and climate changes. The detrimental environmental impacts are consistently disregarded in favour of immediate gratification and conspicuous consumption.

The alienation and detached state of Nature is explicitly reflected all throughout the novel whose most discernible outcome is the airborne toxic event. The airborne toxic event is the central environmental catastrophe in the novel, which causes a turning point in the narrative, evoking an even stronger sense of ecological dystopia. The occurrence of the toxic event is sudden and unexpected such that the sky gets filled with clouds of smoke. It seems to have been caused by the derailment of a train car which leads to the release of a toxin called Nyodene D, presented in the novel as a lethal toxin. The evacuation of the people including children in the aftermath of the toxic event is presented as the most perturbing situation. The toxic event bore drastic results for people and deprived them of their homes. It notes:

They had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday. Kids were getting headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths. A teacher rolled on the floor and spoke foreign languages. No one knew what was wrong. Investigators said it could be the ventilating system, the paint or varnish . . . the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by microcomputers . . . or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things. (DeLillo 35)

The airborne toxic event can rightly be considered a hyperobject as in the words of Timothy Morton, hyperobjects are the things,

. . . that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. A hyperobject could be a black hole. A hyperobject could be the LagoAgrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades. A hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the Solar System. A hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium. . . . Hyperobjects, then, are “hyper” in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not. (Morton 1)

The ominous cloud of toxic gas destined to hover over the town of Blacksmith along with its profound psychological impact on the inhabitants of the town, constitutes visible concrete manifestations of the dystopian state that has already encroached upon the town. The airborne toxic event is also a hyperobject in the sense that it encompasses and entangles not only the multiple dimensions of life like science, technology and capitalist interests, but also operates on a personal and psychological level as a source of existential anxiety causing the characters to confront their inevitable state of mortality.

In the anthropocentric framework, nature is considered not as an integral and inalienable part of existence, but as a gift bestowed upon human beings to serve their needs. This human-nature dichotomy as affirmed by Timothy Morton in the *Dark Ecology*, is the inevitable

reason for man-made ecological disasters whose adverse impact on the environment is cataclysmic. The novel drives the readers to the argument that no attempt to ameliorate the detrimental impact of human-induced disaster is effective to a significant measure, as material agencies have the potential to unleash unforeseen circumstances. The state of uncertainty and anxiety even among the medical experts in the novel on the after-effects of Nyodene D reasserts this argument. Moreover, the novel mentions the existence of a “nuclear readiness foundation” to mitigate the consequences of the toxic event but nowhere in the novel do we witness the effectiveness of such institutions, which furthermore strengthens the argument that material agencies are indeed independent and beyond mortal control.

Such man-made ecological disasters as the airborne toxic event are indeed “massively distributed in time and space” (Morton 1), emerging from the coalescence of ecological degradation and human apathy and serving as a catalyst for ecological dystopia. The toxic cloud is an outcome of industrial advancement and reckless use of synthetic non-biodegradable products which the novel provides ample evidence of. The dystopian aspect of the airborne toxic event also becomes evident as it outright bursts the bubble of illusion of security and superfluous contentment, exposing the vulnerability of humanity in the face of “Nature red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson, *In Memoriam* 56.15). The interconnectedness of ecology and capitalist institutions in a society driven by profit-motive over the well-being of human beings and ecology, culminates into such a calamitous toxic event and massively contributes to the state of ecological dystopia.

Conclusion

The state of ecological dystopia is no longer an apprehension of the future but a reality of the present, one which has already ushered in as a result of uncontrolled human activities such as deforestation, pollution, overconsumption, climate change, loss of biodiversity, and resource depletion. In this dystopian state, human emotions are plasticised such that they can be conveniently discarded as and when their utility value diminishes. The relentless pursuit of material possessions and the anthropocentric view of the world that perceives

nature as a mere commodity to be exploited to derive profit, have led to widespread commodification of all aspects of society. Such commodification further leads to the permeation of a keen sense of alienation into the society, thereby waning its empathy towards both human and nature, disregarding the intrinsic value of the latter.

DeLillo's dystopian narrative set in his contemporary time, advocates Timothy Morton's idea of 'hyperobjects' projecting a viscous reality in which the fatal airborne toxic event emerges as a hyperobject, traversing time and space to inflict long term ecological damage due to humanity's reckless pursuit of technological progress and consumerism. The preoccupation with the fear of death creates a deep sense of insecurity in the characters, which subtly yet firmly gets ingrained into their psyche. Babette and Jack dwell in a capitalist world which renders high value to the intricacies of technology, media and images that serve to escalate their anxiety of death which they desperately attempt to evade by the aid of the colossal consumer culture. Thus, the two ideas of disposable human emotions and the notion of environmental dystopia are intrinsically interconnected in *White Noise* such that one leads to the other, culminating into the creation of a dreadful projection of the modern world. The novel, by functioning as a literary vehicle, prompts readers to reflect on the consequences of our actions and the potential future that we aim to create for ourselves, by raising concerns about our relationship with the environment and the value we place on genuine human experiences and emotions. DeLillo, through his telling cautionary narrative, brilliantly echoes Rob Nixon to exemplify how literature can illuminate and challenge the insidious impacts of "slow violence," encouraging a more profound understanding and urgency to address these pressing ecological crises.

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Karnad's *Hayavadana*: A Feminist Performative (Re)telling through Repetition

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Abstract

This essay appraises the work of contemporary Indian feminist theatre director, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, who in her productions (like *Nagamandala*, *Bitter Fruit*, *Naked Voices*, *The Dark Borders*) has helmed several imaginative modes of recasting myths and narratives about women; challenging the heteronormative patriarchal ways of seeing and dismantling the hold of this *ought-ness* within the Indian societal fabric of tradition and modernity. The essay delineates the radical potential of a feminist reading of a call for *écriture féminine* being transposed and realised in Chowdhry's theatre work, wherein, the cynosure is not only on the re-telling of myths, but also an embodiment of aesthetics of transformation and fluidity through experimentation with her native traditional folk form and presence of naqqals (traditional artists of female impersonators). The essay focuses on her contemporary production *Hayavadana* to explore her feminist reimaginings.

Keywords: *Hayavadana*, *Ecriture Feminine*, Aesthetics, Performance, Feminism, Indian Mythology

When you're participating in an emotion, you cannot really use distance to forge creativity. But within the savagery of the times, I try to find some affirmations, some humanity and some hope.

—Chowdhry 'In Search of Contexts'ⁱ

Introduction

Based in Chandigarh since 1984, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry and her group The Company practices a theatrical style that breaks the

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rules of realism and presents traditional mythological and folk tales in idiosyncratic ways, wherein the emphasis is on exploring the immense potentiality of stage through sound, movement, music and images. Though in her productions, the unspoken preoccupations are given form through actions which create a surreal world by physicalising subconscious drives of characters, nevertheless her theatre is rooted within a social, political, geographical and an architectural context. Her innovative craft, feminist directorial process, collaborative methodology, innovative use of space on stage, engagement with materials, and agential embodied performative acts makes her theatre an apt exemplar of her feminist subjectivity.

In Indian theatre historiography, especially in terms of ephemeral performative idioms, there is a gaping void, a lacunae as well as an absence of documentation of the innovations, interventions and legacies created by contemporary feminist women theatre directors like Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry. It is crucial to address this anomaly and also deconstruct this absence with a critical eye within the socio-historical framework of the history of feminist theatre in India. It is in the 1970s that feminist theatre emerged as a cultural incident in the Indian theatre scape. This was due to the influence of the women's movement of the 1960s and the political impetus from the non-commercial agitprop street theatre movement in the country at the time. However, the transformative potentiality of their work on the proscenium stage is largely under represented and sparsely mentioned by post-colonial Indian theatre histories. In consideration of the above, this article delineates and chronicles the methodology, process, creation of performance text, handling of material and scenography employed by Chowdhry with special reference to her recent production *Hayavadana* (2023) (Horse-headed Man).

Hayavadana, a modern classic written (1970s) by late Indian male playwright Girish Karnad combines myth, folktale, music, humour and tragedy as an integral part of its narrative structure. In a bold (re)telling of this story, Chowdhry explores theatre and performance as a constructive site for a feminist director seeking out to re-create and re-interpret old myths. Simone de Beauvoir pointed that the worldview wherein postlapsarian women were fundamentally flawed, a view grounded in the narrative of Adam and

Eve, is not isolated to western ideological traditions alone. Women across cultures have historically as well as mythologically been represented as doomed to immorality and thereby their sexuality as emblematic of preconceived, static conviction of what it *ought* to represent as well as embody. Making use of the narrative nature of myths, their capacity to delve into the realm of anecdotes through the medium of storytelling, Chowdhry experiments with the same and implements several imaginative modes of recasting myths and thereby makes her narratives more about women; challenging the heteronormative patriarchal ways of seeing and dismantling the hold of this *ought-ness* within the Indian societal fabric of tradition and modernity. A K Ramanujan in his essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three thoughts on Translation,” foregrounds his engagement with a very old debate: can we take one version of a narrative, even if it is the earliest written one, to represent the original text of a tale that was well known across the Indic subcontinent, told in myriad ways and understood variously in different idioms? Ramanujan specifically prefers the expression ‘tellings’ to the popularly used terms such as ‘versions’ and ‘variants’ because the latter terms can and do imply the existence of an invariant original text. In line with this argument, this essay looks at Chowdhry’s delineation as a *retelling* wherein the power accorded to a written originary text is dismantled in favour of reckoning the journey of a myth as varied with shifting contexts; which cannot be mapped onto any paradigm of linearity. It appears associational, polytextual, contextual and overladen with multiplicity of meanings.

Hayavadana is a story of two friends; one is Devdutt, who is an intellectual and an intelligent man, and the other is Kapil, whose body is representative of physical strength and beauty in contrast to intelligence. The plot introduces them as best friends, but a rivalry ensues between the two as they both fall in love with the same woman, Padmini. While Devdutt and Padmini get married, all three of them live together until an unfortunate event leads to swapping of their heads on each other’s bodies, putting Padmini in the spot—who is her husband now, the head that belongs to Devdutt or his body that fathered her child? Chowdhry admits that, “the play’s combination of modernity and contemporaneity with tradition, symbolism and myths of the past dovetailing into a cohesive text is challenging for any

director.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the play, a horse-headed man, who narrates his own fantastical story of how he came to be suspended between the animal and the human world seeks a sort of completeness and a sense of identity. Here, in *Hayavadana* (the Horse-headed man), Karnad reshapes an ancient Indian myth (popularly known as *Vikram-Vetala*) to point to the man’s eternal quest for completeness, or self-realisation. Karnad’s 1971 play, inspired by *The Transposed Heads*, Thomas Mann’s reworking of a Sanskrit tale, from the *Kathasaritsagara*, was treated as a fable. This quest is delineated through a juxtaposition of knowledge (head) and physical strength (body) and the narrative is laid out through two men seeking perfection by vying for each other’s attributes and strong suit. This twinning of two men—one exuding physical strength and the other intellect is an often-used trope in Indian mythology. Karnad’s narrator calls them exemplars of mythic figures like Luv-Kush (Twin sons of Indian Hindu God, Ram as mentioned in *Ramayana*) and Krishna-Balram (Balarama, in Hindu mythology, the elder half-brother of Krishna, with whom he shared many adventures)ⁱⁱⁱ. Chowdhry carries the myth forward “making the play an existentialist myth and a metaphor for the mind over matter discourse inherent in the narrative content of the play.”^{iv} However, the kingpin of her imaginative storytelling on the stage is the tension between the two personalities of her female protagonist Padmini. Chowdhry splits her character and it is two women artists who enact as the two Padminis, representing the ultimate dilemma who thereby take centre stage, both physically and metaphorically. The women director of this play challenges the heteronormative gaze of the spectator by making the women as the subject of her production and not mere objects supplementing the male dominant narratorial dramaturgy and serving as commodified entities to be looked upon.



Fig.1. *Hayavadana* (2023). Photo Credit: Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry

The agency given to women here is what makes Chowdhry a feminist director. The scuffle between the superiority of head over body or vice-a-versa, is not that of a man. Padmini is attracted to Kapil's body, she voices her desires and by splitting her character; Chowdhry is able to provide visibility to Padmini's desires as well as her dreams and wrench them out of the realm of societal invisibility, especially for women in India. A woman's sexual desires and the expression of the same is often relegated to the marginal position of their inner lives, a taboo subject not allowed entry into the mainstream civil society, conversations or representations. Nevertheless, the split of the character of Padmini as a feminist methodological stratagem employed by Chowdhry opens up possibilities for subversions, inversions, contestations as well as rebuttals. The split is not a mere simplistic mind-body dialectic. The two voices are also representative of the conscious and the unconscious of Padmini, which are often an integration of the personal, social and psychical dimension in the form of an insight. If imagined within the conventional psychoanalytical trope, it would have been easy to develop these two as an ontological unit with complimentary roles, falling within the framework of what a Freudian analysis would call a 'projective identification.'

However, Chowdhry's Padminis' are often seen completing each other's dialogues, their voices overlapping each other's at times and echoing at others. They are not always representative of two oppositional dyads of a thought, of feminine desire, of an unattainable idea, a contested identity. There is no hierarchy in the two selves, or a projection of either a vulnerability or a guilt onto the other. The two do not duel for a man's attention rather it is the woman who is unable to decide between two men, and to a certain extent questioning the necessity of making a singular choice. Sexuality of a woman is not relegated into the realm of the unconscious rather a complex nexus of representation is woven, leading the two women actors to explore the complexities of identity, self and agency.

'The love of repetition is in truth the only happy love,' wrote Søren Kierkegaard, describing his attempt to relive a love affair that was always-already lost (1). In this playful account, in the guise of Constantin Constantias, Kierkegaard proposes that life itself is a repetition. His pseudonymous character attempts to re-enact the exact material conditions of a past love affair—including going to the same theatre in order to see the same performance, sitting in the same seat, etc. —but discovers that the only possible repetition is the repetition of impossibility. Chowdhry too has emphasised in her interviews that she believes in creating a new interpretation each time because she truly believes that there is no such thing as a retrospective in theatre. For example, she worked thrice with the same text in her most celebrated production, that is, Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* (Play with a Cobra) to come out with three different *tellings* and performance texts in 1989, 2005 and 2014 respectively. It is an adaptation of a Kannada folk tale in Punjabi, which exemplifies her directorial mediations. Here, she again presents the theme of female sexual desire and transgression by use of subversive humour, female impersonation, and recitation to present this half-fantastical tale. It is this impossibility of mere repetition that I seek to highlight further on. It is interesting to see how Chowdhry employs *repetition* as well as reenactment as an innovative performative tool. She constantly challenges the viewer to grapple with the status of theatricality in the re-enactment and the ways in which its relationships to reference are performed. 'I am always analysing, dissecting, investigating, reworking, reassembling the work I have already done' (Chowdhry

‘In Search of Contexts’). In *Hayavadana* multiple figures and references to the co-existence of the head and the body incongruities in various Indian mythological narratives are reproduced and re-enacted in the play. Megan Carrigy in her book *The Reenactment in Contemporary Screen Culture: Performance, Mediation, Repetition* talks of how reenactment is a form of historical representation wherein the emphasis is on how it is a highly mobile, multimodal and a dispersed representational form with a capacity for adaptation as well as transformation.

Hayavadana opens with the traditional *Ganesh Vandana*, as Ganesh, also called Ganapati—the elephant-headed Hindu god of beginnings, is traditionally worshipped before any major endeavour and is the patron of intellectuals. This is particularly and specifically pertinent here, because the elephant-headed deity, he of the transposed head is invoked to bless this performance. This motif of repositioning of the head, beheading is re-enacted several times in the performance and is a repetition of references from Indian stories of the past, nevertheless it is their contemporaneity, their (re)imagining, their embodiment and their broad conceptualisation that make them an affective medium of feminist imaginings. One of the most spectacular sequences is the long monologue by the goddess *Kali* after the two men offer their head to her. In popular iconography, *Kali* is represented as black-blue in colour, her eyes red with intoxication and rage. Often, she is depicted adorning a garland of severed human heads. The play presents the actor (re)enacting the role of this goddess, standing on top of the bonnet of a truck—radiating as a mischievous, radical and a feminine force with dark humour as her narrative strength. *Kali* is said to refrain from giving that which is expected. Here, she becomes a spectator to her own trick of exchanging the heads. G. N Devy in his article *Politics of Translating Myths and the Indian Tradition* (2022) talks about how “the purpose of translation of a myth or a mythic figure has always been to subvert, to challenge, to shock, to modify,” and Chowdhry dexterously employs this very grammar to present her *Kali*.

Hayavadana is symbolic of the feeling of incompleteness, a constant search for identity. Giving a physical form to an idea is difficult for the director and the actors. It is the scenography of the

play that contributes to the transformations and fluidity essential for the same on stage. As the play begins and the curtain parts, the spectators see a huge truck occupying the centre of the stage—which constantly rotates and is the platform for unfolding of many performance frames.



Fig. 2. *Hayavadana* (2023). Photo Credit: Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry

We see musicians precariously perched on top of the truck (See Fig. 2) who perform live, there are three male actors dressed as grooms sitting on the bonnet of this truck and the audience can see actors of the play sitting on trunks used as luggage inside the truck—preparing for the performance and their acts respectively. The labour of performance and the telling of the story takes place in front of the audience, enabling an involved spectator immersion into the play. One sees that the meaning of what the text is saying is extended through objects, through visual material, through body language, through simple everyday things. The search for identity in a world of tangled relationships is further explored by the director as she brings in both—animate and inanimate objects together as the *mis-en-scene* here, making the play an interesting mix of the fictional, the real and the illusionary. A certain kind of visual exuberance becomes a kind of a counter-text. Sequences like the beheading, the wedding

procession wherein the actors break into a rap song while they tap on the stage with their arms and fists all the while satirically deriding religious superstitions, a horse that speaks, and a chorus of dolls that comment upon the unfolding events, are amongst the many innovative and unusual devices that the play showcases. The accentuation of sensory, intuitional, experiential, improvisational elements in the performance destabilises the hierarchy of the text and word-oriented theatre. Chowdhry is constantly reconstitutes, reassembles, and fuses scenes together in her spectacular scenography and action. In her conversation with another Indian Feminist theatre director, Anuradha Kapur she speaks of how “acting is about intuition and meeting the stranger in a room rather than the familiar.”^v Allowing multiple forms of collaborations in rehearsals and on stage, she enables creative encounters as well as dialogues, it leads to individual notions being challenged and forces collaborators to (re)think, interject and break out of their limitations. Chowdhry, who is also a product of Ebrahim Alkazi’s pedagogy which highlights realist acting, dialogues, blocking et al., makes constant attempts to break free from this realist mode in her productions. “The logic of realism suffocates the actor and does not allow them to push the edge.”^{vi} She makes use of surplus of materials on stage to extend the meaning of the narrative as well as bring in the everyday with its sensory tactility. With a sharp focus on the interplay of visuality, with her work full of images and verbal enunciations, Chowdhry not only questions the established matrix of theatre practice, but also leaving a stamp of her gender on her work. This was possible by bringing in the materials of performance within the discourse. It can also be seen in line with what Andy Lavender (2016) calls three important kernels of theatre and performance: mediation, performing and spectating. With a discerning and a percipient eye for detail and an assemblage of objects onstage, Chowdhry was focusing on the mediality of the event, the format in which it is structured for the performance and the effect on the audience, generating a new set of possibilities of spectatorship, increasingly drawing on participatory models of engagement, and privileging sensory experience. One of the most powerful elements in the play is the entourage of musicians on stage working in unison with trained urban actors. We see Punjab’s *Naqqals* (traditionally travelling bards and also female impersonators) who have had a long tradition of performance art.

Traditionally the Naqqals have a vast repertoire of traditional songs and ballads and a formidable capacity to improvise on, and lampoon, whatever situation they are put in. Initially, when Chowdhry first encountered the Naqqals on her arrival in Chandigarh (1984), she tried to cull from their rich traditions and intricate patterns of lost skills to find modes of dramatic expression that could add to her understanding of regional impulses. Her collaborators of three decades, in this production perform to the late BV Karanth's music, rearranged by his protégé Amod Bhatt, who recasts the musical patterns and placements. She comments, 'The musical instruments which were used in the songs were of a certain temperament, but we have used instruments like the saxophone, guitar, trumpets and xylophone' (Chowdhry Personal Interview). The musicians are not a static presence but are active participants in moving the plot forward and provide a vital pitch as well as tone to the construction of the scene.

Post partition, Punjab has been an important part of the discourse around recollective public memory of trauma through performances, recording testimonies, literature (especially the genre of short story). Chowdhry too has devised performances which are retellings of several short stories by prolific Indian writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955) who wrote people's stories of Partition trauma and violence through short stories and aphoristic sketches. 1984, the year Chowdhry moved to Chandigarh is an important year in the history of continuation of this trauma and violence suffered by the city. During Operation Blue Star which was aimed to kill a Sikh militant, Jarnail Bhindranwale on the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi's command, many Sikh civilian devotees inside the Golden temple were also killed in this attack. Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguard retaliated by assassinating the Prime Minister on October 31, 1984. Thereafter, nationalist Hindu mobs countered with attacks on a grandiose scale, burning, stabbing, and gorily murdering thousands of Sikhs in and around the city of Delhi. Chowdhry's move to the city in Punjab and her dealings with the traumatic crisis of emotional development at the moment can be seen in her attempts to bring in the regional specificities of the state into the mainstream imagination through her theatricality. However, she does not fall into any fixed

and boxed overwhelming provincality, her works are cosmopolitan in their approach and presentation.

In Indian theatre historiography, it is important to address the omissions and the absence of documentation of the theatre created by women theatre directors like Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry. My writing above is an attempt to highlight her work, together with her methodology for an international readership. However, my critique of her work is in her inability to completely break free from the pedagogical lineage and genealogy of male pedagogues like Alkazi and Karanth. The questions I grapple with are, that when women directors and pedagogues try and carve out a space, a niche in the spheres with a long legacy of patriarchal dominance, then to what extent is it possible for them to step out of or challenge this hegemonic genealogy? What should the matrix of academic criticism of these works be pointing towards and should they be highlighting the limitation thereof?

Chowdhry has never worked outside the actor-audience division of the proscenium space, perhaps an institutional limitation she cultivated as a student of the National School of Drama. Her play discussed in the essay, *Hayavadana* is a perfect example of her craft, feminist directorial process, collaborative authorship, innovative use of space on stage, engagement with materials, and agential embodied performative acts. However, the performance text does not make the audience uncomfortable towards the end of the play. Extremely pertinent questions of intersectionality, power relations like caste hierarchies are not explored in the very possible frames of desire and identity present in the text. Could one of the Padmini be presented as a lower caste woman? Or perhaps with a different religious identity? Could the talking dolls represent dissenting voices of the disenfranchised Indians being denied citizenship? Or that of the migrant labourer forced to live in deplorable conditions in the cities? —to further layer the performance with a much more inclusive, social, political, and intersectional feminist way of seeing.

Endnotes

- i. In an Interview with Vikram Phukan, 2020
- ii. Personal Interview (2023)
- iii. Sometimes Balarama is considered one of the 10 avatars (incarnations) of the god Vishnu, particularly among those members of Vaishnava sects who elevate Krishna to the rank of a principal god.
- iv. Directors Note (2023)
- v. Feb 2017, Ambedkar University, “Devising Theatre: A Conversation”.
- vi. Ibid.

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Digital Self-Representation and Resistance: Memes on Menstruation by Women on Instagram Pages

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Abstract

The paper examines how women utilize social media to share their menstrual experiences, dispelling misunderstandings and confronting stereotypes while also providing a platform for self-representation, particularly on Instagram profiles. Select menstruation-related memes and postings have been employed as primary texts. The paper is structured into three sections: the first examines how women's experiences have been portrayed through memes before and during their menstrual cycles; the second looks at how festival messages have been used to challenge stereotypes and honour womanhood; and the third highlights the importance of "everyday" for women in projecting their real experiences and bringing to light the ordinary life events that are frequently disregarded or underestimated. The digital visual methods have been used to analyse the choice of content creation, the consumers, ideas of representation, for studying pattern of resistance by challenging stereotypes and the use of literary tools like humour, pun, or visual graphics with a focus on menstrual activism.

Keywords: Menstruation, Memes, Instagram, Social Media Analytics, Digital Visual Methods

Introduction

Social media and online campaigns have stimulated the discussion or awareness about menstruation widely across the globe. It is interesting to note that menstruation and menstrual products were made visible to the public in 1990s Indian TV advertisements for sanitary napkins, however this portrayal was not free from the commercial and capitalist goal of marketing the products. These advertisements have a significant role in fostering new assumptions

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and idealizing the menstrual experience for women. The introduction of social media gave women of all classes and castes the opportunity to take part in the creation of intellectual material and dissemination of knowledge about menstruation. They could freely communicate their personal experiences in their own unique style without being constrained by the unrealistic and idealized empowerment programs that the advertising businesses were offering. Even women with little education watch videos or look at visual graphics on social media pertaining menstruation that appeal to them. This paper examines the ways in which women, particularly on Instagram pages, used social media to share their experiences.

This study employs menstruation-related memes and postings as primary texts to analyse how women engage with their readers or viewers. The idea of 'text' is expansive in its locale. Eileen Gardiner and Ronald G Musto explain that "the notions of 'text' have changed radically under the impact of the linguistic and other critical turns" (Gardiner and Musto 17). They explain that even though digital humanities have allowed us to see the text in many new ways, the process of digitization has led the text, that was conventionally considered as an autonomous subject, to change from being a fixed object or topic of study to more of a fluid process (Gardiner and Musto 17). Three criteria were used to choose the subjects for this study: first, graphics depicting the experiences of women before and during their periods; second, the ways in which festival messages have been utilized to shatter stereotypes and celebrate womanhood by the Instagram users on their pages dedicated to periods; and third, the memes projecting the importance of "everyday" for women in projecting their real-life experiences and highlighting experiences of everyday life that are frequently disregarded or taken for granted.

This paper employs mixed digital research methods particularly social media analytics and digital visual methods, which includes describing the memes' content in relation to its intended purpose—that is, representing women's menstrual experiences. With an emphasis on menstruation activism, these techniques are utilized to analyse the choices made about content creation, customers, representational concepts, patterns of resistance by questioning stereotypes, and the use of literary devices like puns, humour, and

visual graphics. The nature of this research is qualitative. Using the social media analytics research approach, researchers can choose, record, extract, and analyse social media site data to aid in their findings and conclusions. The memes have been chosen based on the criteria mentioned above, and they have been examined in terms of the graphics employed, the colour scheme, the content analysis, and the use of language and other literary devices.

Influence of TV Advertisements Regarding Menstrual Pads

Despite the fact that advertisements played an important role in highlighting menstruation, they failed tremendously in normalising menstruation. In this context, Kissling explains how advertisements were an addition to the prevalent taboos regarding “dirtiness” or impurity itself:

Given that advertising for menstrual products is one of the few visible, public discourses about menstruation, it is especially important to examine messages about menstruation in mass-market ads. These texts implicitly and explicitly emphasize its dirtiness and/or its secrecy, and thus contribute to the ongoing cultural construction of women as Other. (9)

Menstrual blood was viewed as disgusting and unworthy of being projected on a public screen, as evidenced by the way it was portrayed as a blue liquid. The makers of the advertising thought it was wrong to use crimson for menstrual blood even though it was so far off from normalcy. Furthermore, the notions of forced emancipation and empowerment in these commercials resulted in the total lack of exposure surrounding the discomfort and pain certain women bear throughout their periods.

Moreover, the menstrual pads were proposed as a solution to the boundaries of women as if they were for medicinal use. Although menstrual pads were just a straightforward substitute for the clothing women used during their periods, this caused a significant shift in women's lifestyles. Rostvik states that:

in Scandinavia, knitted pads were the norm until the entry of disposable pads in the early twentieth century. This marked a major shift from the semi-public creation and washing of menstrual technologies at home (and school) to a consumer habit largely kept private through discreet packaging practices and code words while shopping alone. (Rostvik 235)

Similarly, in India many women used old rags or clothes as menstrual pads. In addition to bringing about a significant change in women's lifestyles, the introduction of pads contributed to the growing amount of garbage that disposable pads were producing. *Economics Times* reported that: "Approximately 121 million Indian women use sanitary napkins, resulting in 12.3 billion napkins and 1,13,000 tons of waste annually. The scarcity of incinerators and the inadequacy of small-scale incinerators contribute to the problem" ("Waste Pickers"). The companies that manufactured menstruation pads and promoted them did not assume accountability for disposing of the waste.

Moreover, the language used in the TV commercials regarding menstruation has been very problematic. The commercials first began with Whisper, a product by Proctor and Gamble Co. in the early 1990's. Many of these commercials stigmatised the periods as something to be hidden; something bothering and limiting women's life. The advertising overstated and exaggerated the situation, still there was some truth to it. The second part of the commercials promised to liberate the teenagers during periods, of their limitations with the use of menstrual pads. The solution to all problems was sort through the use of these pads which was a false claim and it overlooked the real challenges being faced by women. The content of such commercials underwent transformation with time. Most of them have come forward as awareness projects. Some commercials catered towards breaking stereotypes such as 'she touched the pickle' ("Whisper") where, in stark contrast to taboo (that if menstruating women touch the pickle, the pickle rots), the older women celebrate a young girl having touched the pickle during her periods. Lutfun Nahar Poly et al. study how the TV advertisements increased awareness about the menstrual pads across the world in the late

nineteenth century. They present a comparative analysis of various countries and the awareness about using pads generated through the advertisements as follows:

Whereas, sanitary pads were used only by 7-10 percent of females out of a total 591 million females in India. But the other nations of the East are in better situation where the use of sanitary napkins in Singapore and Japan is 100%. In Malaysia and China the percentage of using sanitary napkins are 88 percent and 64 percent respectively. After the World War II, women became very aware of using sanitary napkins through TV Advertisement to manage their hygiene and promoted themselves to work. Egyptian adolescents get their mothers as the prime sources of information on menstruation, followed by mass media which affect their knowledge and attitude. (Poly et al. 39)

Television advertisements remained confined to menstruation pads despite the shift in content; for example, there are no advertisements in India for tampons, menstrual cups, or other products. Therefore, some of these businesses' awareness campaigns are still somewhat superficial, and their strategies for empowering women and breaking social taboos seem disorganized and haphazard—perfectly appropriate given the commercial objectives of selling their products.

TV Advertisements vis a vis Social Media

In contrast to the regulated television commercials, women have access to a more expansive, improved forum to discuss menstrual-related issues owing to new media and its accompanying social media platforms. Social media ensured a platform for the stakeholders to participate more freely and actively, while the advertisers would control information and content to reach consumers. For the women, who could now participate voluntarily in the virtual arena without fear of exposure or offending their families, this, in a sense, created a space for both resistance and representation. Social media also tends to offer a personal space to the participants. The content on

social media has been open to debate and discussion. However, it may invite huge criticism that may lead to trolling and bullying. In this context Jacqueline Kamei explains:

Social media can be capable of advancing the feminist movement by bringing greater visibility to women's rights issues, facilitating effective communication, aiding people in organizing, educating people on women's history and current events, and inspiring people to become activists in the fight for greater equality. Yet social media can also potentially undermine the movement through online harassment and disinformation, constant self-comparisons and body image issues driven by societal beauty standards, and weakened critical thinking. (Kamei)

Furthermore, the public controls the content; in particular, stakeholders engage in the decision-making process on the content provided on their feeds. These accounts may be first hand or may have been selected by women who employ creative means to draw attention to issues that are important to them.

Memes on Menstruation: Content Analysis

“Chronicles of Womenia”: Before Periods and On Periods

Most of the ideas regarding periods that were shared with the intention of increasing awareness can be attributed to the distinctive way the content is presented. In addition to posts about biological information or serious content on periods, sometimes humour has been also used in many ways to challenge preconceptions or to generate knowledge regarding the personal experiences of women during their periods, such as emotions, bloating of the body, discomfort, etcetera. Interesting applications of animation, doodling, and interactive graphics have been made; these are helpful in a variety of contexts. An analysis of memes and posts on menstruation-themed Instagram account reveals that women have created content in creative and innovative ways.

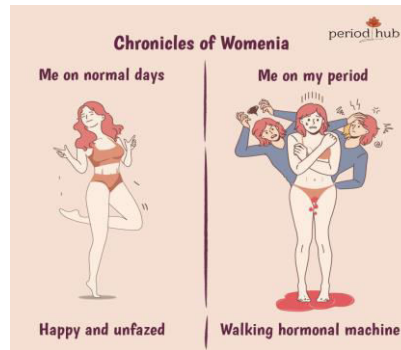


Fig. 1: "I'm a happy person, but on my periods, I feel like a hormonal machine." [@Periodhub]

Some memes use the term "before periods and on periods" to divide time frames, highlighting the difference between apparent normalcy and abnormality in women's lives. This theme is used by the #periodhub meme series "Chronicles of Womenia" to highlight the differences between women's lives before and during their periods. Two columns comprise the arrangement of the memes. In one meme, for example, the first column's title said, "Me on normal days: Happy and unfazed," and the second column's caption said, "Me on my period: Walking hormonal machine." In the first column, the woman is dancing and looks happy and light; in the second, however, she is jumbled and has two other versions of herself peeking out of her back. The other two pictures also show signs of discomfort, including tension, worry, and other facial expressions. In a pool of blood, the woman lies unmoving, her arms folded over her breasts. An orange bikini and panty are worn by the main image, while a grey top covers the alter images. The attention of readers or viewers is captured by the employment of specific colours. Grey is often associated with sadness and suffering, while saffron is a vivid colour that is sometimes also linked to spirituality. The woman's outfit of panty and a bikini may discourage the traditional readers to link the colour to spirituality. Though she might experience mood swings and the rush of hormones during her period, the lady is shown in the vibrant shade of saffron as happier, more satisfied, and more in tune with herself, maybe spiritually collected and satisfied than she would

actually be during that time. The woman, however, is the same regardless of the situation; her physical and spiritual characteristics do not differ from one another whether before or during periods. The after images fade away with time. The meme's light hearted tone draws attention to the "not so visible" or commonly ignored feelings that women experience during their periods, thereby increasing public awareness of these experiences. Additionally, by using the first-person pronoun "Me" in the meme, the woman herself shares her experience, adding a personal touch ("I'm a happy person").

Using Indian Festivals and Celebrating Specific Days for Normalising Menstruation

Memes on menstruation have been thoughtfully selected to align with Indian holidays. For instance, the #periodhub Instagram feed extended wishes for Holi and Dussehra by referencing women and menstruation in the festival's messaging. They shared a meme on Holi that read, "Happy Holi, there's a shade of red for every woman." They wrote: "Period Hub wishes everyone a very happy Holi. May this Holi be filled with colours of comfort, wellness, health and happiness" ("Period Hub wishes everyone. . .").

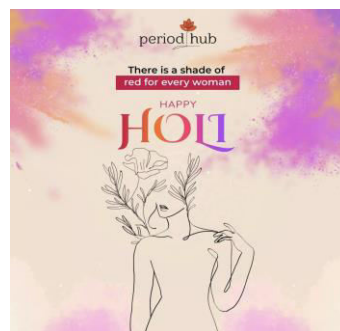


Fig. 2: "Period Hub wishes everyone a very happy Holi. May this Holi be filled with colours of comfort, wellness, health and happiness." [@Periodhub]

Similar to this, the celebration of good triumphing over evil on Dussehra is utilized to refute myths from the past and alter people's

perspectives. The meme reads: “We’re celebrating the victory of Good over evil this Dusshera, so let’s also take a moment to defeat the ancient mythology that has poisoned our minds against periods” (“Let’s bust these awkward periods myths. . .”).



Fig. 3: “Let’s bust these awkward periods myths and celebrate menstruation as it empowers us to be in tune with our health and body.” [@ Periodhub]

Similarly, the Yoga Day page featured a video showing a position that helps reduce pain during menstruation (“Yoga is the ultimate. . .”). On Mother's Day, women were also praised for being the first teachers and for "teaching us how to deal with the world and periods too" (“Mothers are not just. . .”).

Depicting Everyday

Several memes depict the common everyday experiences of women, such as how different it feels to poop on a regular day than during a period, as though "it's firework." (“When You're on Your Period . . .”); another meme suggests “how periods can make great opportunities turn into great efforts” (“We've all been there.”). The discomfort that women may experience with their periods, skin issues, exhaustion, bloating, exercise, etc. are all different concerns covered in this series. The thoughtfully selected content sort of runs counter to the idealized, made-up, pseudo-liberating experiences that the TV adverts claim to provide.

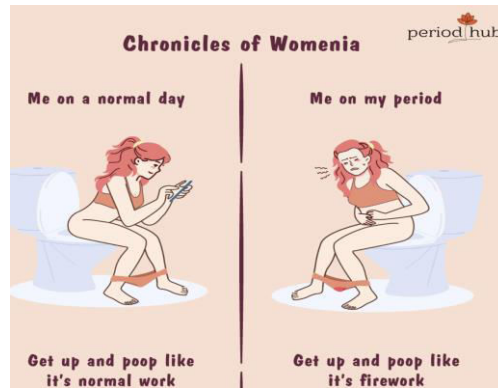


Fig. 4: “When You're on Your Period, Life Is Like Fireworks, and poop is your morning glory.” [@Periodhub]

Social media provides a participatory space where women may choose to share and post what interests them and highlight the often-ignored, and so-called ‘mundane’ experiences of their everyday life. Through the use of participatory methods, women's everyday lives—which are typically taken for granted—have gained significance and meaning, leading to a shift in viewpoint. Posting on social media, participating in online movements or even engaging as readers or viewers of content, has led to a goal amongst women to free themselves from the authority of patriarchal power and work towards cultural democracy within their private spaces.

Juncker and Balling explain how the developments in digital cultures have impacted everyday:

With the latest developments in mediatization and digitization of culture, we are experiencing a participation turn, . . . Our everyday expressive life is ruled by individual interests. The different interests gather and separate us as participants, audiences, readers, listeners, and viewers. Some prefer popular art forms while others choose high culture. We each choose particular activities and experiences because

they make a difference to us—they contribute value and meaning to our everyday lives. (1-3)

For example, a woman who is menstruating may require more time to complete tasks that she finds simple and straightforward otherwise, but when on periods she may slow down as a result. A meme shared on #Menstrupedia page depicts the fight that women may face for sticking a menstrual pad correctly. An animated image of a woman, dressed in a t-shirt and a panty is watching herself in the mirror. The wings of the pad are hanging out. The caption on the meme reads “When you’ve already put on the pad like 5 times and it’s still more forwards than backwards and it doesn’t even stick anymore” (“Getting a pad to stick . . .”).

When you've already put on the pad
like 5 times and it's still more
forwards than backwards and it
doesn't even stick anymore



Fig. 5: “Getting a pad to stick correctly is a task in itself. Do you agree?” [@Menstrupedia].

Another example of how women's monthly struggles, which play a significant role in their daily lives but are often overlooked, are depicted is in a meme that shows a woman clutching a blood-stained, laced underwear. "RIP to my cute panties I lost during my periods," is the meme's caption. Despite its seeming insignificance, it plays a crucial role in the lives of women (“I have lost count!”).

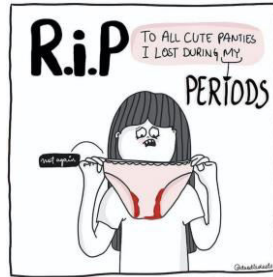


Fig. 6: "I have lost count! How many cute panties have you lost to [#periods](#)?" [[@Menstrupedia](#)].

The changes in the body have also been depicted precisely as to how women feel. A meme posted by [#Planetprudence](#) portrays two images of a woman. The physical changes have also been accurately portrayed to reflect the emotions of women. A meme that was shared by [#Planetprudence](#) shows two different pictures of women. A woman with her breasts as they seem is shown in the first image, while a depiction of enormous and enlarged breasts that depicts how they feel during menstruation is shown in the second. "Period: How my boobs look; How they feel" is the caption ("Sincerely: your frikking period, who else??[#periods](#)"). Memes on social media have also been shared covering a wide range of subjects of everyday life, such as the discomfort that women may experience during their periods, skin issues, exhaustion, bloating, exercise, and other difficulties.

Conclusion

The study of memes on menstruation is not limited to the subjects taken for this study. This study is important because it sheds light on how women on digital platforms have carved out a space for themselves and how they create and interpret visual texts. As a result, they are able to disentangle societal and political agendas through the representation of menstruation. Additionally, they subvert patriarchal views by substituting self-portraits for them. Simultaneously, global conversation or awareness about menstruation has been sparked by social media and digital humanities. Although the rate of content

development appears to have increased, there is still room for improvement because there is not much constructive dialogue regarding menstruation.

Acknowledgement

I thank Aditi Gupta founder @Menstrupedia and Anju Arora founder @Period Hub for giving me permission to use the memes for this paper.

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Infidelity to Exoneration of the Wives: Redefining Morality through the Optimality Lens

Kanak Kanti Bera*

Abstract

The psychological process of 'moral' decision-making by 'women' in select modern Indian English narratives has been looked at through the lens of Optimality Theory or OT, as proposed by McCarthy, McCarthy and Prince, and Prince and Smolensky. In R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* Rosie chose to atone for her 'sin' of adultery. Buddhadev Bose's Maloti in *It Rained All Night* got entangled in an immoral extra-marital affair but had a repentant silent confession to her husband, so did Maitrayi in *Na Hanyate (It Does Not Die)* but without any element of deception. Every act of deception, if any, issues from intricate psychological motivations involving both utilitarian needs and a breach of moral instructions. Then, subsequent decisions resulted from moral dilemma, where a number of warring constraints or motivations must have been fighting for dominance. Pitted against choices of sexual gratification and loyalty to husband, Maloti chose to commit the 'sin' of adultery, since it was impossible for her to fulfill both requirements together. Here only OT can resolve efficaciously the conflict of contradictory principles, before the human cognitive system dissolves it into a 'decision.' By distilling the element of morality through the Optimality filter, the paper explains the 'decision' (that leads sometimes to a 'sinful' act) optimally.

Keywords: Moral Decision, Motivational Psychology, Sin, Utilitarianism, Deontic Reasoning, Optimality Theory.

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Introduction

Concentrating on the select modern Indian narratives, the paper analyses the virtue-vice binarity in the cognitive process of ‘moral’ decision-making in the framework of Optimality grammar, proposed by Prince and Smolensky, chiefly a phonological theory.¹ Interestingly, in the chosen moral decisions, a subsequent revelation or honest confession invariably follows the initial deception, and Optimality Theory (henceforth OT) aims to showcase the radicality of this contrastive human behavior. In R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide* Rosie chose to atone for her ‘sin’ of adultery. Buddhadev Bose’s Maloti in *It Rained All Night* got entangled in an immoral extra-marital affair but had a repentant silent confession to her husband, so did Maitreyi in *Na Hanyate (It Does Not Die)* but without any element of deception. Apart from the literary content, it ventures into morality and psychology. Though the subject of study here is literary, purely psychological is the method of such decision-making where various aspects like deontics, morality and social responsibility, utilitarian self-needs, cognition and even emotions are involved in the process. But for the sake of a deeper scientific insight into the research problem and its analysis, the paper resorts to linguistics, and this psychological issue has been sorted out through the application of a phonological theory as the theoretical framework.

Smolensky (1986) and Smolensky and Legendre (2006) rightly expected that, besides its applicability to syntax or semantics, OT can be adequate as an analytical model even outside linguistics. Accordingly, since its inception in 1993, OT has been applied effectively to a few other non-linguistic fields like traffic rules (Boersma 436), legal dilemma in the Talmud² (Dresher8), to the song structure and text (Gilbers and Schreuder 1), to the choice of words and simulated annealing (Biró 1) and others. OT being applied to morality, psychology and cognition, Jones (320, 367), Mikalsen (1), Biró (1) and Parker and Parker (254) bear even greater relevance to this study. With the help of this theoretic model, Jones (320, 367) analysed the kinship system types that differ cross-culturally. Additionally, his analysis depended much on the assumptions of human cognition and an evolutionary psychology. In his thesis Mikalsen described OT in non-linguistic terms with a goal of

comparing it to other psychological theories. In order to account for diverse food taboos and the dynamics of religious rituals, Biró resorted to OT as his theoretical model. Coming to OT analysis of morality, Parker and Parker acknowledged, “The notion that Optimality Theory could be invoked to evaluate moral decisions was first suggested to us by Amalia Gnanadesikan” (254). Applying OT, they analysed the interaction between religion and morality in ethical decision-making. The review above unambiguously confirmed about the absolute non-existence of any study whatsoever on the application of OT grammar to the analysis of a literary issue.

The primary question is about the applicability of OT to moral decision-making, as narrated in the modern texts selected in this study. A decision is not always made rationally (though assumed so by ‘rational choice’ theory)³ —had it been so, a systematic arrangement of principles could have been prescribed and obeyed. Decisions are not always induced by personal interest and emotions. Had it been so, concept society and social responsibility must have broken down. Neither the decision is always steered by one’s sense of social responsibility, nor solely by his faith in religious doctrines. Had it been so, individual entity of man would have been at stake. As Collins argued, to attach different weight to principles and to balance these principles in an observer-specific way calls for the application of OT in order to analyse decision-making scientifically.

At this juncture, we need to have a look at the relevant constraints. They relate to different concepts, factors, ideology and moral standards, like religion, psychology, utilitarian philosophy, biology, law etc.

Constraints Relating to Religion and Morality

As any decision is an objectified statement about our moral character, religious morality (that is an allegiance with the divine decrees) is always assigned an important role to play in our cognitive system. Like Catholic Christianity, religions prescribe some divine laws (*e.g.* cardinal virtues, capital virtues or theological virtues) regarding one’s own behavior. A moral decision claims that in private or public

behaviors these virtues once acquired would guide action and fight away all evils.

The study paying special attention to the revelation and confession too, it is much pertinent here to refer to the stance of religion in this respect. Christianity holds that, a person's sincere repentance and confession of his/her sin, lamentations over the inability to obey God's laws by his or her own efforts demonstrate his/her acceptance of God's mercy and benevolence.

As per the Christian theology, anybody's life on this earth has been given to him/her only as loan to live by Him, and is expected to follow His path till his physical death. While a virtuous path leads to the final salvation, the path of sin (that is, some deviation from the path of virtue) takes one to hell. Following the arguments above, OT constraints can be constructed as mentioned below (these constraints based on only the chief categories) —

- (1) CARDVR One should acquire the cardinal virtues to fight evil
- (2) CAPITVR One should acquire the capital virtues to fight evil
- (3) THEOVR One should acquire the theological virtues to fight evil

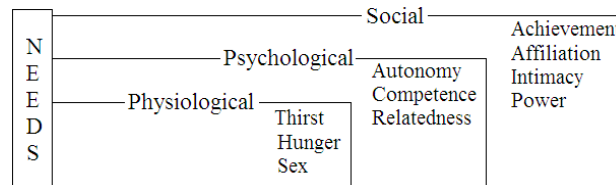
Under these categories there are certain virtues. Each of these Constraints can be specifically referred to with the mention of the virtue in particular like—

CARDVR_[FORTITUDE], CAPITVR_[CHASTITY], THEOVR_[FAITH]

Constraints Related to Motivational Psychology

Motivational psychology centers on what motivates one and how. In this study, the motivational forces serve as OT constraints. Following the descriptions of Reeve, Eysenck and Keane, Sternberg Rumelhart et al., such forces can be termed as 'needs.' Need means 'any condition within the person that is essential and necessary for life, growth and well- being.' (Reeve 77). It has its three-tier hierarchy (Fig. 1):

Fig. 1: Motivational Forces or Needs (Reeve 8)



The two lower levels consist of the basic human needs that are inborn, but the social needs are acquired. Non-fulfillment of the two low level needs causes damage to the personal well-being, whereas that of the other to the social life and interpersonal interaction. Feelings and emotions are always the by-products of needs, depending on their fulfillment or non-fulfillment. Feelings are associated very closely with these needs being mere projections of the latter. The higher the need-tiers, the more acute the feelings. Fulfillment of psychological or social needs brings happiness and all attractive feelings, but repulsive feelings like anger, aggression, envy arise from their non-fulfillment. But the point worth mentioning is that Reeve (8) found emotions and needs quite separate as entities but equal as potential motivating forces.

- (4) PHYND Physical needs are to be fulfilled to avoid damage to body
- (5) PSYND Psychological needs are to be fulfilled to avoid damage to mind
- (6) SOCND Social needs are to be fulfilled to avoid damage to interpersonal interaction

Each of these constraints can be specifically referred to with the mention of the need in particular, like

PHYND[SEX], PSYND[AUTONOMY], SOCND[POWER] and so on.

Constraints Related to Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism, propagated by Jeremy Bentham in the early 19th century, radically changed the concept of morally. The morality it propagates is based on the motto: ‘the greatest good for the greatest number.’ A course of action in any situation is held right if it can yield more benefits than harms for everyone affected. Utilitarianism

justifies even the conventional vices like theft, lies, manipulation, or deception, provided the course of action produces maximum benefits (for everyone ideally or for the maximum number of people concerned).

Utilitarianism prescribes straightforward method for decision-making on the basis of immediate gains and benefits for the maximum. This process of selection of the fittest course of action is very much like the OT process of election:

- i) Put in a situation to make a choice, various probable courses of action (= OT candidates) are first identified by the cognitive system;
- ii) Benefits and harms of each are taken into account instantly (= weighing and ranking of the OT constraints);
- iii) The course of action providing the greatest benefits is selected (= benefit is ranked the highest).

Thus, the philosophy works through the following constraints:

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| (7) MAXBNFT | The Benefit caused by action is maximum |
| (8) MAXHARM | The Harm caused by action to anybody is maximum |
| (9) *HARM | Ideally there is no Harm to anybody |
| (10) *BNFT | There is no Benefit for anybody |

Constraints Related to Biology and Law

Biologically, man is an animal; therefore, law is necessary to curb animality and enforce humanity. Since our birth, we are confronted with challenges to our biological processes of adaptation and evolution, different threats to our survival and 'growth.' In this context, we also share a psycho-biological instinct of self- and species preservation, as Proverbio (244) contended. And significantly this preservation and survival policy depends a lot on man's biological preferences. Preferences are highly variable because, one may prioritise species over self, but the other otherwise. Nevertheless, as per common knowledge, an OT view of species-

preservation strategy (SELF put aside) might be presented by such rankings of constraints as the following:

OFFSPRING>>AMOROBJ (SPOUSE>>LOVER⁴)
 >>PARENT>>RESTOFSPECIES
 (NEWBORN>>PRESLEGALO>>RELATIVE>>FRIEND>>NEIGHBOUR>>OTH)

It's more propositional than absolute, as it is highly relative and variable. For our OT analysis here, we require not more than these following four constraints:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| (11) PRESSELF | One should always save him/herself |
| (12) PRESAMOR _[LOVER] | One should always save his/her fiancé/fiancée |
| (13) PRESAMOR _[SPOUSE] | One should always save his/her spouse |
| (14) PRESLEGALO | One should always comply with legal obligations |
| (15) PRESSPEC _[OTH] | One should always save Others |

In fact, biologically 'preservation' is parasitic of the urge for 'growth,' since the former is the primary condition for adaptation or growth. So, the quality of 'growth-seeking' is a biological requirement that can ensure 'preservation' in a more effective way.

Law is indispensably associated to biology in that the very concept of a civilised society necessitates restraining many of the biological instincts that would have been rampant otherwise. As for example, polygamy is biological, but needs to be curbed by law. Instead, society has an overreaching interest in the institution of marriage and its stability. Therefore, even in America extra-marital affair, polygamy and adultery have been made cognisable, valid ground for granting divorce irrespective of whatever might spur the adulterer (Amato and Previti 602). But, if one refuses to meet his friend on a certain day as agreed upon, or attends no parties thrown by his colleagues it's never cognisable. Such acts may not have social licenses. Social license cannot assure legal license always, for example, a teacher punishing her student. So, the two useful constraints to explain this legal and social licenses would be:

- (16) LICENSELAW The decision or act must be licensed by Law
(17) LICENSESOC The decision or act must be licensed by Society

Now let us turn to the process of constraint ranking and deontic reasoning. Turning to the point of markedness-faithfulness contrast in the constraints, let me connect phonology to decision-making. As in phonology, in decision-making too, the constraints mentioned so far can be classified into—

- Faithfulness constraint: (demands responses to the external/idealistic factors)
Ideal Input = Real Output (input-output uniformity is demanded)
However difficult the output action is, the ideals when strictly complied with can only ensure social or spiritual ‘validation.’
- Markedness Constraint: (demands responses to the internal/self-centered factors);
Ideal Input $\neq$ Real Output (context-specific compromise is demanded)
Paying little attention to the ideal, it intends to make the output action easier, more convenient for material/utilitarian ‘growth.’

Thus, motivational forces or needs can be classified as either dealing with internal factors or the external. The external forces include social, religious and ethical norms where compliance ensures ‘validation.’ But the physical, psychological, utilitarian forces are internal, intended for the material ‘growth’ only. Those relating to the external are idealistic, intending to make the person live up to the highest moral level. They can be labeled as the ‘faithfulness’ constraint. As for examples, the constraints relating to religion and morality can be categorised as the faithfulness constraints, since it’s normally taken for granted by the authority that these virtues should there be ingrained naturally in any person born as human. Conversely, the internal needs (or motivational factors) mostly guide to the behavioral well-formedness in mundane life and its well-being removing the oddities and difficulties that are less favored by the common people. They are markedness constraints. Utilitarian

constraints and those pertaining to physical and psychological needs, for examples, can be put down as markedness constraints.

On one hand, many of the above-mentioned motivators are conflicting; on the other hand, neither can be absolute. Consequently, human beliefs about what is, and is not, the right course of action are neither complete nor consistent. Thus, context-specific reasoning is mandatory that systematises these motivators through a syllogism based on deontic propositions (Green et al. 27, Ray et al. 829, Staller and Petta U27), that centre on concepts of ‘obligatoriness’ and ‘permissibility.’

“Deontic assertions concern what one ought to do, may do, and ought not to do” (Bucciarelli and Johnson-Laird 159). Therefore, all the ethical, philosophical, religious, legal and even biological principles are included in the deontic system. Deontic principles vary in their consequences, both for abiding by them and for violating them (Evans and Twyman-Musgrove 811). As in phonological OT, deontic reasoning functions here as the constraint-ranking mechanism in the moral act of deciding a course of action between/among alternatives.

All the cases of deception taken up for analysis from the Indian narratives are non-optimal from religious stand-point, since any such deception involves lies and therefore violates the divine norms of honesty, integrity and humility. But deontic reasoning often asserts that a ‘sinful’ act may be permissible if it is obligated by something more serious. Utilitarian philosophy tries to justify ‘sin’ on its practical utility for the maximum. Thus, the ‘sinful’ act is hardly an evil straightway; rather, behind it, there is always a conflict among diverse motivating forces or ‘CONstraints’ in Optimality terminology.

In Buddhadev Bose’s *It Rained all Night* (published in 1967), Maloti the woman made a decision to cheat upon her husband Nayanangshu in order to satisfy her sexual needs with his friend Jayanto, where her loyalty to husband must have denied her need fulfilment. After the adultery was committed, she became even more

conscious of the seriousness of the act, and silently confessed the sin of betraying her husband to the latter.

(Abbreviations in the Tableau: W for Maloti the central Woman; H for Nayonangshu the husband; L for Jayanto the Lover)

Pitted against choices of sexual gratification and loyalty to husband, Maloty chose to commit the ‘sin’ of adultery, since it was impossible for her to fulfill both requirements together. From the religious perspective, Maloti’s act of adultery for the sake of sexual gratification is non-optimal or sub-harmonic, and the act is to be considered a ‘sin.’ First let’s see how, in this course of behavior, various constraints are ranked with descending power matrix. The following constraint hierarchy may be proposed:

MAXBNFT >> PRESAMOR_[LOVER] >> PRESSELF >> . . .
 .>> CARDVR_[JUSTICE]

Table 1: Tableau showing the OT mechanism in Maloti’s ‘sinful’ choice

Constraints ►								
Input: ‘W deceived neither H nor L’								
Candidates (warring to be Output) ▼	MAXBNFT	PRESAMOR _[LOVER]	PHYND _[AUTONOMY]	PRESSELF	PRESLEGALO	LICENSESOC	*HARM	CARDVR _[JUSTICE]
a) W deceived both H and L	*!	*			*!		**!	**!
☞ b) W deceived only H					*!	*!	*	*
c) W deceived only L	*	*!	*!				*!	*
d) W deceived neither H nor L				*!		**		

The tableau shows how Maloti decided in favor of love or against loyalty to conjugal relationship. The constraint-ranking in the tableau shows that she attached more importance to physical love and sex drive than to morality (as the motivator that led her to be disloyal to Nayon her husband). Actually, in performing this ‘selection task’ (Wason 135), she followed the deontics:

- Physical love and sex drive have obligated moral negligence;
- Moral negligence has prohibited conjugal loyalty;
- Prohibited conjugal loyalty lead to adultery
 - = Physical love and sex drive have prohibited conjugal loyalty.
 - = Physical love and sex drive led to adultery (Deception).

Beside benefit and love, the psychological need for autonomy is ranked very high.

Maloti cannot easily get rid of the stigma of ‘sin,’ because, as per the deontic assertion, whatever is obligatory may be permissible (Hilpinen 1, Lewis 5, van Fraassen 417). But, neither prohibited conjugal loyalty nor physical love and sex drive obligated her adultery.

Importantly, the revelation comes through a sincere silent confession on the part of the ‘sinner’ herself. Here the husband represents the religious standard, or simply the society itself Maloti had a tryst with eventually. Confession signifies that she was going through penance for her disloyalty: she started wishing she were loyal to her husband. The tableau below can present the new way she had now prioritised the constraints accountable for her moral behavior, free from all vices.

Table 2: Tableau showing the OT mechanism in Maloti’s confession of ‘sin’

Constraints ►	CARD	VR _{UN}	PRES	*HAR	MAX	PHYN	PRES	LICEN	PRES
Input: ‘W deceived’									

<i>neither H nor L'</i>								
Candidates (warring to be Output) ▼								
a) W deceived both H and L	**!	*!	**!	*!				*
b) W deceived only H	*	*!	*				*!	
c) W deceived only L	*		*!	*	*!			*!
☞ d) W deceived neither H nor L						*!	**	

Thus, at the time of revelation through a silent confession to Nayan, Maloti ranked her constraints quite differently. As failed to materialise her ideal of love, the constraint PRESAMOR_[LOVER] would rank very low or be inapplicable. But on the other hand, the sincerity and honesty with which she silently accepted her faults points out the strength of her new urge to protect her marriage (*i.e.* the constraint, PRESLEGALO). With the realisation of her guilt in betraying the husband for the sake of an impossibility, she started conforming to the virtue of justice, *i.e.* what she should have done to him. Thus the ranking has now been quite opposite:

CARDVR_[JUSTICE]>>PRESLEGALO . . . >>MAXBNFT . . .
.>>PRESAMOR_[LOVER]

While Maloti's decision to betray her husband came almost as a response to the time-bound biological call, in Maitreyi Devi's *It Never Dies* Maitreyi's attachment to her lover Mircea was carried on for a long time.

(Abbreviations in the Tableau: W for Maitreyi the central Woman; H for Maitreyi's husband; L for Mircea the Lover)

The tableaux below can tell the story about the nature of deception and its evilness

Until the ripples of the Romanian novel by Mircea Eliade *La Nuit Bengali* or *Bengal Nights* (published in 1933) reached Bengal to disturb Maitreyi and her life, she had been living with her husband a long, happy conjugal life, their ‘life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire.’ Did she hide the past from the husband? Nothing is clearly mentioned in her novel *It Does not Die* (published in 1974) that presents her own version of her love affair with Mircea. Even if the truth was hidden, is this a ‘sin?’ In fact, such decision to hide the truth about her deep attachment to Mircea was obligated by no danger of death but motivated by some other needs of hers. In spite of the element of deception, as the ranking of constraints demonstrate, the ‘sin,’ from the woman’s perspective, has its justification through the high ranking of the social, psychological needs that obligates her utilitarian decision not to hurt her husband’s emotions by revealing the truth.

Table 3: Tableau showing the OT mechanism in Maitreyi’s initial choice of suppression

Constraints ►								
Input: ‘ <i>W</i> <i>deceived</i> <i>neither H nor</i> <i>L</i> ’								
Candidates (warring to be Output) ▼	SOCND _[AFFILIATION]	PSYND _[RELATEDNESS]	MAXBNFT	PRESAMOR _[LOVER]	LICENSESOC	CAPTVR _[CHASTITY]	CARDVR _[PRUDENCE]	THEOVR _[FAITH]
(a) W deceived both H and L	*		*	*	*	*	*!	**
☞ (b) W deceived only H						*		*!
(c) W deceived only L		*	*!	*		*		

(d) W deceived neither H nor L	*							
---	---	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Then, why did she finally reveal it at all? Her confession to her husband about her emotional attachment to foreigner is all honesty and sincerity, and in a way her genuine cry from the core of her heart for true love and respect for the husband, his family and society.

Table 4: Tableau showing the OT mechanism in the revelation of Maitreyi's secret

Constraints ►								
Input: ' <i>W</i> <i>deceived</i> <i>neither</i> <i>H nor L</i> '								
Candidates (warring to be Output) ▼	THEOVR _[FAITH]	CAPITVR _[CHASTITY]	PRESAMOR _[LOVER]	CARDVR _[PRUDENCE]	LICENSESOC	MAXBNFT	SOCND _[AFFILIATION]	PSYND _[RELATEDNESS]
(a) W deceived both H and L	**	*	*	*!	*	*	*	
(b) W deceived only H	*!	*						
(c) W deceived only L		*	*			*!		*
☞ (d) W deceived neither H nor L							*	

In these two cases of confession, it has been observed that the validation-seeking faithfulness constraints are ranking high,

defeating the ‘growth’-seeking markedness constraints that were prioritised at the time of deception. Significantly, faithfulness constraints when ranked high, as for example, at the time of genuine confessions, are not succumbing to any obligation. Rather they come to exercise their power over the other needs and utilitarian motivations, when the person concerned (here Maloti or Maitreyi) has ‘acquired’ some deeper knowledge of higher truth.

The case of Rosie in R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide* (published in 1958) is concerned with a more serious act, that is infidelity to husband and adultery. It was all a lustful act of infidelity taking place when the tour guide Raju was allured into her hotel bedroom during the period of historical research work by her husband Marco. Starting from this point, the immoral relationship continued for some long time until Raju was convicted of forgery.

(Abbreviations in the Tableau: W for Rosie the central Woman; H for Marco the husband; L for Raju the Lover)

Rosie kept deceiving and cheating upon her innocent and all-credulous husband Marco for long. For this act of adultery and deception, the following constraint ranking can explain the nature of the ‘sin’ concealed by the immoral wife all along from her innocent husband:

Table 5: Tableau showing the OT mechanism in Rosie’s ‘sinful’ choice

Constraints ►								
Input: ‘ <i>W</i> <i>deceived neither</i> <i>H nor L</i> ’								
Candidates (warring to be Output) ▼	PHYND _[SEX]	PSYND _[RELATEDNESS]	MAXBNFT	PRESAMOR _[LOVER]	SOCND _[AFFILIATION]	CAPITVR _[CHASTITY]	PRESAMOR _[SPOUSE]	THEOVR _[FAITH]

a) W deceived both H and L	*					*		*
 b) W deceived only H						*	*!	*
c) W deceived only L	*	*	*	*!	*			*
d) W deceived neither H nor L	*		*	*				

Here the high ranking of the physical and psychological needs, along with a utilitarian approach, accounts for such deception through a selfish ‘growth’ has been intended by an individual. But significantly the social constraints also go hand in hand with them, all together leading to the act of hypocrisy and deception.

Importantly, Rosie realised her mistake only when Raju’s fraud came to light and was to be convicted. Then Rosie’s mission for ‘growth’ had a setback, and decided to go back to her husband. Rather than realisation, it may be termed as a greater feat of deception on her part. Probably Raju could see into this side of Rosie, when he said, “Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining utility and which she herself had underestimated all along.” (Narayan 199). Let us first introduce the constraint ranking for it first, then followed by discussion:

Table 6: Tableau showing the OT mechanism in Rosie’s ‘realization’ of the ‘sin’

Constraints ►								
Input: <i>W deceived neither H nor L</i>								
Candidates (warring to be Output)	MAXBNFT	PSYND _[RELATEDNESS]	SOCND _[AFFILIATION]	PRESAMOR _[LOVER]	PRESAMOR _[SPOUSE]	PHYND _[SEX]	CAPITVR _[CHASTITY]	THEOVR _[FAITH]

▼								
☞ a) W deceived both H and L						*	*	*
(b) W deceived only H					*!		*	*
(c) W deceived only L	*	*	*	*!		*		*
(d) W deceived neither H nor L	*			*		*		

Like Rosie, Maitreyi had her confession too but with a major difference: Rosie had her realisation as a utilitarian and opportunist, the other with a complete devotion to her husband. The husbands here were no less than the epitomes of poetic justice: one held the devotee in his embrace, the other refused to accept the deceiving elf. In spite of her final realisation (though apparent only), Rosie definitely kept justifying her adultery all through on ground of Marco's impotence. Maitreyi was definitely more sincere in revealing the truth than Rosie, because the former did it spontaneously without any great obligation, but the latter was obligated to do so by her psychological urge to purge off the guilt to some extent and also to continue her marital relationship with Marco. Different motivations accounting for such difference have been aptly captured through the respective sets of constraints and their different ranking for the confessions by these two wives. It shows that, while Maitreyi went for 'validation' ranking the faithfulness constraints higher, Rosie still was running for only 'growth' though the satisfaction of the well-formedness or markedness constraints.

In the given four literary texts, OT has successfully explained the complex processes of moral decision-making (in favor of deception and then confession). As claimed above, behind such acts, necessarily there are a number of constraints or reasons fighting for

dominance; and one kind of constraint arrangement leads to some certain act. By showing that contradictions are produced by different constraint hierarchies, the model has accounted for contradictory nature of human behavior (as evident in the cases of Maloti, Maitreyi or Rosie followed by the final revelations of their guilt). Thus, optimality framework has efficaciously resolved the situations when contradictory principles interact in a complex manner before the human cognitive system translates it into a final decision.

By distilling morality through an OT filter, 'decision' (that often leads to a 'sinful' act) has been explained optimally. Sin as a religious concept is synonymous with any kind of deviation from the divine path of 'truth.' But the deontic way of reasoning challenges the very basis of this concept by raising the question: is the deception 'sinful' when it saves a life but causes no harm to anybody? Re-defining the concept of 'sin' or any course of behavior that is biblically non-optimal, it is proposed that, deception or disloyalty itself being never sufficient for sin, though necessary, should not be directly correlated or equated with 'vice.' Thus, logic has here been scientifically supported by science represented by OT.

Here OT has resolved efficaciously the conflict of contradictory principles before the human cognitive system dissolves it into a 'decision.' Sin as a religious term is synonymous with deviation from the divine path of 'virtues.' What if the 'sin' is forced by an obligation? Is anything immoral always immoral, in every context and situation? By distilling the element of morality through the Optimality filter, the paper has explained the process of 'decision'-making optimally. Re-defining the concept of 'sin,' it has thus shown that, any non-optimal course of behavior like deception or disloyalty itself is necessary but not sufficient always to be called sinful or to be directly correlated to 'vice.'

Endnotes

- i. Optimality Theory-Some useful Information:
OT Mechanism works through the three central principles: **GEN**, **CON** and **EVAL**.

GEN stands for the **GEN**erator or the productive function of the grammar that generates or determines the set of a number of *candidates* for each underlying form (input).

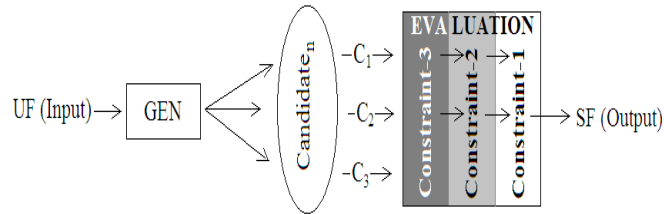
CON stands for the **CON**straints, rather a set of constraints present in every grammar that are: (i) Universal; (ii) ranked; (iii) Violable; and (iv) conflicting.

EVAL stands for the **EVAL**uator, *i.e.* the mechanism to evaluate the respective grammaticality of each and every candidate by the ranking of **CON**straints, following the principles that:

- No Candidate (abbreviated below as $C_1 / C_2 \dots C_n$) can satisfy all the constraints;
- Optimal Candidate is the one that satisfies the most dominating constraints in the hierarchy.

Graphically the whole process can be captured as in the Figure 2, where the constraint ranking has been assumed as: Constraint 3 >> Constraint2 >> Constraint1.

Fig. 2: OT Mechanism of GEN, CON, EVAL: Input-to-Output



The whole process of this constraint conflict and their ranking to determine the optimal candidate is represented by an OT tableau:

Table 7: Model OT tableau representing Constraint Ranking and Candidate election

/input/	Constraint-1	Constraint-2	Constraint-3
OutputA	*!		
☞ OutputB		*	
OutputC		*	*!

Let us explain the essential elements including the signs and symbols used in an OT tableau (always remember that, in the tableau an empty white cell means complete satisfaction of the constraint concerned by the candidate):

- a. Crucial elements
 - (i) Input [*i.e.* the underlying form, used as the raw-material here]
 - (ii) Output [*i.e.* probable surface form called Candidate]
 - (iii) Constraints [*i.e.* structural requirements, often abbreviated here as Con₁, Con₂, Con₃, ..., Con_n]
 - (iv) Asterisk (*) [that indicates ‘violation’ of the Constraint concerned]
- b. Other indicators which make meaning more specific for the reader
 - (i) Exclamation marks (!) [that means ‘fatal violation’ of the Constraint concerned]
 - (ii) Grey-shaded cell [meaning non-applicability of the Constraint concerned]
 - (iii) Pointing finger (☞) [It indicates the winning candidate or the optimal output form]

We can see in the tableau above that, three output forms or the ‘candidates’ (sometimes abbreviated as C₁ / C₂ . . . C_n) are fighting to be the winning candidate. But the OutputB (second candidate) gets elected as the grammatical output because, in the given instance the ranking of the constraints is like—Constraint-1 >>Constraint-2 >> Constraint-3—where the Constraint-1 is most powerful and Constraint-2 dominates the weakest Constraint-3. Given that, OutputB is the optimal candidate, as it satisfies the most powerful Constraint-1 but OutputA seriously violates it. Though both have satisfied Constraint-1, OutputB is preferred over OutputC because the latter violates the last two constraints, while the former satisfies the Constraint-3.

Originally, OT grammar is highly a non-linear phonological system working through constraint ranking. It works through constraint ranking and its hierarchy. Grammar must reconcile the conflicting forces of faithfulness and markedness. Kager (1999) talked about the conflict between the markedness and faithfulness, resulting from their ranking in the optimal candidate winning over the other candidates. The way constraints are ranked determines the winning candidate, as shown below:

Table 8: Ranking Con₂>>Con₁>>Con₃ leading to the election of CandidateA

/input/	Con-2	Con-1	Con-3
☞ CandidateA		*!	

CandidateB	*		
CandidateC	*		*!

- ii. The Talmud, written in Tannaitic Hebrew and Aramaic, contains opinions and lessons of the pre-Christian era rabbis on law, ethics, philosophy, customs and so on. The entire Talmud consists of two collection of writings, Babylonian Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud. In Jewish law the Talmud provides foundation for all behavioral codes.
- iii. Rational Choice Theory discusses the selection process based on a complete and transitive preference out of many available choice alternatives. In determining preferences, the rational agent considers all ready information about probabilities, consequences, costs and benefits involved. Thus, it is a consistent act of choosing the self-determined best choice.
- iv. LOVER here refers to either fiancé or fiancée

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**The Conversion and “Education” of Duleep Singh in
Navtej Sarna’s *The Exile* and Lady Login’s *Sir John
Login and Duleep Singh***

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Abstract

Duleep Singh (1838–1893), the youngest son of Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) and the last king of Punjab was deposed as a child King by the British in 1849 as a prequel to complete annexation of Punjab. He has mostly been seen as the inconsequential child king whose reign was significant in political terms only to the extent that it marked the beginning of colonisation of Punjab. This near amnesia with regard to Duleep Singh and his mother, Jind Kaur, was well orchestrated in historiography by the British because any attention paid to the duo would only expose their deep dark secret with regard to managing the twin fates of the mother and son. This essay attempts to expose the educational and evangelical project tied to the strings of Duleep’s tenuous life that needs a fresh exposition from a Postcolonial perspective. Lady Login’s *Sir John Login and Duleep Singh* (1890) and Navtej Sarna’s *The Exile* (2008) are the two texts through which an attempt is made to do a close study of the strategies employed to control and ‘civilise’ the child Maharaja Duleep Singh.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Duleep Singh, Jind Kaur, Punjab, Colonisation, Evangelism.

Introduction

Oh you *firanghees*! To what a miserable, hot place
you have flung our Duleep!

Sarna *In Exile* 114

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Kingdom taken away, mother sent to exile, culture and religion switched. It was all very neat. And my tractable character, gentle disposition and pleasing ways would go a long way in making me a perfect example that could be followed by many in India. And of course, I played right into Dalhousie's hands.

Sarna In Exile 147

He had forgotten nothing of his life at Lahore. He loved to talk of his old days and his eyes were filled with tears, as he spoke of his old playmates, his *tahlias* (attendants), his favourite horse and the gorgeously uniformed regiment of infants constituting of cadets coming of the noblest houses in the Punjab.

Obituary on the death of Duleep Singh in
The Tribune, October 25, 1893. Qtd. in
Ballantyne 154

Duleep Singh (1838–1893), the youngest son of Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) and the last king of Punjab was deposed as a child King by the British in 1849 as a prequel to complete annexation of Punjab. He has mostly been seen as the inconsequential child king whose reign was significant in political terms only to the extent that it marked the beginning of colonisation of Punjab. This near amnesia with regard to Duleep Singh and his mother, Jind Kaur, was well orchestrated in historiography by the British because any attention paid to the duo would only expose their deep dark secret with regard to managing the twin fates of the mother and son. In a manipulative move, the East India Company separated Duleep from his mother, Jind Kaur and in 1850, whisked him away from the Lahore Fort under heavy security cover, to a sleepy town called Fattahgarh, on the banks of the Ganges. By now the lone child was under the firm thumb of the East India Company and moved under the care of new foster parents, Scotsman John Spenser Login, a doctor with East India Company and his wife, Lena Login. His impressionable age of 9 years at the time of his

separation from her mother and his subsequent rearing and education under the strategic policy implemented personally by the Governor General Lord Dalhousie and Dr Login fashioned him into a vulnerable character riddled with many contradictions. When evaluated for the stereotypical Punjabi masculine characteristics like bravery and audacity, of which his father was an embodiment, he comes off as incredibly naive and weak. While it is convenient to broad-brush his life as “most tragic and pathetic” and leave it at that, there was a whole educational and evangelical project tied to the strings of his tenuous life that needs a new exposition from a Postcolonial perspective. Lady Login’s *Sir John Login and Duleep Singh* (1890) and Navtej Sarna’s *The Exile* (2008) are the two texts (One colonial and the other post-independence) through which an attempt is made to do a close study of the strategies employed to control and ‘civilise’ the child Maharaja Duleep Singh.

Navtej Sarna’s narrative technique in *The Exile* is one of exposition through multiple points of view, which brings a rare intimacy in telling a tale that had been nearly expunged from history, a deep dark secret of the British which could be brought to the daylight only by giving first person narration to the hitherto powerless witnesses of his life. He uses the first person point of view of five characters: Duleep’s own perspective, who, while dying alone in a far flung decrepit Paris hotel room, recounts his life story as a painful flashback, Mangla, the old trusted maid of Jind Kaur who had known Duleep since he was a baby and was subsequently thrown out of service by the British after the expulsion of the Queen, Arur Singh – Duleep’s trusted valet, his foster parents, the Logins and General Charles Carrol –Tevis, an American soldier, who became a confidante of Duleep Singh in Paris. By alternating the thread of the story between different voices, a more holistic exposition of Duleep’s life takes place.

Lady Login, wife of Dr Login, was urged to write the book *Sir John Login and Duleep Singh* “. . . in the interests of the Maharaja, in the interest of truth and justice, of writing from the stores of documents in her possession, a connected history of the Maharaja’s life from the date of connection with him of the late Sir John Login to the time of the cessation of the connection” (Login xvi). The book,

apart from her personal commentary, includes personal letters and documents, sometimes revealing details that the veneer of her outward commentary belies.

This paper makes an attempt to unravel the dark secret of the Empire whereby a mother and her child were separated, and child Duleep, through a combination of evangelism and Western education, was cast in the mould of an Anglicised Christian aristocrat. Further an attempt is made to unravel the strategies employed by the East India Company to fashion him in the way that best represented the interests of the Empire, while claiming a high moral ground for themselves all the while. The blatant hypocrisy of their civilising and evangelising mission as a handmaiden in the Imperial project is exposed. Duleep Singh can be seen as an early example of the colonial education project, the great advocate of which, Macaulay had written the famous treatise about fifteen years before the annexation of Punjab. Further, Duleep was rendered incapable of rebelling against the Crown because he encountered it in the guise of the ostensibly kindly Logins whom he lovingly addressed as ‘my Ma-Baap.’ This was along the lines of fulfilling Macaulay’s ambition of creating “a class (of people) who would, in fact, protect British interests and help them rule a vast and potentially unruly land” (Macaulay; qtd.in Loomba 75). The price Duleep paid was a highly fraught life where he lost all sense of belonging to his beloved Lahore, while never being fully accepted by the English society in which he was supplanted. While the robbery of the *Koh-i-Noor* is a legend well known, the robbery of the child King is way lesser known but many times more tragic. An attempt is made in this paper to examine the ostensibly kind but extremely problematic approach in fashioning him into a character fit for the Imperial project at a religious, social and cultural level. Ballantyne says in this regard that ‘the meaning of individual lives are not fixed, rather they are shaped, contested, and reformed through stories, graphic images, biographies, works of fiction and various forms of private and public performance . . . Dalip Singh is a rich case for a study of the constructive and uneven work of memory, especially given his mobility and uneven fortunes (153).

Events Leading to Annexation of Punjab

Duleep Singh was 5 years old, when he ascended the throne in September 1843. His father, Maharaja Ranjit Singh who had stretched the boundaries of the Sikh Empire to include parts of Tibet in North and touched Peshawar in the West, had died in 1839. His death was followed by a decade of internecine violence and a series of brutal murders of his line of successors beginning with Kharak Singh whose reign barely lasted for five and a half months. His son, Nau Nihal Singh, a great favourite of Ranjit Singh, was ‘accidentally’ killed when the masonry of a gateway under which he was passing gave way on the very day he was returning from performance of the last rites at the funeral pyre of his father. Excessive factionalism of the Dogras on the one hand and the Sikh nobility on the other, had shattered Punjab and the British who were already stationed in Ludhiana were waiting for an opportune time to take over Punjab. Ranjit Singh, close to his death, had remarked in his prescience, “Sab lal ho jayega” prophesising the imminent take-over of Punjab by the East India Company after his death. Nau Nihal Singh’s death was followed by an interregnum when Maharani Chand Kaur, the widow of Kharak Singh claimed the throne for her yet unborn grandson. She, therefore, was made regent. Her short reign ended in her brutal murder when she was stoned by her servant girls in a community bath and her grandchild turned out to be still born. Ranjit Singh’s other son, Sher Singh, son of his first Queen Mehtab Kaur then took on the reigns upon returning from his post in Batala. The stylish Sikh, a connoisseur of French perfumes also met a brutal end when he and his minor child Partap Singh were murdered by the Sandhawalia Sardars in 1843. On the same day, Dhian Singh, the veteran Prime Minister of Ranjit Singh, who was still calling the shots, was also murdered (Bance 17–25).

It is against this gory landscape of Punjab, on 18 September 1843, with gun shots resounding and canons booming, that Duleep, was elevated as the King, with his mother Maharani Jind Kaur, the last Queen of Ranjit Singh, as the regent.

Duleep Singh’s short reign saw the two Anglo-Sikh wars and the complete annexation of Punjab by 1849. Jind Kaur was exiled, first

to Sanman Burj, then to Sheikhpura Fort and finally to Chunar Fort in Benaras in 1848 on trumped up charges of conspiracy. It was an alibi to disconnect her from the *darbar* because her relentless contestations with the British coupled with a guileless stance had unnerved them. Subsequently through the propaganda mills, she was labelled *Messelina of Punjab*, derided as a woman of low character, separated from her son Duleep and never allowed to set foot on Lahore again. She, on her part, managed to flee from Chunar in disguise as a servant girl and walked all the way to Nepal where she was accorded refuge. In accordance with the Last Treaty of Lahore (1849), Maharaja was declared a “state property and appropriated by the British Government . . . further . . . every article of property in possession of the Maharaja was declared state property” (Login 139). Duleep Singh was already separated from mother and now made a ward of Dr John Spenser Login and his wife Lena Login. He was then removed to faraway Fattengarh and subsequently England under the constant supervision of Dr Login and given an anglicised Christian upbringing.

Duleep and the Logins in Lahore Fort

The first contact of child Duleep Singh with his foster father, Dr John Spenser Login took place in 1849 when the latter entered the Lahore fort with twin charge as *Killah-i-Malik*, caretaker of the *Toshakhana*, the treasury, fort and ‘all that it contains’ including the deposed child King, Maharaja Duleep Singh. Login had taken charge of his appointment, ruminating over “the opulence of his new residence as compared to the rough camps in Kabul and Herat” (Sarna-Login 110). On one evening he witnesses Duleep playing in the rain:

I was about to go indoors when a sudden burst of activity from the Shish Mahal caught my eye. Duleep in full dress, complete with his turban and pearls, burst forth from between the carved pillars. I was mesmerised by the sight of the boy and his grown up companions playing in the rain. They didn’t seem to have any care in the world. I wondered whether I or my countrymen would have been able to give ourselves up with such abandon if

we had been in the position that the Sikh king and courtiers were in. A Kingdom lost, the Sikh Empire ended forever, the British incharge of Lahore and the *toshakhana* and they could still dance in the rain. (Sarna-Login 111)

Login was a Scotsman and a deeply driven Evangelist. Mrs Login relates the incident when he got local women in Herat, where he was earlier posted, to make embroidered velvet covers for Bible. According to her, “covers were made for Login’s Bible and Prayer Book and this opportunity was made use of by him to send a Persian Testament to have a cover made for it and when he found it bore marks of having been read, he offered to exchange it for a volume of Hafiz’s poems, which offer was eagerly accepted” (Login 37).

This instance exemplifies the following:

- Login’s assiduous evangelical aims in the colonies.
- The use of indirect, covert means in influencing the target communities in appreciating Christianity.
- Presenting an excellent personal example through his own bearing and conduct by exhibiting high morals, ostensible morality, honesty and high family ideals. In this case if he had directly tried to influence the women by distributing free Bibles, he would not be so valued, as it was, when given in exchange for a volume of Hafiz poems.

In “gently” cajoling Duleep towards Christianity, all these means are adopted by the Logins. This new “job” that involved overseeing the education of Duleep was accepted with him a rare Christian devotion and he and his wife remained connected to the ‘wellbeing’ of Duleep for a lifetime. It is to be underlined that Empire and Christianity worked hand in hand in these times of the high noon of Imperialism. Upon meeting Duleep, he announced that he found him very intelligent and also courteous. This assessment is repeated again and again by him and later his wife, Lena with two express purposes: One, to distinguish him from his mother, Rani Jind Kaur who is unceremoniously thrown into exile and labelled “Messalina of Punjab,” who like the Ancient Roman Queen Messalina, was labelled as a woman of a loose moral character, a liar and a lunatic. This

outright condemnation becomes the very justification of throwing her out of Lahore. Needs to be said that she was a single parent to Duleep, Maharaja Ranjit Singh having already died in 1839 when Duleep was barely ten months old. As opposed to the mother's character, son Duleep is espoused as the one whose intelligence is the foundation on which the edifice of 'good Christian' upbringing can be erected. Despite the fact that they labelled her a lunatic and duty informed Duleep that the mother had abandoned him. His quest for his missing mother led him to make several attempts to get in touch with her later.

To endear themselves to Duleep and to nip his rebellious tendencies in the bud, they seemed to care for his every need, big and small. Dr Login celebrated his birthday in Lahore Fort (first without the mother Jind Kaur) with a lot of pomp, for which he invited the other widows of Ranjit Singh who were still living in the *zenana* (Sarna 113). He began the day by sending his special clothes and jewels to wear, ironically from his own *toshakhana* which was now under the thumb of the British. The gullible, innocent child Maharaja remarked that he had worn the *Koh-i-Noor* on his arm on his last birthday. (Sarna Login 113) The famed diamond, had by then gone into the treasury of the Crown (Bance 29). A box of toys arrived from England and "both the little Maharaja and his servants were anxiously waiting to see its contents" (Bance 28). They were advancing these baubles to win him over, while pocketing the spoils of the Sikh Kingdom. Every day, the contents of the *toshakhana* were being emptied into British treasury.

Fattehgarh Days

I cannot put a Bible in his hands yet . . . Login to his wife Lena. (Bance 35)

Fattehgarh camp had grown around the remnants of a mud fort and three villages. A small settlement of Englishmen and indigo planters lived their lives around the theatre with its tamarind trees . . . and when they died of malaria, cholera or the heat they were buried in the two cemeteries shaded with neem and shisham trees. (Sarna-Login 114)

In 1850, Duleep was moved to Fattahgarh, a cantonment town in what was then United Provinces, so as to sever all connection with Lahore. His few valets from Lahore who had accompanied him were subsequently sent back home to avoid any possible rebellion or contact with Jind Kaur. A strict vigil was maintained to ensure that Duleep was under the firm control of the British. He was 'escorted' from Lahore by 'a selection of the best men of the 6th Light Cavalry, 18th European infantry, 15th Native Infantry and Horse Artillery' . . . 'they were to guard us against any attempt by any bunch of desperados to rescue the Maharaja' (Sarna-Login116). What followed was a meticulously controlled conspiracy to introduce Duleep to the precepts of Christianity to covertly encourage him to adopt the faith so as to create a rift with his own heritage that he would never be able to fill. Further that would make him unfit to ever claim Punjab as its ruler. Lena Login includes a letter dispatch written by Henry Elliot, Secretary to the Government of India that points to the meticulous control exercised in this regard:

Dr Login will have the entire authority over His Highness's household during his boyhood. He will be placed under the direct control of the Governor General after leaving the jurisdiction of the Board of Administration in Punjab. Monthly diaries or reports should be made by him to the Secretary to the Government of India . . . and copies of his accounts should be rendered quarterly in the same Department. (Login 202)

Besides, successfully converting Duleep would be a huge symbolic victory for the British as he would become the first Indian royal to adopt the faith of the colonisers.

Login claims that when the retinue of Duleep Singh was to move to Fattahgarh, none of the Sikh priests accompanied him though they were offered accommodation and facilities. Thus Duleep left Lahore without any local teacher who could have instructed him in his tongue and without a single copy of the Guru Granth Sahib. According to Login, despite his exhortations, none was ready to accompany the child Maharaja and 'I being from a different religion . . . would not

give them orders on the subject' (Qtd.in Bance 30). The Maharaja, thus reached Fattehgarh without a credible connection with his Sikh heritage. Login's explanation here has to be taken with a pinch of salt. Henry Elliott, had earlier instructed him that "a very careful selection should be made of the attendants who are to accompany them. In the case of the child especially, there can be no reason for taking almost any servant from Lahore and both should be prevented from having anyone about them except such persons as Dr Login may consider from his experience to be worthy of trust" (Login 203). While his every action was being remote controlled from Calcutta personally by Lord Dalhousie, it would not have been difficult for them to have a Sikh teacher accompany Duleep. This has to be seen in the chain of events, where the enthusiasm to have Duleep take to Christianity and western style education served the dual purpose of having him cut all ties with Lahore and become more amenable to accepting the British Raj as opposed to rebelling against his ouster as a rebel. His impressionable age only helped matters. He was being put into a mould. His old retainer Mian Kheema who had been with Duleep since early childhood "quietly carrying me, putting me on a horse, helping me dress, putting food in front of me, talking to me as I fall to sleep' was promptly sent back to Lahore. I wonder did he want to leave me or that too was part of the plan? . . . I needed him, he must have known that, and but still he left" (Sarna-Duleep 120).

Duleep was exposed to Western style education under a dubious tutor by the name of Bhajan Lal who was a Christian convert (having studied in mission schools in Farukhhabad) and a wily, servile man. And he replaced Mian Kheema "perhaps in their minds, perhaps in Login's mind or Dalhousie's or in some despatch of the secret committee this plan was already in place . . . then the reason for Mian Kheema's return to Lahore is clear to me: he could not read the Bible to me like Bhajan Lal would" (Sarna-Duleep 120).

Bhajan Lal played a crucial role in exposing child Duleep to Christian precepts and Biblical fables while deriding the superstitions of Hindu faith. Subtly and by degrees, he was able to establish the binary—one the one hand was Christian reason, and honesty and high morals and on the other—between Hindu superstition, ludicrous

rituals and treachery. Indian religions were presented as an antithesis of the morally uplifting Christian worldview. Besides, the stories told by Bhajan Lal evoked in the child Duleep an alternate world of imagination, which became a refuge of sorts:

And then every night he read the Bible to me. A chapter or two as I lay in bed, just before falling to sleep, in his gentle, sweet voice, it kept me from thinking of my mother and from wondering why I had been separated from her.” (Sarna-Duleep120)

Later in life, it became clear to Duleep that Bhajan Lal had, indeed, spied on him and reported his movements to Login (Bance 31).

Two more teachers subsequently played a role: Walter Guise and Reverend Carshore, who too, as tutors, were trained in the same mould to encourage Duleep towards Christianity. About Guise, Login claims in a letter to Lena that he “is a very good fellow, rather slow perhaps and not altogether the man who would suit later on but he is amiable, patient, and attentive . . . and has I think been more useful in winning the boy round to apply himself to study than a more accomplished tutor would have been” (Login 224).

Added to this was the atmosphere of Fattehgarh, which was a Christian missionary town and Duleep’s desire to belong to the ostensibly kind Logins who were severe practicing missionaries and would not miss their Sunday Church for anything. Somewhere Duleep’s desire to be one of them was a strong undercurrent in his attraction towards Christianity:

I was very keen to speak English like Tommy Scott and Robby Carshore, not sound so much like a native Prince but an English Sahib. I wanted to be like them in so many other ways too, have their uncomplicated carefree attitude, play cricket and football like they could, even get into the kind of clothes that they wore- shorts and shirts and stockings (Sarna-Duleep119).

John Login wrote to his wife Lena:

I trust however, God helping us, we shall be enabled, as “written epistles” to manifest the spirituality and benevolence of a Christian life if we cannot otherwise preach to him. I have this morning and evening prayer together, he asked me to order his purohit (priest) to come also at a fixed hour daily to read to him in his holy book. This, I think indicates a devotional feeling that may hereafter be directed aright (Bance 32).

And, then:

I shall be glad when you join me, for I cannot expect to have more than two to three years in which to influence the young Maharaja’s mind favourably towards our domestic life and I must not lose them on any account . . . I was glad indeed that you sent him that book of games, *The Boy’s Own Book*. It is seldom out of his hand and it has added to his eagerness to learn English (Sarna-Login 117).

Lord Dalhousie, always mindful of the furore the conversion of the Child King could lead to, especially in Lahore wrote to Login: “If Duleep Singh is to go to England, let him be quietly baptised before he goes and by his own name Duleep Singh” (Bance 34). Lady Login, however, noted that Duleep was anxious to convert sooner and prove he was no longer a Sikh by “cutting off his long tress of hair which, he in common with all Sikhs wore twisted into a ball above the brow . . . ” (Bance 34).

The child’s decision to embrace Christianity was projected as being one of his own volition where, Logins’ and Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General’s involvement in ensuring that Duleep moves in this direction is evident in their intricate planning and several exchanges of correspondence. He was formally baptised on 8 March 1853 in his own Fattehgarh bungalow. Dalhousie, expressing satisfaction in the matter, wrote to his friend George Couper: “This is the first Indian Prince of many who have succumbed to our power or have acknowledged it that has adopted the faith of the stranger” (Bance 35).

It took the English men a few weeks to sort things out. It was not a small thing- to handle the conversion of a native prince to Christianity. The men of East India Company had to be very careful of what people thought of them, how history judged them. All the paperwork had to be complete. The file had to be correct, with all the notings in place. Nothing should show that undue influence had been used, that a position of trust had been abused (Sarna 127).

Just before Duleep's departure to England in 1854, Dalhousie also presented him with a Bible, a present that he claimed "... which in future years might sometimes remind you of me ... the volume which I should offer to my own child, as the best of all gifts since in it alone is to be found the secret of real happiness either in this world or in that world which is yet to come" (Bance 35).

But Dalhousie's duplicity in the matter was later clear to Duleep: "What he actually thought of me, I discovered when I read his letter to his friend Hobhouse. He called me a 'child notoriously surreptitious,' a brat begotten of a *bhishti*, and no more a son of Ranjit than Queen Victoria is. This is what he really thought of me, the rest was deception and fraud" (Sarna-Duleep 156).

The Question of Marriage

The question of Duleep Singh's marriage was also accorded an unusual importance. Login wrote to his wife about the matter of finding a suitable bride for Duleep as his topmost priority (Bance 32). First off, they unilaterally called off the engagement of Duleep with Sardar Chhattar Singh Attariwala's daughter that had been fixed since he was an infant. That, of course, was to prevent any connection with Lahore.

Lord Dalhousie, in a letter to Login had written:

I should object decidedly and do not wish to countenance any relations henceforth between the Maharaj and the Sikh, either by alliance with a Sikh family or sympathy with Sikh feeling. (Bance 32)

This clearly revealed that the British were using Duleep's marriage too as a means of tightening their grip on Lahore. He was then presented with two proposals, at different points in time: One, a proposal for him to marry the widow of Maharaja Sher Singh, his half-brother who had been murdered by the Sandhawalias. His wife Rani Dukhno, though many times his senior was presented as a possible match under the ceremony of *Chadar Chadana* that allows the widow to marry the brother of the deceased husband, a custom amongst the *jatts* of Punjab. However, Duleep showed no inclination to this match whatsoever. Second, which was personally pushed by Queen Victoria, was a proposal for him to marry Princess Gauramma of Coorg, a royal who was in somewhat similar circumstances as Duleep, having been deposed and brought to England. However, Duleep declined the match:

I know what you are thinking. That she is suited in so many ways for someone in my position. Otherwise, whom will I marry? Some heathen Indian who will be forced to become a Christian only to please me? Or some European with whom I will produce half castes? (Sarna Duleep 161)

On the other hand, when he was attracted to one of the relatives of Logins, a young pretty British girl, he was outright discouraged to proceed. The real face of the guardians then was revealed, and he could see beyond the projected kindness of his benefactors. Inter-racial marriage was an anathema in the Victorian times and 'sexuality was thus a means for the maintenance or erosion of sexual difference.' (Loomba 135). There was a consistent effort on the part of the British to ensure that he marry within the race and secondly, he ought not 'cross the line' by romancing a white British woman. The racial divide between them was clearly exposed and at this point he began to have second thoughts:

Even you, for so many years the only parents I have known, are not going to accept me as your own. You took me away from what I have known, my country, my people, even my faith. I lost all chance of ever being one with my own race and if I still cannot be

treated as one of our own then I do not know where to turn to.” (Sarna Duleep 162)

Eventually in 1864, he married Bamba Muller, daughter of an Abyssinian woman and a German father from a mission school in Cairo. In being a bit of an outsider, but nevertheless, a devout Christian, she fitted the ideal that Duleep had in mind for a wife.

Post Script

The famous portrait of Duleep Singh made by Francis Xavier Winterhalter and commissioned by Queen Victoria herself in 1854, is a sordid commentary on the actual circumstances of Duleep. He stands there in an Oriental regalia – trousers, brocades and a turban decked with pearly strings. The painter himself confessed that he painted him tad taller so as to make him look aristocratic. He wore a pendant with the painting of Queen Victoria around his neck, looking much like a loyal subject. The Queen herself was overseeing this session being conducted in Buckingham Palace. What leaps out of this is the complete delineation of a man who was completely fractured in psyche, his education mirroring the colonial project of creating loyal subjects, who progressively become hateful of their own heritage and servile to the new masters but never fully accepted by them as their own. CA Bayly, a prominent South Asian historian who curated the landmark exhibition “The Raj: India and British 1600-1947” for which he used this portrait as the central image, says: “The image suggests the vigourously exotic; the reality was defeat and dispossession” (qtd. in Ballantyne 159). Similarly, Nina Poovaya-Smith calls it a “studied exercise in presenting or mimicking the veneer of power and authority, a gloss as superficial as the varnish that overlays the painting” (qtd. in Ballantyne 159).

That voice come back to me now as I lie in this bed, preparing to fall into eternal sleep. I wish someone would come and read me something to soothe my soul and I would not care if it was Bible or the Guru Granth or even the fantastic tales from Hindu Shastras . . . I have believed in everything and nothing . . . sometimes I feel I have no conviction at all (Sarna-Duleep 120).

Endnote

Since Navtej Sarna's book employs multiple Points of View, I have used the following structure in the in-text citation: (Sarna/name of character/page number). This makes the perspective of the speaker clear.

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Reverse Internal Migration: Identity Negotiation in 1232 Km: The Long Journey Home and Homebound

Kanika Panghal* and Dr. Ila Rathor**

Abstract

The ascent of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 not only threatened the physical well-being of the masses but also raised several social, economic, and humanitarian concerns. One of the many afflictions instigated by this massive pandemic is the reverse internal migration that took place all over India. Amidst the misery of the crisis, millions of migrants were seeking the comfort of their homes and returned to their hometowns, but unfortunately, most of these journeys turned out to be dreadful. This paper aims to explore how these individuals navigate the transformation of their identities in the challenging process of returning to their hometowns amidst the crisis by employing a theoretical framework that draws upon the concepts of identity, reverse migration, and internal migration. By synthesising the theoretical perspectives of “Self-Categorization” as devised by David Willer and Henri Tajfel’s “Social Identity Theory,” the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how the return migrants negotiate their “self” and “home.”

Keywords: Reverse Migration, Internal Migration, Identity Crisis, Displacement, Reverse Internal Migration, COVID-19.

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Introduction

The pandemic-led reverse migration in India exposed the systemic vulnerabilities of migrant workers, the harsh realities of economic dependency, social isolation, and inadequate health infrastructure. The instances of brutal law enforcement alongside the abrupt closure of industries not only led to widespread economic distress, but the uncertainty about their future also caused psychological distress among the migrant workers (Choudhari 1). In reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented outbreak in 2020, India experienced a tremendous surge of reverse internal migration, with millions of people returning to their homes. Upending their lives and means of subsistence, the pandemic changed the migrants' perception of home and identity. This paper endeavours to elucidate the complex mechanisms through which return migrants undergo identity negotiation, in the context of leaving their current homes to move back to their hometowns, by employing a theoretical framework that draws upon the concepts of identity, reverse migration, and internal migration. It seeks to critically analyse the transformative journey of these individuals as they redefine notions of home and belonging. By synthesising the theoretical perspectives of "Self-Categorisation" as devised by David Willer and Henri Tajfel's "Social Identity Theory," the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how the return migrants negotiate their "self" and "home."

As a response to the pandemic, the Government of India implemented a one-day curfew called the 'Janta curfew' on March 22, 2020, which soon turned into a nationwide lockdown beginning on March 24, 2020, leaving inhabitants only four hours to respond. Overnight, everything took an unknown turn, transit lines came to a halt, leaving travellers stranded and without a place to go. In the months that followed, some of the most appalling displays of despair and agony were seen. Following the unanticipated closure of enterprises and industries, thousands of migrants along with their families and dependents were forced to go back home under harsh conditions and on foot. On their way, they met unforeseen hardships including violent beatings by police, a sense of estrangement, and an identity crisis insinuated by displacement. Returning to their hometowns amidst the crisis was a challenging task for all the

migrants given the financial crisis, immobility, social disintegration, and fear for life. The two poignant novels: *1232 Km: The Long Journey Home* by Vinod Kapri and *Homebound* by Puja Changoiwala, serve as windows into the harrowing experiences of migrants who had to take an arduous journey back to their “homes,” underscoring the need for more robust social safety nets and supportive policies for internal migrants in future crises. The matter of concern is the question if their supposed homes will offer them the comfort of a home. These books chronicle physical trials as well as the emotional and psychological toll exacted by the reverse migration, uncovering social disintegration/reintegration against the backdrop of crisis-induced challenges.

1232 Km: The Long Journey Home gives a crucial account of reverse migration through seven migrant workers- Ritesh, Ram Babu, Sonu, Mukesh, Krishna, Sandeep, and Ashish, who felt so displaced by the pandemic that they decided to bicycle their way back home all the way from Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, to their villages in Saharsa and Samastipur in Bihar. Identity crises are exacerbated by the loss of social ties, and this is what can be observed in the plight of the migrants who had to move to their original homes. According to Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, and consequent social identity shapes their behaviour and attitudes (Leaper 338).

As soon as they were hit by the crisis, the need to return home overpowered the challenges standing in their way as they only identified themselves with their place of origin. Kapri's meticulous account lays bare the extremities and challenges that they choose to face in order to be where they belong. The sense of un-belonging to where they lived as migrant workers and, on the way, comes from the encounters with police brutality, hostility from the locals (landlord), and constant fear of hunger (Kumar 318). This compelling narrative reflects the transformation of the identity of these individuals when they are met with crisis. In the houses that they lived in, they are just tenants who must leave if the rent is not paid on time. On the streets, they aren't citizens of India moving to their homes but unruly subjects who deserve to be beaten. In other villages, they are travellers who carry the deadly disease. As a result, the migrants

identified themselves with their original homes despite having a strong connection with the newer homes (Jha and Lahiri 3). They identified with each other as “migrant workers” who are outsiders everywhere except their villages.

While these seven migrant workers were able to be at “home” finally in their villages and identified themselves with the people and place that they come from, “Homebound” by Puja Changoiwala paints a different picture. For the young Meher, Dharavi represented a realm of opportunities and potential. However, things take an unfortunate turn with the extensive lockdown imposed by the Indian government as a response to COVID-19. Her parents lost their employment, thrusting them perilously close to losing their lives. Amidst the surging COVID-19 cases, they grapple with the realisation of the uncertainty of their lives and leave for their home which is their sole shelter. Despite the given restrictions on public movement, they decide to walk a 900-kilometer-long journey and face barbaric police officers, scorching temperatures, and the seemingly dispassionate whims of fate on their way. Even though the journey ended, her search for home remained unfinished.

Internal Migration and Reverse Migration

During the national lockdown, when people were asked to stay put at home, migrants faced an appalling question of where their home is. The one that they had been living in and adapting to for a long time did not seem like an option anymore. The reality of internal migration is no different than international migration (Khan and Arokkiaraj 12). The same kind of dissociation happens as soon as a crisis comes. While Meher claims Mumbai as her home, her “disillusioned” father calls it a mirage and stresses that they must return home despite the known risks.

“It’s dangerous,” argued Ma. “Heavy police deployment everywhere, day and night. Many have died on the road already.”

“Many haven't. And once we finish this journey, we'll be home?” But this is home, I registered my protest.

No, asserted my father, too curt for his make. “This is its mirage.” (Changoiwala 2)

Meher's father's resolute commitment to returning to "home," coupled with his characterisation of their current residence as a "mirage," suggests a fundamental distinction between the immediate environment of Dharavi and the true essence of home. While Dharavi may appear as home to Meher due to her limited experience with what her father believes is their home, it fundamentally lacks the essential qualities of a true home, that is, a safe and secure refuge. Meher's conception of home is thus primarily grounded in familiarity rather than a deeper sense of security and belonging.

As Everett S. Lee's Push-Pull Theory states, migration decisions are based on a combination of push factors and pull factors, that are based on social, economic, and political conditions of both the homeland and the host land. These factors work similarly in the case of reverse migration. Meher and her father are torn between such factors. For Meher, Dharavi represents hope, possibilities, and familiarity, rendering it to be a more profound and cohesive concept of home as compared to the place of their origin, but the pandemic-induced lockdown brought the brink of despair and her father's decision to initiate this reverse migration serves as a powerful testament to the existence of migrants as marginalised communities especially in the face of overwhelming odds. The problem with internal migration is that when one moves away for opportunities, he/she does not think of himself/herself as a migrant, and even if there is the slightest thought of being a migrant, it is overshadowed by the idea of nationalism. However, the reverse migration is not the same. There is an instant identity crisis followed by the negotiation of a home. The return in internal migration happens with a lot of rethinking and negotiation of identity (Rajan et al.). For Meher and her family, even though the return was inevitable, there was a sense of loss about leaving Dharavi. As they embarked on the journey, the contemplation of "home" and return began:

As the men counted more reasons to justify our illegal escape from Mumbai, Electron Aunty weighed in with negatives. We will always be outsiders in this city, she droned. 'For people in this jungle, families like ours are good enough to build their subways. and skyscrapers, but not good enough to deserve decent homes, paid leaves, even pending wages.'" (Changoiwala 17)

The calculated decision to return home, despite knowing the gravity of the situation and the risks associated with this journey serves as a poignant commentary on the position of the outsiders. This narrative of the family's journey offers a multifaceted interplay between societal perceptions of migrants and the individual agency. On one hand, the decision to return home and choosing to confront adversity underscores the strained relationship between migrants and the host society; on the other hand, the resistance by the younger members reflects their choice of the 'known' over the 'unknown' home: "He left Balhaar when he was five, and he remembered too little of our village to tolerate this arduous journey" (Changoiwala 40). This realisation of unfamiliarity with the so-called "home" during the return is what leads to a vulnerable state of identity crisis. However, what makes the internal migration stand out is that there is both acceptance and rejection of two homes at the same time. While Meher considers Dharavi to be her home, she also accepts Balhaar as one when she agrees to Electron Aunty's reply "But we're leaving for home. Is that a crime, too?" to "Leaving home is a crime" (Changoiwala 52).

Reverse migration, like migration, is also motivated by economic and social unrest (Lee 51). Both *1232 Km: The Long Journey Home* and *Homebound* exhibit the challenges of reverse migration in the context of internal migration. Keeping the characters' emotional distress in view, it is important to note that the hurt of return is much greater than anticipated and acknowledged.

Identity and Crisis

It is in times of adversity that the need for acceptance and oneness with people and a place arises. With the announcement of the lockdown, the migrants were promptly unsettled and the authorities and the locals made them feel abandoned in their own country. Not only were they beaten with police batons on the highways when they tried to reach a safe place on their own, but they also met new forms of untouchability as they were denied admission into village boundaries, and were even denied water and food. The treatment they received at government quarantine camps was sub-human at best. All that happened during this bicycle insurrection from Ghaziabad to Saharsa of these seven migrant workers, describes an unimaginable, unscrutinised sight of the plight of reverse internal migrants. Kapri's *1232 Km: The Long Journey Home* is a "haunting and also hallucinating ethnography of a rare form of spontaneous 'mass civil disobedience' by millions of disenfranchised and invisible so-called 'footloose workers' in migration studies" (Kumar 318). The one instance where Ritesh, Ram Babu, and Sonu decide to cross the Ganga, knowing they will not make it, sheds light on their willingness to risk their lives as their sense of self was being reduced constantly and the return seemed the only way to assert some form of agency.

Stella Ting-Toomey's idea that "individuals acquire and develop their identities through interaction with others in their cultural group" stands true in this context. As the crisis made them question their place as migrants, their interaction with people and perception of others became biased based on class, place of origin, and religion:

‘And, apart from the police beatings, even the locals in Dharavi threatened us.

Did you know that? About six of them, when we were returning home after the lathi-charge. They held Jairaj and me by our necks and said, "if any of you filthy outsiders gets infected with the virus, no one will be spared, we will bury you alive." It's time you realize that Mumbai wasn't ours, but the biggest delusion of our lives, the greatest mirage' . . .

‘Do you know, Jairaj? Two of those six men were Muslims,’ Baba added. ‘I’m sure they instigated our Hindu brothers against us.’ (Changoiwala 48)

“The self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (Stets and Burke 227). Drawing from the Turner’s concept of “self-categorization,” it is evident that the crisis amplified pre-existing biases and accentuated the inherent vulnerabilities associated with migrant identities, bringing out a new, negotiated identity (Willer et al. 647). Turner argued that people don’t hold rigid, fixed identities; instead, their sense of self changes depending on their surroundings and social situations. Turner’s perspective highlights that return migrants are likely to re-evaluate their self-concepts upon returning to hometowns where the community’s expectations or norms may differ from the areas they are returning from. This fluid sense of identity demands them to adjust, aiming for a sense of coherence between their experiences in both urban and rural environment (Willer et al. 647). The hostility directed towards migrants by local residents, driven by religious and class-based prejudices, fundamentally disrupted their sense of belonging within Mumbai. This adversarial environment compelled the migrants to confront the stark reality of their outsider status, catalysing a reassessment of both their identity and their conception of home. This situation exemplifies how identities are negotiated through the interplay between external social interactions and individual self-perception.

There is another side of the migrants' lives presented by Kapri and Changoiwla where the migrants have formed a close-knit community and their identification with each other is based on factors beyond their strong connection with their home. Meher's description of Dharavi sums up her life as a migrant: "The slum is not a conventional beauty, the world knows that, but what it does not know is that everyone here speaks the same language. Not Hindi, Marathi, Tamil or Telugu, but the language of people who know what it's like to leave their homes, falter, mend, learn, experience, and evolve. Now that we are returning to Balhaar, Ms Farah, I think I will feel lost in my village, more than I ever did in this alien ghetto" (Changoiwala

27). Meher's disagreement with her father, asserting that Dharavi is home, highlights a potential generational and emotional gap in the perception of what defines home. This can be understood through Kimberlé Crenshaw's theoretical framework of intersectionality which states that individuals concurrently identify themselves with multiple social categories (including race, gender, caste, class, etcetera) and it is their experiences that shape the final impression of their identity.

After traveling thousands of miles and witnessing countless atrocities, Meher's contemplation of whether any city, country, or the world can be the "home" implies that "home," like identity, is not confined to the place of origin or immediate surroundings. She perceives her identity as the sum of her experiences and her home is a space where there is solidarity, a nurturing environment, and no fear:

I've been trying to understand the idea of home, what it means to me, and why humans are willing to lose all for a few walls. I peeked inside me for answers, but I found them in those around me, in their resolutions, and in their defeats. Home is where fear dies, ma'am, where solidarity dwells, and where love begets love. It's where your smiles remain honest, where you're mothered and you're nurtured, and where you cannot bear to see the ache of others. It's where the feelings of the mind are not blunted, and where interest does not draw a film across the eyes. It's where mercy does not veil her face, and no heart is dead to warmth.

It's where all journeys begin and end, where we all belong, where we can leave and know that we shall still belong. It gives you wings to fly, the home, and room to fall flat. It's a winter hearth, the home, a summer stream. And if that is what home means, ma'am, I wonder if this country, this world, is my home. They could not be. (Changoiwala 224)

For the reverse migrants, the idea of home became a defining factor of their identities. The idea of home was substantially redefined. It turned out to be not the physical location they expected, but rather an emotional anchor.

Conclusion

A significant shift is needed in migration studies from economic, social, and political theories toward psychoanalysis of migrants and hosts, to ensure the creation of a safe haven for migrants, especially return migrants. Diaspora theorists have described home as “a mythic place of desire in their minds” and a “place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin” (Brah 188). This narrative of not belonging anywhere needs to be changed and this paper attempts to revisit the struggles of return migrants, whose journey towards ‘home’ is at an epistemological impasse. An attempt is made to explore the migrants' ability to negotiate an identity where a sense of ease and 'home' is possible. To comprehend the reverse migration, we must transcend traditional frameworks to reconceptualise identity and belonging. Such an approach will bring forth the complex interplay between the quest for 'home' and their existential narratives.

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Interpolation of Patriarchy: A Study of *Devadasi* through Select Literary Representations

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Abstract

Devadasi an old Indian temple/religious tradition enjoyed unquestioning reverence from the commoners. Its popularity and mass acceptance gave birth to various region/ culture/ community specific forms/ names such as *Jogini*, *Mahari*. *Devadasi* tradition and its deterioration and decline as a practice can be better understood if not seen just as gender exploitation is seen but as a gender question at the intersection of caste, class and sexuality. The paper is an attempt to understand *Devadasi* tradition and problematise the treatment of devadasis across time and generations through a critical reading of Vaasanthi's "The Symbol" and Rishi Reddi's "Devadasi."

Keywords: *Devadasi*, Exploitation, Jogini, Mahari, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Devadasi,ⁱ a much cherished and revered religious tradition in southern and eastern parts of India, seems to be a mythical history now. This cultural-religio traditional practice meant dedicating young girls to the Hindu temples either as a *dasi* (servant) or a bride in the *seva* (service) of God from the beginning of this tradition. Once committed to a temple, they remained in the service of God and his servants (demi-gods) on earth till death. They were highly respected in society as they were transformed from ordinary women to

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nityasumangali or *maha-nari* after dedication (Jain 132). On festive occasions, their presence was highly awaited and considered auspicious, and their position as a deity's *dasi* granted them a quasi-royal status in society. Aleena Anabelly A defines devadasis as, "skilled dancers or ritualists who earned great respect and appreciation from their audience . . . women with inordinate social visibility, enjoying exclusive privileges and benefits" (55). As the time changed, *Devadasi* system was infiltrated with moral corruption and soon the system became synonymous with prostitution and 'devadasi' became the symbol of sexual exploitation of women by temple authorities and wealthy patrons. Men, both outsiders and insiders within the *Devadasi* community, played a significant role in making decisions regarding the lives of the devadasis. The king was considered to be the deity's living embodiment (*chalanti pratima*ⁱⁱ), and the temple priest was regarded as a mediator between the devadasi and the deity itself. Religion sanctioned both the king and priest with an authority to dictate the socio-cultural-religio rules and norms for devadasis to follow. The gurus (*nattuvanars*) were endowed with power and control over devadasis through their "expertise" (Vishwanathan 69).

The premise on which *Devadasi* flourished, aligns with Sylvia Walby's definition of patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Bhasin 5). Originally, socio-religious institution like temple played a central role in the life of a devadasi. It provided not only the physical space for her performances but also the religious and cultural framework that shaped her identity. The rules governing the whole *Devadasi* setup, were crafted and enforced by male elites/policy makers like the temple priests, the patrons and the landlords. The male authority frequently dictated the function of the devadasis within the temple, delineated the rites they would execute and established the parameters of their interaction with the outside world.

Objective

Devadasi is often portrayed as a tradition associated with religious, spiritual service and cultural preservation but in reality, it is deeply rooted in a patriarchal system that allows men – priests, patrons, or

landlords – to exercise control over the women who participated in it. The objective of the present paper is to lay bare the hetero-patriarchal power at work in the dominance and oppression of devadasis and the demise of *Devadasi* through a critical analysis of Vaasanthi's "The Symbol" and Rishi Reddi's "Devadasi." The study also examines the intersections of gender, caste, class, and sexuality to problematise how these factors shape the lives of devadasis across different contexts.

Discussion

The concept of *Devadasi* in this paper is viewed as a literary "heteroglot"ⁱⁱⁱ that encompasses the portrayal of regional variations of the system, such as *Jogini*, *Mahari*, *Matangi*, *Basavi*, *Jogati*, *Murali*, etc., in various literary works. Thus, *Devadasi* is used as an umbrella term to represent these related systems of oppression grounded in women's marginalisation since ages.

Men often held the power to initiate or terminate a devadasi's involvement in religious practices and her engagement in the royal services. The temple priests wielded significant authority over the devadasis by exerting control not only over their participation in religious rites but also dictated their personal and social behaviours. Frederique Apffel Marglin in her encounters with the *Devadasi* community in Puri points out the existence of a parallel culture where women were subjected to male dominance and control, just like devadasis: "[A] group of women attached to the palace, the palace equivalent of the devadasis who are affiliated to the temple . . . are known as *deis*. The devadasis have ritual duties both in the temple and in the palace whereas the *deis* have ritual duties only in the palace" (Marglin 26). Both devadasis and *deis* were given basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter by the temple and the king. They were also provided with the opportunity to strengthen their artistic skills so that they could elevate their status and worth as performers. Thus, the devadasis, the temple, and the king had a mutually beneficial relationship with each side contributing to the well-being of the other. But the seamy side of this picture cannot be ignored that in the garb of the *Devadasi* tradition, women were forced to engage in sexual relations and abstain from mortal marriages. This amounts to a lifelong punishment of extreme social depravity in

terms of normal marital status, motherhood and general relational dynamics.

Devadasis were significant financial stakeholders in addition to being skilled artists in the temple culture. They were in charge of conducting religious rituals and upholding the cultural traditions of the temple. This enhanced the temple's general reputation and financial prosperity. In return, devadasis were well taken care of by the temple/king. Kings functioned as their patrons giving them the chance to perform at their palaces. Along with this under the patronage of the king, the local landowners and other powerful people indulged their sexual fantasies with devadasis who were attached to the temple. With the entry of this socio-moral corruption into *Devadasi*, devadasis' social standing declined significantly over the years, eventually degrading the highly honoured and royal dancers with outstanding talent to the level of sex workers. A devadasi was not an immoral or unusual being but rather a social and cultural construct of patriarchy – a construct of religious, gender, caste and class politics. Couched under the guise of patronage and protection, the relationships between patrons and devadasis often entailed implicit or explicit expectations of sexual favours that fudged the line between beneficence and exploitation.

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner points out, “Men punish, by ridicule, exclusion, or ostracism, any woman who assumes the right to interpret her own role or – worst of all sins – the right to rewrite the script” (13). When compared to other women in terms of wealth and social status, devadasis may have held a relatively elevated position in the social hierarchy. They possessed a high level of education which was denied to women in general. They were socially extrovert, financially self-sufficient, and openly expressed their sexuality and disclosed their relationships with men. These signs of personal agency must have posed a possible threat to the patriarchal authority and the status quo, leading to a decline in their position. Voices against them started in 1883 in the form of Anti-Nautch campaigns across the nation and finally culminated as ‘Madras Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act, 1947’ after voices of social reform joined forces to abolish *Devadasi*. This was framed as a moral effort to “rescue” *Devadasi* women but was largely rooted in patriarchal setup and went negatively against these women. By

outlawing *Devadasi*, the state effectively removed their religious and cultural roles thus leaving them with little social security or alternative livelihoods.

With their performances being banned under the pretext of upholding the ideals of female morality, they were denied their means of livelihood. The impact of Western influence on modern Indian society has led to the stigmatisation of devadasis as nothing more than prostitutes, and the devaluation of the art of dance as a mere expression of sexuality. *Devadasi* which was once a celebrated cultural tradition, under the modern/western gaze came on the verge of dying. Lakshmi Vishwanathan a celebrated exponent of *Bharatnatyam* in *Women of Pride: The Devadasi Heritage* recalls, “it seems ironic that Hindu society, which had encouraged and accepted the devadasi from time immemorial was now all of a sudden outraged at the so-called vulgarity of her dance” (185). The needs of the devadasis were not addressed even in the Nehruvian socialist/reformist agenda, leaving them without any assistance or acknowledgment. This led to the rapid deterioration of *Devadasi* in the post-independence era, forcing women from *Devadasi*, *Jogini*, *Mahari*, *Matangi*, *Basavi*, *Jogati*, *Murali* communities towards prostitution. A survey conducted in 2016 by the Joint Women’s Programme for NCW among 375 devadasis in Bangalore reports, “63.6 percent of young girls were compelled to become devadasis owing to tradition, and 38 percent claimed that their family had a history of devadasis. 40% of the devadasis worked in the commercial sex sector, while the rest worked in the communities” (Harishankar 20). The oppression and exploitation faced by the devadasis is rooted not only in religion but it also stems from systematic gender, caste, and class discrimination sustained by patriarchal structures. The social reform initiatives albeit well-intentioned further marginalised devadasis by stripping them of their economic independence and religious significance. While the efforts aimed at protecting women from exploitation but in reality, they resulted in unintended consequences including economic destitution and forced migration into sex work for many devadasis and severing their ties to temple-based support systems.

Literature provides a space for addressing and examining issues that history has shied away from or failed to mention. *Devadasi* has

been a subject of debate for many writers who seek to explore the complex issues of caste, class, gender, and sexuality associated with it. Like any socio- cultural tradition, *Devadasi* too underwent significant transformations. With two-three generations away from the times when *Devadasi* was a living tradition, it becomes impossible for the young generation to understand the tradition's true religious or cultural significance without any prejudice. As a result, contemporary devadasis are no longer at odds with outside of their community and country; rather, they seek approval from within their community and country.

Rishi Reddi is an India-born-US-based writer. Her story collection *Karma and Other Stories* published in 2007 highlights the cultural differences between India and America seen from the perspectives of “interconnected multigenerational” characters who are on a journey to find a balance between their Western and South-Eastern identity. Vaasanthi on the other hand is a Tamil writer and journalist from India. Her *Ganga's Choice and Other Stories* focuses on the representation of women from different cultural backgrounds as they battle repressive social conventions and gender stereotypes. Vaasanthi emphasises the boldness, tenacity, and bravery displayed by common people in the face of hardship via her stories. Both Reddi and Vaasanthi, in one way or the other, reflect upon the complex interactions between gender dynamics and societal injustice. Rishi Reddi's “Devadasi” and Vaasanthi's “The Symbol” provides an intricate examination of the patriarchal politics inherent in the *Devadasi* system. The stories depict the difficulties, victories, and personal development of characters like Uma Reddy, Guru-Ji, Soundari Ammal, Mallika, Karpagam and Senthil, who directly or indirectly are entangled in the web of power relations and gender stereotypes.

Rishi Reddi's story “Devadasi” captures the ethos of the *Devadasi* tradition from a multigenerational perspective. Uma Reddy, a young woman of third-generation Indian heritage, comes to India with her parents from America to attend a wedding in Hyderabad. Due to her upbringing in a foreign land and culture, Uma is unaware of Indian cultural traditions and fails to recognise their inherent value. Uma, a learner of *Bharatanatyam*,^{iv} is ignorant of the current plight of the devadasis in India. She identifies herself as an

American uprooted from the tradition and culture of her family. When she visits Guru-Ji's residence for her dance lessons, she is clueless why Guru-Ji resides on the outskirts of the city and questions Hafeez, her driver, "why did an accomplished Bharatanatyam dance instructor live far from the affluent Hindus beyond the Muslim section of the town?" (Reddi 169) Uma's failure to understand the situation depicts the ostracisation of dancers like Guru-Ji following the colonial legacy that later transformed into nationalist policy. The segregation of Guru-Ji from mainstream society is both literal (living on the outskirts of the city, in Muslim-majority or lower-caste areas) and symbolic and represents the patriarchal desire to keep certain women, particularly those associated with profanity outside the bounds of "respectable" society.

Urmimala Sarkar Munsri further explains how devadasis like Guru-Ji were forced to live on the fringes: "[F]rom the colonial to the nationalist discourse the transfer of power and responsibility for policy-making did not mean anything different for the Devadasis, as in both the discourses she remained the 'polluted one'" (Munsri 299). So in order to keep the city pollution free, women like Guru-Ji were restricted to the geographical, social and historical margins of the society. In the colonial period, the British moral discourse labelled devadasis as "polluted" due to their association with misuse of their sex in the name of religion and public performance which did not conform to the Victorian ideals of feminine purity. This moral judgment was also adopted and reinforced by Indian patriarchal system during the nationalist reforms that actively worked to stigmatise and suppress *Devadasi* legacy in an attempt to construct a sanitised version of Indian culture that conforms to societal ideals of morality and purity. The tradition was thus rendered invisible particularly to the emerging middle class and diaspora, who, like Uma, became disconnected from its historical and cultural importance. Hence, Uma's oblivious behaviour stems from the patriarchal attempt to shun devadasis and their history from the social discourse.

Uma represents the typical modern lens to view and understand Indian culture for it to be accepted as modern and civilised culture. However, this modification fails to recognise the legacy and contribution of the artists in the development of their dance form. The

west's perception of devadasis has brainwashed not only Uma but also the average common people of India. Guru-ji breaks her western lens and introduces her to the 'original' Indian culture. The story highlights how *Devadasi* legacy is fading away in contemporary times and the younger generations seem to lack the intent and effort to preserve their cultural heritage. By erasing the role of devadasis from the social discourse, patriarchy creates gaps in cultural memory leading to a disconnection between generations that prevents young women like Uma from understanding the full scope of their heritage.

Uma is westernised as a result of living in America since her childhood. However, her parents, the first-generation immigrants to America did not introduce their children to their Indian history, culture and tradition. Such western exposed generation is accountable for the loss of the devadasis' traditional heritage since they pushed rich cultural traditions like *Devadasi* to the margins of society. Uma's parents exhibit patriarchal control when as stereotypical conventional parents, they see that she is becoming overly friendly with Hafeez and are reluctant to let her travel to Guru-ji's house alone with him. Uma's parents aptly exemplify western educated Indians who can easily swap their allegiance between tradition and modernity depending on their needs and situations. Their actions mirror the patriarchal double standard as they embrace modernity when it suits them but revert to traditional gender norms when it comes to controlling their daughter's behaviour. Despite the fact that the devadasis and their dwellings are far removed from the mainstream society, Uma's parents permit her to learn *Bharatanatyam* from Guru-ji. Her parents' willingness to send Uma to Guruji without any resistance demonstrates their tolerance for the *Devadasi* community when it benefits them. This flexibility in swapping between tradition and modernity based on convenience reflects their cultural ambivalence where they hold onto patriarchal values in the private sphere while adopting modernity in public settings.

Vaasanthi's "The Symbol" attempts to capture the ethos of artists like Soundari Ammal, a Carnatic singer from the *Devadasi* community, whose life got disrupted due to the Reform movements of the early 20th century that forced artists to stop practising their art and retreat into domesticity. These movements aimed to liberate women, including devadasis, from the oppressive

clutches of the patriarchy. But these reformist systems hit many artist women including devadasis hard by disembodiment of their identity and their means of livelihood, that is, their art form. "The Symbol" shows how disrespectfully great artists and cultural ambassadors are treated in post-independent India. Mandakini, a journalist and the granddaughter of Soundari Ammal's friend, comes to interview Soundari about her past. The family of Soundari Ammal is reluctant to reveal her past as a devadasi. Senthil, Soundari Ammal's son-in-law, feels that disclosing her identity in public would bring dishonour to the family and make it impossible for anybody to want to marry his daughter Mallika, who is Soundari Ammal's granddaughter. Everyone including Mallika has been kept in the dark about Soundari Ammal's past and Mallika is inquisitive to learn more about her grandmother when Mandakini visits them to interview Soundari Ammal. Patriarchs like Senthil seek to control women's narratives and prioritise societal respectability over the recognition of women's artistic and cultural contributions. By hiding Soundari Ammal's past, Senthil and the family conform to the patriarchal mindset that devadasis should be seen as victims of an immoral system rather than as artists who contributed immensely to Indian culture.

The treatment that Soundari Ammal gets from Karpagam and Senthil illustrates the viewpoint of the second generation. Despite societal changes, Soundari Ammal remains devoted to her art because singing is her love and passion. Rathnam's efforts to get Soundari Ammal to join the Reform movement against the oppression of the devadasis by giving up her singing do not deter Soundari from her art. To the reformists, devadasis' art stands for their oppression within the tradition and to Soundari it is everything in her life. Soundari Ammal could not think of her life without singing because singing is what she is, her identity. The cultural capital that earlier came from performance, was replaced by a social shame that reformists associated with her former life as a devadasi. She is made to quit her profession and confine to the four walls with no agency: "It seemed to Mallika that aunt was the queen of some kingdom, although she had never left the house for two decades and remained seated in her reclining chair" (Vaasanthi 38). Soundari Ammal is left with no purpose to leave the house, a metaphoric prison

where her passion and art remains chained in 'free' India. Patriarchy manifests itself through the silencing of Soundari Ammal's past where her artistic accomplishments are overshadowed by the shame of her *Devadasi* identity.

Reflecting on the position of women like Soundari Ammal, the historian Daves Soneji writes, "Twentieth-century reform movements promised to grant Devadasis full participation as citizens in the emergent nation-state only if they were able to 'reform' themselves through marriage" (Soneji 113). This abrupt declaration of reform through marriage is amorphous and ambiguous in the context of devadasis. The emphasis on marriage as a tool of reform is emblematic of the patriarchal agenda that shaped the reform and sought to mould devadasi into a new version of womanhood that aligns with bourgeois, domestic ideals of the emerging nation-state. Soundari Ammal's decision to stay with her brother's life with an intent to fit into this new social order, does not give her an independent life of usual domesticity but rather leads her to a life where she is tamed to contain her voice, desire and freedom. The reform did not free her but rather silenced her and stripped her of the voice, freedom, and desire that were central to her identity as an artist.

The reformist push towards marriage was not a path to liberation or empowerment but rather a form of containment that served as a tool for patriarchy to coerce devadasis into a life of invisibility. But, Guru-ji who had married Ustad Mohammed Ali Khan too does not get a space in "reformed" society. Marriage, proposed as a tool of reform, could not bring changes in devadasis as a collective; it might have changed life for few individuals. However, the deep-seated tradition of *Devadasi* as well as devadasis as a community remains unaddressed and hence unreformed. Devadasis like Guru-Ji and Soundari Ammal become victims at the hands of this new social order in the name of civilisation, which takes away their individual identities. The narratives understudy also expose the society's hypocrisy and fake moral structure in the present times when on one hand, women from Devadasi community are forbidden from dancing and singing considering these arts as sexually explicit and filthy. On the other hand, the same society accepts and continues to popularise cheapness, obscenity presented through item numbers and dances in in the popular cinema. The double standards of a society that

continued to police female sexuality while celebrating or profiting from their sexualised performances highlights the continued existence in controlling of women's bodies and identities under patriarchy.

“Devadasi” by Rishi Reddi and “The Symbol” by Vaasanthi portray the characters belonging to three different generations and the conflicts arising from their association with the *Devadasi* community. Rishi Reddi's “Devadasi” highlights the predicament of Uma, who experiences inner turmoil regarding her identity and sense of belongingness upon her arrival in India. Despite learning *Bharatanatyam*, she fails to appreciate Indian culture and its aesthetics. Guru-ji, a revered figure in the past, now lives on the fringes of society. Through her dance, she attempts to relive her past and keep the legacy of the devadasis alive. She shares anecdotes with the younger generation, including Uma, in an attempt to celebrate and preserve the *Devadasi* culture and tradition. In “The Symbol,” the publication of Soundari's interview in a magazine prompts three distinct reactions from three different generations. As Soundari Ammal reflects on her glorified past, when her singing was praised and admired, the interview looks like an artefact/channel to preserve her legacy and share her love and passion with the world. On the other hand, Senthil comes home enraged and frustrated, unable to understand Ammal's emotions and takes it as a blot on the family's name. Mallika, who had earlier wanted to learn how to sing, changes her mind after learning about the challenges experienced by artists via the fate of her grandmother. The way art and women artists are treated in a male dominated world is quite enough to dissuade her. Mallika's decision signifies the disempowering effect of patriarchal control that discourages younger women from embracing their artistic heritage due to the social and familial constraints imposed on them.

Both the narratives demonstrate how the patriarchal system in *Devadasi* tradition has resulted in the discrimination and marginalisation of women. They also show how these patriarchal ideals affect women's autonomy, artistic expression, and sense of self. Soundari Ammal and Guru-Ji both have strong attachments to their past. They find it difficult to overcome the trauma and memories of being barred from performing. They lament how the patriarchal

regulations in the name of reforms have taken away their freedom of choice and their ability to express themselves creatively. Despite the fact that the family is financially dependent on Soundari Ammal's pension, her family has no respect for her because they are ashamed of the public image associated with devadasi status. Soundari Ammal's past continues to haunt her family, she herself point out that, "[e]very word that comes out of my mouth appears to them frightening as a spirit. But for my pension, this Karpagam would have driven me out on the streets" (Vaasanthi 23). Regardless of her position as an elder, Soundari Ammal's voice is stifled and her participation in family matters is restricted. She is valued by her family primarily for the financial support she provides through her pension. Women like Soundari Ammal are valued not for their wisdom or experience but only for the material benefit they bring to the household. Soundari Ammal is tolerated by her family because of her pension but her opinions, voice, and experiences are systematically suppressed. Her autonomy as an elder in the family is undermined and she is seen as a burden; a living reminder of a past that her family wishes to erase.

The publishing of her interview reveals the truth about her family, which puts up a facade of love and respect but the truth is that it is only to gain financially from her economic status but are ashamed of her identity as devadasi. Similarly, when it comes to sending girls like Uma to Guru-Ji for dance training, families have no qualms about doing so, but they shun devadasis from their temples and the city and characterise their dance as vulgar and immoral. The same family then requests Guru-Ji to teach its daughter the dance which had been denounced and shunned long back. Both the narratives expose the patriarchy's hypocrisy and double standards in its treatment of women. The regulatory frameworks, ritualistic practices and economic structures that govern the lives of devadasis are deliberately constructed and maintained by hegemonic power structures to ensure that devadasis remain subjugated and marginalised within the existing patriarchal order.

Devadasi or *Mahari* system, from the very start, had been exclusively women oriented and women of high-caste Brahmin households were committed as devadasi to serve in the temples. Contrary to this, Dalit women or women from lower castes were

generally chosen for dedication in its other manifestations such as that of *Jogini* or *Basavi*. With the changed social scenario around *Devadasi*, devadasis from the upper classes often fared better since they had access to resources and social and financial support and assistance from their family and relatives. Some of them could change careers and find alternative sources of income. However, devadasis from the lower class/caste background experienced more difficulties because they had either none or fewer income generating options. Many of them were compelled to work in professions exploitative in nature including prostitution. Reddi's Guru-Ji and Vaasanthi's Soundari Ammal belong to the former category of devadasis. Coming from privileged class they both are able to reposition themselves in lives away from prostitution but still could not enjoy social tolerance and acceptance just because of their past association with *Devadasi*. It is the patriarchal reforms that denied these women their most significant avenue for self-expression and public recognition by taking away their means of livelihood and their artistic platforms.

Conclusion

The contribution of *Devadasi* women in the history of social, political and cultural progress and growth of the society has been silenced. It was not religion but the nationalist agenda that prohibited any freedom to devadasis and stripped them of their identity as well as their legacy. The gendered labour of devadasis (as performers, religious intermediaries, and custodians of temple arts) was legitimised within a patriarchal context where men held institutional power (priests, patrons, kings). Gerda Lerner's words emphasises the paradox of devadasis' crucial involvement in shaping society and how they were marginalised in defining, understanding and making of new societal norms and practises: "the contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their condition" (Lerner 5). Modern dance styles that descended from the ancient devadasi's dance styles, such as *Odissi* and *Bharatnatyam*, after a modern process of sanitisation are now celebrated and appreciated worldwide with no credit to their account.

Devadasis, nevertheless, continue to battle for the acceptance and respect that the society owes them.

To conclude, it is evident that devadasis have faced difficulties at many fronts with the sudden change in the social attitude of people, institutions and the state. *Devadasi* based traditional ideas of caste, class, and gender promotes patriarchal beliefs and maintains control over women's lives and bodies. Guru-Ji, Soundari Ammal, Mallika and Uma have to surrender their identity to fit into the changed modern context/situation. Devadasis like Guru-Ji and Soundari Ammal accept their changed situation clinging to the memory of their glorious past but Uma and Mallika, the younger generation women try to subvert the repressive societal conventions and gender roles that limit their space and distort their agency to uphold the male dominance but in vain. Reddi's "Devadasi" and Vaasanthi's "The Symbol" reveal the devastating effects of patriarchal control on *Devadasi* women. The patriarchal system, through reforms, economic dependency, and cultural stigma, has stripped devadasis of their autonomy, artistic expression, and sense of self.

Endnotes

- i. Italicised *Devadasi* denotes the institution, practice, culture, tradition, community etc., and Devadasi refers to an individual/being. The tradition was prevalent in ancient and medieval India as a sacred institution where girls were dedicated to temples through ritual marriage to the divine. As sacred servants, the devadasis performed dance and music as spiritual offerings to the deity and also participated in ritual ceremonies, sang hymns, and assisted priests in temple rites. Their artistic expressions were grounded in ancient treatises like *Nāṭya Śāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* which governed their stylised dance and classical music training.
- ii. In Orissa, the Gajapati/ King is seen as the living representative of Lord Jagannatha, so the king is known as the '*chalanti pratima*' which is translated as 'proxy-idol.' For details refer to Pattanaik, Devdutt. "Gazing at a Dying God." *Soulveda*, 9 Nov. 2021, <https://www.soulveda.com/guest-contributors/gazing-at-a-dying-god/>.
- iii. The term 'heteroglossia' is based on Bakhtin's idea of 'heteroglossia' that identifies a symbiotic relationship among

different languages and identities in certain social and cultural setting. The term ‘heteroglot’ describes the distinctive linguistic form and style that results from heteroglossia. For details refer to Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Discourse in the Novel.” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, U of Texas P, 1981, pp. 259–422.

- iv. *Bharatanatyam* is a modern dance form developed on the repertoire of the *Devadasi* dance, i.e., *sadir kutcheri*. For details refer to Vishwanathan, Lakshmi. *Women of Pride: The Devadasi Heritage*. Roli Books, 2008.

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Reception and Conception of Bengali Muslim Literary Works in the Colonial Period: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Meg Brown (1994) taking the concept from Hans-Robert Jauss' (1982) 'Reception Theory of translation' emphasises "the role of reviews in informing the public about recently published books and preparing the readership for the work" (Munday 154). She borrows the phrase "horizon of expectation" which is employed by Jauss (ibid. 24) to describe readers' general expectations of the style, form and content of a translated text and how the cultural norms, assumptions and criteria shape readers' understanding and judgement of any literary work. This paper discusses and interrogates the Bengali Hindu public opinion as reflected through the Bengali press that will throw light on the different discourses in the Bangla language. This is brought out by analysing the book reviews in two well-known Bengali Hindu periodicals during the time period 1880-1939 A.D., namely *Bharati* and *Parichay*.

Keywords: Reception Theory, Book Reviews, Print, Public Sphere, Bengali Muslim, Bengali Journals

Introduction

Public debates and opinions on Bengali Muslim literary works and the language they used started to appear in print from the early 19th century onwards. The language, themes and subject matter of these works claimed to represent the Bengali Muslims. While the entry of print played a vital role in spreading awareness among the Bengali Muslims, the role of print becomes utmost important in creating

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multiple visions of a community leading to different views and opinions in the public sphere. The Bengali Muslim intelligentsia did not disown the Bangla language instead nurtured it. However, the Bangla that was emerging from the portals of the Fort William College in the early 19th century was highly Sankritised/ Hinduised, a result of the British language policy. The kind of Bangla that was fit for the Bengali Muslims, the kind of vocabulary needed, questions on literary form, genres and aesthetics as well as other related questions became a matter of intense debate in the journals and the presses. The Hindu Bengali journals and newspapers made use of “pure” Bengali that was a product of colonial modernity and characterised as modern, formalised vernacular fit for public discourse. Anything otherwise was considered in opposition to the Bengali identity and culture. The Bengali Muslim literary works involved concerns about the spoken language of the Bengali Muslims, their local customs and practices and their identity as Muslims.

The British colonisation brought about a wide spread transformation of the Indian society, from political to economic as well as social changes. “The colonial policy reproduced a highly stratified system of admission to social opportunities” (Naregal 182) and due to “the absence of the representative channels, this challenge needed to be symbolically staged through available public arenas like the press” (ibid. 218). Journals became not only a medium to develop relationship and to communicate information but also to convey opinions among each other. The elitism of the colonial intelligentsia combined with their excessive conservative biases of their discourse came to reinforce each other. They “sought to derive its effectiveness mostly from an aggressive posture that conveyed an impression of absolute intolerance towards any alternative or oppositional point of view within the public domain” (Naregal 263). Naregal brings out this peculiar nature of the Hindu upper-caste intelligentsia’s dominance over the public sphere by the 1880s in her work. As a result, the cultural and ideological divisions became apparent and the alternative trajectories became noticeable in the public sphere towards the end of the 19th century.

The Bengali Muslims in response to the narrow categorisation developed a new narrative of themselves in which their Muslim-ness became central to their identity. The Bengali Muslim literati started to defend their rootedness to Bengal and claimed the Bengali language and culture as part of their heritage. They felt the need to create a modern literature in equal footing with their Hindu counterparts. However, there was diversity in responses and opinions not only to the dominance of the colonial rule but also to the creation of a standardised cultural order that was hegemonic in nature. The book reviews and criticisms published in the journals and periodicals help to reveal not only the responses of the audiences and the public opinion to the discourses that was adopted by the Bengali Muslim literati to negotiate their Islamic identity with the Bengali language but also points to the hegemonic nature of the men in power.

This paper examines the book reviews in two well-known Bengali Hindu periodicals *Bharati* (*Bhāratī*) (Calcutta, 1877-1926 A.D.ⁱ) [1284-1333 B.S.ⁱⁱ] and *Parichay* (*Paricay*) (Calcutta, 1931-1943 A.D.) [1338-1350 B.S.]. The reason for selecting these two journals is that they were the most enduring Bengali journals of their time. *Bharati* and *Parichay* exhibit varied literary tastes and opinions of the writers, readers and the reviewers. The data was compiled from primary archival sources and then critically analysed. The reviews on works by Bengali Muslim writers reflect the reception of the works by the readers. In the beginning of the nineteenth century the works of the Bengali Muslim writers were encouraged and appreciated but by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century communal differences widened and that gets reflected through the book reviews in *Bharati* and *Parichay*. The book reviews inform about the variety of themes used, the language employed, the different genres used, the price of the books, the quality of paper used and the different publishing houses. The Bengali Muslim writers wrote not only on Islamic religious history and Islamic characters but also on broader themes on women's emancipation, women education, communal harmony, European history and many more.

***Bharati (Bhāratī)* (Calcutta, 1877-1926 A.D.) [1284-1333 B.S.]**

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Bangadarsan* (*Baṅgadarśan* ⁱⁱⁱ) (Calcutta, 1872-1874 A.D.) is one of the well-known literary magazines written in Bengali during that time. It had a great influence on the emergence of Bengali identity during the beginning of Bengal nationalism. Based on its objectives other highly valued journals originated like *Jnanankura* (*Jñānāṅkur*) (Rajshahi, 1872-1875 A.D.), *Aryadarsan* (*Āryadarśan*) (Bowbazar, 1874-1885 A.D.), *Bandhaba* (*Bāndhab*) (Dhaka, 1874-1906 A.D.), *Jnanankura and Pratibimba* (*Jñānāṅkur o Pratibimba*) (Calcutta, 1875-1876 A.D.), *Bhramara* (*Bhramar*) (Calcutta, 1874-1875 A.D.), *Bharati* (*Bhāratī*) etc. Towards the end of *Bangadarsan* with all its literary discussions one notices the presence of the powerful Hindu orthodoxy. There was a need to bring about a reform against such orthodoxy and introduce thinking that was progressive in nature. In the year 1874 A.D. *Bangadarsan* was closed down. This gap was filled by the birth of *Bharati*.

Bharati first started publishing on 29th July, 1877 A.D. It was a monthly journal. It was Dwijendranath Tagore who gave the name *Bharati*. In the Preface of the first publication of *Bharati* he explained the objectives and the reasons behind giving that name to the journal. *Bharati* means 'education' and so it acted as a mouthpiece to discuss the varied aspects of the Bangla language. The main objective of *Bharati* was spreading knowledge and educating its readers regarding the Bangla language. *Bharati* encouraged the development of all kinds of knowledge both native and foreign. The journal became a landmark because it helped in the growth of Bangla language and literature. It encouraged the contributions by prominent women writers and editors. The editor of *Bharati* was Sri Dwijendranath Tagore. The journal showed a tremendous growth and an active spirit of observation and enquiry. It gave importance to the development of the vernacular tongue. After Dwijendranath Tagore, Swarnakumari Debi took over the post of the editorship in 1884 A.D. She was followed by Hiranmayi Debi, Sarala Debi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay and Manilal Gangopadhyay. *Bharati* had turned into an important Bengali monthly journal that was widely circulated as well as quite acclaimed. In 1894 A.D. it

merged with another periodical *Balak* edited by Jnanadanandini Debi and was published as *Bharati o Balak*. It continued for six years as *Bharati o Balak (Bhāratī o Bālak)* but was again published as *Bharati*. It became the longest surviving and well acclaimed Bengali monthly journal till the year 1926 A.D.

Following are the book reviews (described as Samālocanā) of the literary works of the Bengali Muslim writers published in *Bharati*. The year of publication is important as that highlights the transformation and rigidity in attitude towards Bengali Muslim works especially on their use of Mussalmani Bangla.

R^{iv}-1. *Biṣād Sindhu, Maharam Parba* [Vol. 10, Phālgun, 1293 B.S.:688] (1886 A.D.)

The story is written by Mir Mosharraf Hossain. The reviewer comments that it is almost a thousand years now that the Muslims have settled and established themselves in Bengal but the sad part is that the Bengali Hindus know very little about the Islamic religious history. If the Muslims start writing about their history in pure Bangla, then not only the crisis can be overcome but also both the communities would develop a kind of friendliness among them. *Biṣād Sindhu* has been well received by the readers. It is based on the Muharram episode. The language is clear, the story well organised and the characters are well drawn. The reviewer remarks that he has not come across any Muslim writer earlier who has written so well in Bangla. He also informs the readers that the second part would be written soon and that the readers would wait for it eagerly. In this manner the writer will inform and make the readers aware of the Islamic religious history.

R-2. *Biṣād Sindhu, Uddhār Parba* [Vol. 12, Māgh, 1295 B.S.:596] (1888 A.D.)

The story is written by Mir Mosharraf Hossain. *Biṣād Sindhu, Uddhār Parba* describes the brutal killing of Hassan and Hussain by Yazid. The *Uddhār Parba* deals with the defeat of Yazid in the hands of the army of Hassan and Hussain and the safety of their successor Jainal. Like the first part, the second part is also written in the form

of a novel. The language of the first part is purer and clear than the second part. The readers are eagerly waiting for the release of the third part.

R-3. *Kārbālā* [Vol. 37, Śrābaṇ, 1320 B.S.:463] (1913 A.D.)

It is written and published by Sri Abdul Bari. It is printed at the Metcalf Press, Noakhali, Maijdi. The reviewer writes that it is a poem on the sad events of the Muharram episode. It is based on true historical facts for which the poem had to be limited within its boundary. The reviewer claims that the readers have felt satisfied reading the poem. The language used by the poet is good, serious and rhythmic. However, the use of Islamic cultural terms at places has hampered its poetic effect. According to the reviewer the use of Perso-Arabic terms like “lāyek” has spoiled the contents of the poem. The language should be as rich as the theme of the poem. The reviewer remarks that the correct use of vocabulary and a synthesis of thoughts should be made in order to make the poem a successful one. These factors should be kept in mind while writing the next volume so that he can overcome the shortcomings. If done so then only it can be hoped that a poem like *Kārbālā* will gain a high position in Bangla literature.

R-4. *Pradīp o Cerāg* [Vol. 41, Caitra, 1324 B.S.:1153] (1917 A.D.)

It is written by Mohammad Hedayetulla. It is published by R. Rahaman, The Mussalman Book Agency, Kolkata. It is printed at the New Age Press. This is a story book and it consists of three stories - *Pradīp o Cerāg*, *Masjid o Mandir* and *Dost o Duṣman*. The reviewer comments that all the three stories stress on Hindu-Muslim unity and amity as well as removing of the communal differences between them. The stories express communal harmony between the two communities. The work however lacks the art of storytelling yet it is a good read. The reviewer further discusses the plot of the three stories in brief. He remarks that the language used is good but the use of Mussalmani Bangla at places sounds quite odd. The writer is creative and needs to rectify the little errors present in the work. He hopes that this young Muslim writer will be successful in future.

Parichay (Paricay) (Calcutta, 1931-1943 A.D.) [1338-1350 B.S.]

Parichay is a Bengali quarterly magazine. The price of each volume is one rupee. Sudhindranath Dutta is its founder and the first editor as well. The two other later editors are Hirankumar Sanyal and Gopal Halder. The journal was published from Modern Art Press, Durga Pituri Lane, Calcutta. The main objective of the journal was to publish the earlier and modern writings in Bangla. The intention of the editor is to introduce the readers to the special gift given by writers of different languages in the past and in the present. The journal discusses literary works analysing them literally or linguistically. Book reviews and translations in Bangla are also present. *Parichay* helped in the promotion of the Bengali language. Different subjects like history, politics, economy, society and culture were dealt with so as to bring about advancement in the society. The most interesting part of the journal is its book reviews. The journal consisted of approximately 154 pages among which minimum 36 pages are devoted to book reviews approximately. Both native and foreign authors' works were reviewed by prominent people. It was a research-based discussion. The reviewers included Nirmalya Bagchi, Narayan Gangopadhyay, Narahari Kabiraj, Hirankumar Sanyal, Gopal Halder, Ashok Dasgupta, Radharam Mitra and Sunil Kumar Sen.

Parichay gained an important place in the world of journals during the colonial and post-colonial periods in Bengal. *Parichay's* aim was to introduce world literature to the people of Bengal and it has been successful throughout. As a progressive journal it has gained success and popularity. From 1342 B.S. onwards *Parichay* had become one of the longest surviving Bengali monthly journals. The following are the book reviews (titled as *Pustak Paricay*) from *Parichay*. The reviews in *Parichay* show a similar reaction as witnessed in *Bharati*.

R-5. *Śirṇī Darjīr Śāstar* [Vol. 3, Śrāban, 1340 B.S.:159-160] (1933 A.D.)

It is a collection of tales from the village of Pabna written by Professor Muhammad Mansuruddin, M.A. It is published by M.C.

Sarkar and Sons. Professor Muhammad Mansuruddin is a well-known name in Bangla literature. The readers are grateful to him for his earlier collection of Baul songs titled *Hārāmanī*. He has been attracted to the tales and poems of rural Bengal. This led him to bring out this collection with the blessings of Professor Muhammad Shahidullah and Abinandranath Tagore. The reviewer Sri Prabodchandra Bagchi considers this work to be of immense importance as it brings out the creativity and rich culture of the rural people of Bengal. He things this work important from the point of language study and anthropology because for a comparative study of the different dialects of Bengal it is required. He observes that Professor Mansuruddin is the first person to publish such a work. The reviewer comments on the language used. He says that if Mansuruddin has written the book in his own language then the usefulness lessens from the point of view of linguistics. The reviewer further remarks that Mansuruddin has written the book in Persian style that is writing from back to front. He thinks that the writer has unnecessarily used Arabic and Persian words like “duniyār tāmām” in his work. The reviewer questions would the use of such Perso-Arabic words enhance the beauty of Bangla. In India the Brahmi script is used, so is there any need to transgress it? In his earlier work *Hārāmanī* he did not deviate in this manner.

R-6. *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* [Vol. 4, Kārttik, 1341 B.S.:331-333] (1934 A.D.)

Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ is written by Jasimuddin. It is published by Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons. It is reviewed by Abdul Qader. The reviewer mentions that the earlier work of Jasimuddin which has been published is *Naksikāthār Māṭh*. Here the poet is very skilful. But in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* his skilfulness is not completely visible. In *Naksikāthār Māṭh* the plot and characterisation is incomparable whereas in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* the plot and characterisation are not well made. There are different minor characters and events that he has given which has made the plot disorganised. In *Naksikāthār Māṭh* Jasimuddin is seen as a story-teller at some places where as in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* he is found doing that often. In *Naksikāthār Māṭh* Jasimuddin’s love for humanity can be seen whereas in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* his socialist, feminist and humanist viewpoints gets

displayed. Through his modernism he has influenced the hearts of the readers. This he has done through the use of ornamental language.

The reviewer mentions that Jasimuddin's work upholds the beauty of rural Bengal. The picture he draws in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāt* of the prayer gathering "nāmājer mahfil" and other rural settings brings him close to the readers. His characters are life-like. But the reviewer remarks that the language used is not proper, yet the work is still worth mentioning. The hero and heroine named Sojan and Dulali's characters are well formed. Through their tragic tale of love, Jasimuddin brings out the happiness, pain and sufferings of the rural people. This part, the reviewer hopes will be liked by the Bengali readers.

Conclusion

Tracing the transmission and reception of literary texts written by Bengali Muslim writers from 1880-1939 A.D. leads to many broad observations. Firstly, there is a kind of "internal power play" that emerges through this discussion. The book reviews present and analysed in *Bharati* and *Parichay* reveal the critical attitudes and responses of the readers to the growing Bengali Muslim literary consciousness. These Bengali Hindu journals acted not just as a commentary on the literary works produced by the Bengali Muslim writers but were greatly influential in validating and encouraging new tastes and linguistic choices among the readers. Those literary works were considered legitimate that carried the stamp of official recognition and could be circulated among the public authoritatively. The standard norms were laid down by the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia that resulted in the construction and shaping of the Bengali literary and intellectual culture. They had the power in their hands to regulate production as well as the circulation of knowledge.

Secondly, major cultural shifts are noticed in the linguistic development after the coming of the British in India. The establishment of the British power in India did alter the notions of political space, subjectivities and collective identities particularly focusing on Bengal and South Asia in general. They displaced and appropriated the existing notions of authority, self-identity and

collective belongings. The colonial rulers played a crucial role as they occupied a representative position in the spread of modern discourses and the cultural norms that were laid down by them resulting in drawing of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The literary production and reception were both interlinked with the political practices of the British that is in the alteration of textual norms, the redistribution of the sites of textual production, its network of dissemination and how readers may evaluate and assess a literary work. Efforts were made towards standardisation of Bangla in order to rapidly transform indigenous textual traditions that were already present in Bangla.

Along with this is witnessed a kind of calculative part played by the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia in the establishment of a Bangla public sphere in Bengal where critical exchange was possible only through the vernacular. The entry of the British produced a class of English educated Bengali babus who occupied the forefront of the public sphere activities. These Bengali babus were bilingual viz. in English and Bangla. They nurtured and cultivated their mother tongue Bangla side by side to English. These privileged babus backed by the support of the English reshaped the native vernaculars. Definitive arenas were set that determined access and marginality by other subordinate groups.

Thirdly, the press and print played an essential role as a medium for social and cultural reform. Print became vital in the dissemination of new ideas among the common people as well as in making Bangla literature gain more readers. The press became a common site where these intellectual elites established a sphere of critical discussion. They became the spokespersons of a hegemonic discourse. The press turned into an arena of political contestation where the individual and group identities got reshaped.

Fourthly, the society became stratified and displaced based on language. There developed an altered communicative and cultural practice that led to crucial hierarchical ideological divisions based on language in Bengal. The fact that gets established is that there took place decisive shifts in the structure of cultural production as well as

in the norms for articulating the possibilities of contestation and containment.

As a result of Sanskritisation, both Persian and Arabic words that had entered the Bangla vocabulary due to the spread of Islam started to be considered artificial and foreign and were eventually dismissed by the 20th century. There took place a process of de-familiarisation and there was no development of alternative critical discourses. However, the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia created their own kind of Bangla literature making use of an alternative Islamised and spoken Musalmani Bangla as a reaction against the Sanskritised Bangla that was followed by the Bengali Hindus.

The Bengali Muslim writers/translators found themselves in a peculiar situation. They were excluded from the process of building and transmitting a literary tradition in Bangla. Yet the Bengali Muslim writers challenged this hierarchy and the process of exclusion by their use of greater lexical influences from Persian and Arabic in their literary works. The Bengali Muslim writers/translators became negotiators/mediators in the dissemination and representation of knowledge as well as in the preservation of native beliefs and practices of their community. They aimed for a wider readership through the newspapers and the press and spread modern rationalist discourses to enlighten the people of their own community. Their main aim was the development of a collective self-identity through a counter-discourse that would counter the hegemony and the discrimination that they faced. Thus, literary writing and translation was used strategically by them as a medium for remaking of the native linguistic forms. But unfortunately, polarisation of ideas took place between the two communities that affected the growth and development of the vernacular discourses also.

Therefore, what comes out is that there was a turn to orthodoxy and an increased reluctance towards egalitarianism. Sign of intolerance is brought out clearly in excluding the minority voices from the primary arenas of the Bangla public sphere. The literary works did no longer reflect heterogeneity rather exclusion and the way the politics of language worked during colonial period. The

literary criticisms point out how the Bangla language was shaped. The literary productions emphasised certain literary styles and tastes at the cost of others. The mixed diction present in the Bangla language was eclipsed by the Sanskritised Bangla which came to be accepted as the standardised one. The alternative mode of literary transmission was completely weakened. For a better understanding and a truer picture of the development of the Bangla language this needs to be taken into account.

Endnotes

- i. A.D. - Anno Domini
- ii. B.S. - Bengali Satabdi
- iii. Modified Roman symbols are used to transliterate the Bangla letters. Diacritics have been used for special characters.
- iv. R – Review. The book reviews have been literally translated into English by me.

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Rituals of the Eunuchs in Punjabi Fiction: A Critical Study

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Abstract

This article examines the ritualistic practices of Punjabi eunuchs—especially related to *nirvana*,ⁱ marriage, death, festivals, and so on—in the context of creating a sense of identity, cohesion and order. The embodiment of rituals and their characteristics—including formality, fixity, and repetition—constructs, upholds, enforces, and maintains the identity of eunuchs. Moreover, rituals serve various cultural functions, such as fostering belief, preserving religious vitality, promoting trade, fostering courage, bringing about healing, and altering individual consciousness.

Keywords: Ritual, Identity, Culture, Eunuchs, Consciousness.

Introduction

Barbara Boudewijnse observes that etymologically or historically, the word ‘ritual’ was first recorded in English in 1570, and initially it was used to define “the prescribed order of performing religious services” or particularly a book of these prescriptions (278). According to Victor Witter Turner “a ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” (1100). Ritual, as a meta category, includes both “religious and nonreligious rites, the human and nonhuman, the traditional and the contemporary, the prescribed and the improvised, and rubs up against a number of other cultural domains, such as play, games, performance, and theatre

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worlds” (Stephenson 3). Similarly, Clifford Geertz argues that rituals are places to invent new cultural forms or orders. He, further, states that the purpose of religious symbolic systems is to provide both a “model of” reality (by offering how to interpret the world) as well as a “model for” reality (clarifying its ideal state) (Geertz 126–27). His analysis of rituals structures them as language-like codes that can be interpreted independently similar to cultural systems.

Rituals in India

In the Indian context, rituals have a long history and a special importance in human lives in establishing an organized order of society. The religious as well as civil codes like *karma*ⁱⁱ (to do), *mangala*ⁱⁱⁱ (auspicious event), *samskara*^{iv} (well formed), *kalpa* (to bring something in perfect order), *puja* (worship/ honour), etc. are native Indian terms that not only cultivate the social structure but also inculcate rituals to regulate the whole livelihood. In Punjab, the central beliefs in the state largely pertain to Sikhism and Hinduism. Punjab, in the majority, follows Sikh *Rehat Marayada*^v – the manual that specifies the duties of the Sikhs, it is a kind of a code of conduct. Aligning the self with a particular religion demands the person to follow the patterned living style. As Peter Burke's *Identity Theory* (2009) argues “Simply identifying with the religious group is enough to activate similarity in perceptions and behaviour among group members” (118). From a meaning-making perspective, the construction of different rituals is similar to the establishment of a family culture where one develops a sense of identity through shared rituals.

Eunuchs and the Role of Rituals

Parallel to the mainstream culture of Punjab exists a culture of eunuchs or *khusras*,^{vi} a community whose members are defined as neither male nor female. In Punjab, eunuchs can be seen as a minority group that has a secretive society carrying their invented cult rituals and value system. But most of the rituals are appropriated from the mainstream culture.

According to Serena Nanda's ethnographic study, most of the eunuchs perform stereotypically feminine gender roles in the context of dressing, gendered behaviour, as well as patterns of speech. Just like mainstream social set up they also adopt patterns of behaviour or ritual to define their identity. Meanwhile, others prefer to behave 'as men' or carry masculine features but use cosmetics, and jewellery and keep their hair long by transgressing normative gender presentations. Kira Hall critically argues that "they do not occupy a position 'outside the male-female binary', but instead have created an existence within it, one that is constrained by rigidly entrenched cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity" (13).

Staying within the dichotomy of male and female, eunuchs have created an ambiguous identity through certain rituals like *nirvana*. Their festivals and the *guru-chela* kinship relationships also play a significant role in defining their collective identity. In this sense, the roles of rituals or the process of *ritualization* (Bell i) are associated with strategies for differentiating itself – to various degrees and in various ways – from other ways of acting within any particular culture of the same society. The ambiguity in identity is the primary reason that they are deprived of entering into the normative society. At one level, the entire *gharana* or *dera*^{vii} of the eunuchs follows the mainstream rituals but it transforms them according to its cultural needs. These rituals are related to marriage, death, and celebration on auspicious events. Other rituals like emasculation or *nirvana*, *dand* or *taka bharna* (paying money), are examples of rituals that they have tried to create.

Castration or the Nirvana Ritual

Taking into consideration their cultural practices, the first important ritual that plays a significant role is related to the castration ritual, called *nirvana*. Originating from the Sanskrit language the word *nirvana* is associated with extinction and disappearance of the individual into the universal which contains eternal peace and happiness. In Prakrit, the word *nirvana* connotes 'blown out' which represents the religious doctrine or the state of soteriological release. Collins argues that the *nirvana* is derived from the verbal root *vana* means 'blown' and its prefix *nir* means 'out' (Collins 1998). It is also

a stage of liberation from *samsara* (world) and *dukha* (pain). In *Introducing Philosophy of Religion* (2009), Chad Meister remarks that “Buddhism: the soteriological goal is nirvana, liberation from the wheel of *samsara* and extinction of all desires, cravings and suffering” (25).

Among eunuchs, this process is associated with entry into the community as well as identity formation and physical transformation which involves an excision of male genitalia where the *nirvana* enters into a new phase of life. In reference to eunuchs the idea of ‘sameness’ supports them to create a sense of belongingness or collective identity. Moreover, this process is also a prominent part of their devotion to the divinity, Bahuchara Mata, who blessed them with new lives. Nanda states that “The emasculation operation consists of surgical removal of the penis and testicles, but no construction of a vagina. This operation defines them as *hijras* – eunuchs – “neither men nor women” (ix).

According to A. M. Shah, the castration *hijra* rituals derive from a particular form of Mother-Goddess worship. The concept of identifying oneself with one’s deity or object of worship is prevalent across many Hindu sects. The phenomenon of the *hijras* represents an intense manifestation of this idea, particularly within the worship practices of the cult of *mata* (1326). Jessica Hinchy, illustrates this practice by taking examples from the Ramanandi monastic order that crosses gender boundaries. In their devotion toward Ram and his wife Sita, male Ramanandi “perform feminine behaviours, dress as women and even observe the taboos of the menstruation period” (278). Among the eunuchs, *nirvana* stands for transcending such boundaries of gender that ultimately distinguish them from mainstream society.

As a central practice *nirvana*^{viii} is also referred to as the stage of calmness or the transcendent state in which there is neither suffering nor the sense of self but the subject is released from the effects of *karma* and the cycle of death and rebirth. According to popular belief through the emasculation or nirvana, the former, impotent male person dies, and a new person, endowed with sacred power (*shakti*), is reborn (Nanda 26). The character of Simran in *Ki Jana Main Kaun*

is represented as a *khusra* who has gone through the process of castration: “At last, I attained Nirvana Although this journey was very painful, I was happy and made myself like a woman. I also adopted the attraction that a woman is proud of.” (Rana 144) In the process of identity formation emasculation is a major source of power or the source of their uniqueness and the most authentic way of identifying oneself as a eunuch and of being so identified by the larger society.

Ideally, the emasculation operation is usually performed by an experienced eunuch called the midwife or *dai ma*, who transforms them into a *hijra/khusra* and not a man to a woman. The operation takes place in the early morning (around 3:00 or 4:00), a usual time in India for auspicious ceremonies, such as marriages and worship. The treatment given to the nirvana during the recovery period is quite similar to the one which a woman experiences after childbirth. It is important to notice that during and after the surgery, the wound is left without stitches and when the cut is made, the blood gushes out, and nothing is done to stem the flow, as they believe the blood is considered the ‘male part’ that should be drained off. No stitches are made in the wound after the surgery, and the wound is healed through repeated applications of hot *gingili* (sesame seed) oil and heat to prevent infection. The hour just after the operation is considered to be the critical time during which the *nirvana*’s life or death is at stake or in the balance. This uncertainty is conceptualised by the *hijras* as a ‘tug of war’ between Bahuchara Mata, who gives life, and her elder sister, Chamundeswari, who takes life.

During the healing period, the nirvana is not permitted to leave the room, where the recuperation takes place, throughout the 40 days. She is not even to use the restroom all alone. Her needs are addressed by the elder *hijras*, who seriously take care of her. In addition to the restricted diet, nirvana is forbidden from having milk (black coffee or tea can be consumed), eating bananas, looking in a mirror, combing hair, and seeing men. She gets a bath on the third day following the operation. Saffron is applied to the nirvana’s face and her hair is cleansed at the end of the 12th day; this is done again on the 20th, 30th, and 40th days.

The restrictions or obligations of this ritual are also borrowed from mainstream society. For example, the postpartum ceremony or *sawa mahina* (40 to 45 days), a ritual of the mainstream society, where mother and baby do not go outside the room. Women (other than close family members) avoid frequent visits to the room to prevent any kind of infection. During this period, the mother undergoes a process of purification from the impurities associated with childbirth. The instructions followed after the nirvana symbolises the adaptation of rituals related to childbirth. The dietary pattern used during the *sawa mahina* also matches with eunuchs' food followed during the castration process. The absence of female genitalia in eunuchs attracts them to adopt feminine characteristics. During nirvana, they act as a pregnant woman who has given birth to a child. Moreover, this ritual is a celebration of their impotency.

Death and Its Significance among Eunuchs

In their everyday lifestyle eunuchs appropriate the ways of the heterosexual society. However, in the case of rituals related to death, the rituals are performed differently. The rituals and ceremonies associated with death in most of the cases depend on the philosophy of life and death in different communities/religions. Hindus believe that after death a person is reborn (in another human or animal form) but Muslims, Christians, and many other communities do not believe in the idea of rebirth. Death is considered a sad and fearful thing that everyone desires to avoid. Various mortuary rituals provide a gratifying platform in which the demise is mourned and social memories are created or (re)asserted in order to renew social bonds and individuals make claims for individual identities and group membership.

Different from every religious practice of the prevailing society, it is believed that the funeral of *khusras* takes place at midnight so that no one (especially from the normative society) can see it all. They are suspicious that if an outsider sees the one who dies then he/she would again be born as a eunuch in the next life. The deceased is not carried on the four shoulders but they make the body stand and then take it for the funeral. The last rites are performed in a simple manner. Following the mainstream rituals, the body is ceremonially

bathed and wrapped in clean, mostly white cloth. Jewellery and other items are removed before cremation. Sacred water, from either the *Ganga* (sacred river in India) or any other holy river, is poured into the mouth of the deceased. Before cremation, any strings that tie the body are removed, symbolizing the severance of all ties of the deceased with this world. The body is to be set alight by the male blood relative of the deceased (if present) or the senior member of the community. But most of the time, the dead body is buried instead of burning.

It is also believed that before the last rites are performed, the deceased person is abused and hit with slippers and shoes. This is done because they have a firm belief that if the eunuch had committed a crime, then he/she gets repented and in the next life should be born as a 'complete' human being (male or female). For a week after the death, the companions keep a fast for a week and pray for the deceased to be born like an ordinary person in the next life. Surprisingly, the eunuch community does not get sad about the death of their fellow *khusra*, but instead, they feel happy for liberation from such a negligible life.

“Noori,” a Punjabi story written by Aneman Singh vividly describes the last rituals on the death of a *khusra*. The story outlines the situation “The news of Bibi Pashi’s death disseminated far and wide throughout the community. As she was about to die, Chando, Kalo and Raji started beating the body lying on the bed” (Singh 177). These lines explain the normal activities that are done on the death of a *khusra*. Instead of mourning, they beat the body and curse the demised person: “Bibi Pashi was engulfed in flames as soon as everyone saw it. Everyone started playing *bhangra*. They started thrashing and talking loudly. God, don’t put in this life again (Singh 178). The lines are the reflection of collective trauma, pain, and discrimination that they face for being a *khusra*. Consuming alcohol and performing *bhangra* are two unconventional practices that are observed during the funeral.

The story focuses on the festival-like post-funeral performances of the community. This is an imitation of the mainstream ritual of *dastar bandi*. In this ritual when the head of the family (like the father

or the eldest son of the family) dies, the son or the brother becomes the new head of the family. The reference from the story conveys a similar sense as Noori acts as a new head of the family after the death of Mahant Pashi. Unlike mainstream society, they prefer to enjoy or to celebrate the death of a *khusra* because they associate this with *moksha* or liberation from worldly affairs.

The portrayal of *khusra* community in the novel *Aadam Grehan* discusses the death rituals in a brief manner and shows how the sudden demise of *Mahant* Bulbul is mourned by fellow eunuchs of the *dera*. Just like the Sikh funeral, the body of the deceased is washed and dressed in white-coloured clothes. The major difference in performance is played by Miran. She acts like a bride of the *mahant* and wears a white dress that is a mandatory dress code in Indian mainstream society for a wife to wear on the demise of her husband. The bond of a guru and *chela* or disciple (here in the case of Bulbul and Miran) is represented as a husband and wife. The practice of playing a band on death is quite unusual in the mainstream Punjabi culture. The band symbolises that the celebration of the death of the *mahant* and his liberation from the miseries of the human world.

Keeping in consideration the loss of a person, after death in a Punjabi family, the period of mourning continues for nine days among the Sikhs and for thirteen days among the Hindus. The relatives and neighbours visit the house to sympathise with the family. The funeral ceremonies can happen in a number of places including the family home, at the *gurudwara*, outside the house, or at the crematorium. Traditionally, a Sikh funeral will include a community prayer, called *ardas*, as well as two daily prayers, 'Japji Sahib' and 'Kirtan Sohila.' But the *khusras* perform this ritual in their own ways that are quite opposite to the mainstream culture. They call other eunuchs from different *gharanas* or from the states to join them in their hard times. The ritual starts with celebrating the death and ends in jubilation or delightful manners.

In the novel *Aadam Grehan*, the last rites of the *mahant* are performed according to the traditions of the community. Following the legacy "A total of one thousand letters were posted in Punjab and every state of India. The period of mourning was to last for a whole

month and a half” (Chahal 76). For the next month and a half period of time, the community performs different activities to complete the last rites. The surprising side is seen when “This environment of mourning ends with a ceremony of joy. A couple is prepared as a man and woman. . . . *Mehndi* is applied, heads are tied, *barat* is held and *doli* is also sent off.” (Chahal 76)

The rituals of the mainstream society are mimicked and subverted by eunuchs to create their own meanings. For instance, in Punjabi society, after the death of a Sikh, the family of the deceased may undertake a non-continuous reading of the entire Sri Guru Granth Sahib called *Sehaj Paath*. This reading or *path* is timed to conclude within nine days of the death of the person. The conclusion of this final ritual is called the *bhog* ceremony which marks the end of the mourning period. Considering the death rituals of *khusras*, they do not perform the practices prescribed in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. On the contrary, by reframing certain practices they end the death ritual not with a *bhog* but with a marriage. A couple, selected for the marriage, acts like a man and woman, which symbolises their desperation to be heterosexuals. The marriage rituals or ceremonies of *mehndi*, *barat*, and *doli* are performed at the occasion of death.

On the last day, the members of the *dera* and the invited guests gather to perform the final part of the ritual where the members from different *gharanas* collect money for the *dera* of the demised eunuch. As it is seen in the novel *Aadam Grehan*, “On the last day, according to the ritual, all the groups put money in the pot according to their financial conditions. It is thus a ritual which is performed to overcome the economic crisis” (Chahal 77). The ritual of collecting money, which is performed to overcome the economic crisis, is quite similar to ‘*neonda pauna rasam*’ that is observed in Punjabi marriages. In this ritual the relatives and the neighbours give money to the family so that they shall not face the economic crisis for a specific period of time. This is how eunuchs appropriate certain practices from others, and convert them to create their own.

Rituals Related to Marriage

The Punjabi eunuchs have their own marriage rituals. Dressed from head to toe in traditional bridal wear, with henna on their hands and dyed hair, they marry either in front of the idol of the Goddess Yelamma or with Aravan during the Kuvagam (Tamilnadu) festival. The famous Koothavandar Temple in Kuvagam or Koovagam is dedicated to an incarnation of Aravan. *Aravanis* (bridal eunuchs) visit the temple to replicate a one-day-long marriage ceremony. This is a festival that helps the eunuchs to forge a collective identity. For instance, the novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun* provides a reference to such a ritual when Dr. Ayyiyar explains the significance of the festival to Nasibo. He says “And they get married to the god Aravan. They definitely perform the wedding rituals. And on the second day of marriage, considering themselves as widows, they break the bangles. They wear white robes. They also erase the vermilion from the head” (Rana 57).

Similarly, the Punjabi short story “Chupp Mahabharata” portrays the ritual in a very brief manner. The story describes the ritual “The priest performed many other ceremonies and after the visits, everyone danced well, Aravan was their husband for a day and they all were his wives” (Singh 115). For many eunuchs, the festival is extremely significant because this is their only chance to get married. They might not be able to experience the event of marriage due to the social and cultural prejudices they encounter. This festival offers them the opportunity to fulfill their hidden desire.

On the wedding day of the festival, the priests of the temple adorn the *aravanis* with *thaalis* (*mangala sutra* or bridal necklaces) and conduct rituals to sanctify their marriage with the deity. “Now there will be a sacrificial ceremony, it is a tragic moment in our life, when we will be married and become widows in one fell swoop” (Singh 116). For their marriage to Aravan, everyone wears their finest bridal *saris*, gold jewellery, multi-coloured bangles, *gajras* (floral garlands), and bridal makeup. Just like marriage in mainstream society, they carry with them various *puja* (the act of worship) items, *kalasha* (pot), and so on. In the sanctum sanctorum, a group of priests, who act as representatives of Lord Aravan, officially complete the

marriage ceremony and each eunuch gets married to the deity individually. The priests tie the *thali* (sacred thread made with turmeric) around their necks and apply *sindoor* (vermillion) in the partition of their hair, both symbols of marriage for Hindu women. This day of joyous celebration is followed by the next day which commemorates the death of Aravan and all the bridal eunuchs become widows.^{ix} Then ‘widowed’ *aravanis* throw their *thaalis* and remove their ornaments and flowers as a part of the mourning the death of their husband.

The festival witnesses screams all around. “Chupp Mahabharta” captures the environment thus.

A complete man was sacrificed. The idol’s head was bowed down. As soon as the sacrificial ritual was completed, the shouting and screaming started. Lamentations in various languages echoed in the air. Niranjana and her companions broke the colourful bangles on their arms, broke the *gajras*, wiped the vermillion from the head, clean the dark make-up from their faces (Singh 116).

All the brides declare themselves as widows and perform certain rituals that a woman is supposed to do on the demise of her husband. In the end, they cry aloud, beat their chests, and lament their widowhood, before bathing and changing or wearing fresh white saris as Hindu widows commonly wear. Niranjana witnessed that “Gradually, all of them wore white clothes and assumed the form of widows” (Singh 117) in order to mourn the deity.

The collective lamentation on the death of Aravan (a husband for a day) can be seen as the community’s catharsis, re-enactment of trauma of repressed feelings and as their collective protest against the discrimination they face in heteronormative society. It is a further salient feature to notice that this festival is not just a culturally significant event but symbolically it is an opportunity for the collective expression of their identity. In this sense, Koovagam festival is a rare occasion where the eunuchs can openly flaunt their sexuality and gender identity in public without facing any kind of

censorship or mockery. K. Delliswararo and Hangsing in their essay “Socio-Cultural Exclusion and Inclusion of Transgenders in India” state that “Through this narration of myth story *Hijaras* may wish to define themselves who they are and how they want to see themselves as an individual who has existed throughout history but also as important individuals within the ancient text for their deeds” (10-11). In this case, the festival for eunuchs is a brief moment where life unshackles its official pain, sorrows, and the feeling of being displaced or isolated; ultimately it brings a sense of utopian freedom. The carnival offers a non-hierarchical, co-operative, combined, and it fosters a sense of equality among the members who participate.

Ceremonies Related to Guru-*Chela* Relationships

Another important ritual among eunuchs is related to adopting a *chela*.^x In the hierarchy of their community, a *chela* is the lowest member of the community. According to their civil codes, a eunuch who is willing to be a *chela* can make only one guru. Being the lowest member of the community, he/she is not in a position to leave the *dera* without the permission of the guru. In case anyone, intentionally or unintentionally, goes against this ritual can be excommunicated from the entire community and thereafter no one accepts him/her as a *chela*. The exchange of *chelas* (from one *dera* to another) is done under the ritual of ‘*taka bharna*,’ literally meaning ‘paying the money.’ The sending of eunuchs from one guru to another is realised only by taking money in instalments. In the novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun*, Bobby explains the ritual to Karanjit, “When we make someone our disciple, he is in a sense our property. A disciple of one guru cannot be adopted by another guru as his disciple. If someone wants to do this then he/she can make him/her the disciple only by paying a sum of money” (Rana 222). Through this exchange of *chela(s)*, the leader or mahant of the *dera* receives the demanded amount of money.

In the novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun*, the ritual of adopting a *chela* is portrayed in a different manner. The ritual takes place when Jugnu is adopted by Zarina Ahmed “ . . . *Aarti* was performed and Jugnu was placed on the carpet. With everyone's consent, Zarina Ahmed carried five suits, two boxes of jewellery, bangles, and a gift of eleven

thousand rupees to Jugnu's lap. Then a heavy embroidered *chunni*,^{xi} with a fringe of red and white pearls on the top and edges" (Rana 152). At the end of this ritual, Zarina Ahmed confesses in front of the present members that "I am making this my *chela*" (Rana 152). Because of their inability to continue their family line, the exchange of *chelas* becomes the only method for eunuchs to increase their population.

The power of approving the entry of a new member into the community through a *reet*, or a ritualistic ceremony, as well as the excommunication of the members also lies in the hands of a guru. In this traditional ceremony, a *chela* is adopted by the guru to the house or *gharana* to which the guru himself/herself belongs. A newly added member learns the ways of being a eunuch, for example, how to wear a dress and use makeup, singing traditional songs, and the steps of dance that accompany those songs. The newly added member is welcomed by the other eunuchs on the instructions of the guru. As the novel *Aadam Grehan* represents: "The drummer was about to go into the room rubbing his eyes, yawning, when the *mahant* called out and said, "Who will do the welcome ceremony? Noori picked up the *tabla* and started dancing. In the dead of the night, Noori, with *ghungru*^{xii} on her feet, started the tone with the beat on the *table*" (Chahal 34). Similar event is described in another novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun*. The lines reflect that if one of the members decide to become a *khusra*, there is a christening ceremony, known as a *reet*, which he/she must undergo.

This practice, called *reet*, can be seen as a replica of the *janeu practice*, the thread ceremony of the Brahmins or baptising particular religion. *Janeu* or *Upanayana* is a Brahmin educational sacrament, one of the traditional rites of passage that marked the acceptance of a student by a preceptor, such as a guru or *acharya* (Kanitkar and Cole 4). Among the eunuchs, the rite is performed by the guru and the disciple is instructed accordingly. The charter of rules and regulations is explained to the aspirant. These include things like how a *khusra* must walk, and how to serve water to a visitor. There are several others, including the following: while serving water, the glass must not be held at the top or the middle. Instead, the glass must be balanced on palms joined together. The *pallu* (in case of wearing sari)

or *dupatta* must not touch anyone while moving around. One should not lie with his feet facing the guru. The guru's clothes must not be worn by the *chela*, nor should the latter utter his guru's or *gharana*'s name. One should not speak or raise the voice back to his guru and so on. The naming ceremony is also done at this stage where a eunuch is officially assigned a name and loses the former one. The methods of the practice differ over cultures and religions. At the arrival into the community, most of the eunuchs drop their old names and surnames, in order to conceal their identity, religion and caste. This not only represents their casteless social structure but also protects them from identity-based discrimination. Therefore, at this stage it becomes necessary for all of them to go under the process of *naamkaran* or naming.

In *deras*, the hierarchical relationship between *guru-chela* does not allow anyone to sit next to the guru. In case the *chela*, consciously or unconsciously, breaks the rule, he/she faces the hardest punishment from the guru. For example, in the novel *Ki Jana Main Kaun*, Jugnu unknowingly disobey the rules of the *dera* when she clothed the guru with *dupatta*. The novel describes: "One hand was numb from kneading the flour, she picked up the guru's *dupatta* with the other and ran and placed the *dupatta* on guru's head and started walking. Oh you the fool, what a heinous crime is committed. You should be ruined. You clothed the guru with a *dupatta*. Jugnu had really made a big mistake. She could not escape the punishment anyway" (Rana 112). These lines represent how it is mandatory for eunuchs to obey the rituals in order to maintain the hierarchy as well as to avoid hard punishments.

The *dand* (literally means punishment) is another way to send away *khusras* from one *dera* to another otherwise there is no alternative to leave the guru or the *dera*. According to their civil codes no one willingly adopt the abandoned *chela(s)*. If someone goes against the laws then the individual in question is excommunicated. Rituals, in this sense, are one of the fundamental ways in which the social order of community is maintained by eunuchs through the regulation of internal councils, called the *panchayats* or *jamaats*. Expulsion of members from the communities through self-conceived regulatory bodies can be seen as an ordered

structure of the society. Terms like *huqqa-pani band* (literally meaning to cast-out or ostracise), and *dand* (punishment) are examples of their rituals that they borrowed from mainstream culture. During the expulsion, an outcast eunuch finds it difficult to re-initiate him/herself in the community in any city because once a member is excommunicated, financial security through certain idiosyncratic livelihood prerogatives for the outcast becomes limited until the council reconfigures an appeal for their re-admittance into the community. In *Aadam Grehan*, Noori delivers Manu to Miran by paying a certain amount of money. It notes: “The next day Mahant Lainchi, Rekha, and Noori were ready to go. Miran handed over a thousand rupees to Mahant Lainchi as Manu’s punishment. Manu immediately expressed his heartfelt desire to stay with Miran” (Chahal 117). These lines show how their society functions lawfully or ritualistically from generation to generation. The exchange of *chelas* is significant in order to continue their established culture.

Conclusion

The adaptation of a different set of rituals by eunuchs offers them to a sense of distinct community even if it is an ambiguous one. Their popular rituals are also associated with marriage, death and the practice of *nirvana*. But they use these rituals by subverting their forms and meanings either to fit into the mainstream society or to disassociate from it.

Endnotes

- i. The word *nirvana* is associated with a state of peace and happiness. In Buddhism, *nirvana* is the highest state that someone can attain, a state of enlightenment, meaning a person’s individual desires and suffering drift away.
- ii. The word *karma* originated from Sanskrit means an action, word or deed and its consequences.
- iii. The *mangala* means auspicious or successful event.
- iv. *Samskara* is a Sanskrit term, derived from the word *sam* meaning ‘well planned’ or ‘well thought out,’ and *kara* meaning ‘the action under-taken.’ It is believed that actions performed with full awareness have the greatest impact, leaving impressions that are more easily traced and repeated.

- v. Sikh *Rahit Maryada* is a code of conduct and a convention for Sikhism. The word *Rehit* is derived from the Punjabi language which means *rehna* or *rehan sehan*, whereas *Maryada* is a Sanskrit word (composed of *marya* + *adda*) that connotes limits and boundaries of rules and customs.
- vi. *Khusra* is used for the Punjabi community of eunuchs.
- vii. *Dera* is a Punjabi word of Persian origin meaning camp, abode, tent, house, temple, sacred shrine or habitation, camp or cantonment. In Punjab, the house of *khusra* community is called a *dera*.
- viii. It is not mandatory for every hijra to undergo nirvana, and is more of a personal choice.
- ix. It is also important to note that this widowhood, of eunuchs, is not permanent rather only symbolic and temporary. After the festival, the bridal eunuchs can return to their usual colourful garment after a short period of time. Moreover, they can return to the festival next year to repeat the same marriage ritual.
- x. The major principle of social organization among the eunuchs is the relation between gurus and their chelas (disciples).
- xi. Another term for *dupatta* or a long scarf that some women wear around their head and shoulders
- xii. *Ghungghru* is the small metallic bells strung together on the anklets worn by classical Indian dancers.

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The Saga of the Blind
Translation of Surawa Naatak

Ravindra Pratap Singh

Surawa Naatak, translated into English as *The Saga of the Blind*, is a powerful cultural text centering the character of a woman addressed as Surawa's wife. Her name does not appear in the text of the play, nor is any paratextual clue given throughout. Having a protagonist from the marginal section of society, with high morals, gives this play a special place in Indian folk literature. Under Indian dramatic tradition, the major characters in a play mostly hail from the higher classes of society. In *The Saga of the Blind*, Surawa's wife hails from the *Dalit* community, and exhibits lofty morals and virtues, that fetches all the reasons to be recommended a place for her beside any great woman in history. The *Saga of the Blind* presents an interesting record of the vicious intrigues and conspiracies found in many joint families. Further the value and importance of cultivated land in the Indian agrarian household economy has been referred as having greater impact on social and familial relationships. The character of Surawa's wife in the play presents an ideal Indian wife, who by virtue of her inner strength proves a role model for the womenfolk. Although badly tortured and harassed in an orthodox patriarchal set up, she never succumbs to adversities, and thus proves that an Indian woman can brave any adversity.

I struck a chord with the plot of this play, watching certain performances in the Awadh and the eastern (Poorvanchal) regions of Uttar Pradesh. Upon inquiring about the published text of the play, the actors and owners of the theatre troupes could not provide the authentic copy. Different theatre groups blend local colours also with the main story line. In folk performances, interludes and farce also interfere with the plot. The version taken here is the most popular. Most of the folk theatre artists learn their dialogues and acquire an understanding of the plot through the medium of folk orality, as the play travels in time from one generation to another.

Mr. Vidya Naresh Singh an inquisitive member of my research team managed a published copy of *Surawa Naatak* from a rural weekly market from a place known as Rasara in Balia district of Uttar Pradesh. The published copy of the play credits its authorship to Sri Mahadev Prasad Singh. From the para texts and the blurb of the printed version nothing is known except his name. It is published from Thakur Prasad and Sons Booksellers & Publishers, Rajadarvaja, Varanasi. The text of the play is printed in 16 pages, and ends up in some verses on copyright. Various lines/dialogues/stage direction, etc. in the text of the play have been arranged as *Doha* (Couplet), *Chaupai* (quatrain) and *Kajali* meter, in the print version, but they seldom match the classical features of these meters, technically. In this version the punctuation marks are also not used correctly. When my research team recorded and analysed the popular oral versions of the play, several dialectic variations came forth but the theme remained the same. In the translation, I have followed an edited form of this folk cultural text – *Surawa Naatak*. The literary translation of the play, that I very modestly propose to be called “Translevelization” follows:

Text

***Surawa Naatak* as The Saga of the Blind**

Characters¹

Surawa

A young man

Savitri

Surawa’s wife

Shaila

Savitri’s sister-in-law (Bhaujai)

¹ In the source language-text the characters are not introduced. The text is unsystematically arranged, and the names of the characters are dubious and overlapping. For bringing clarity to the context and text, I have named the characters. The decision to give names to different characters, makes the text more accessible, and the overall meaning comes out well.

Sangya
Surawa's sister-in-law (Bhaujai)
Kutani
A provocateur
Ghurawa/ Fake Sadhu
A young man, who had a proffer for marrying Savitri
Sadhu
Genuine Sadhu

Invocation:

Chanting Rama brings eternal bliss, chant His name
by heart,
it shows us the purpose of life, even the Vedas so
affirm.

Introduction:

Now listen, one and all, with attention keen,
I narrate *The Saga of the Blind*,
Kajali meter makes the rhyme.
A true record of a Sati it has proved,
Mahadeva narrates that,
which was, henceforth:
Unheard!
Nondescript!
Unseen!

Scene: One

Narrator: Now worshipping the holy feet of Sita-Ram, I narrate
Surawa's saga, in verse:

Residing there in a Tappepur a small village Jhingru Rawat
did see every pleasure with kith and kin,
Two sons, he begot, managed their nuptial knots on time.
As ill luck would have it, illness caught suddenly the younger one:
he lost his eyes both. Unfortunately,
on the chap's turning blind, his connubial stage came at stake –
the wife decided to stay at father's home.
What happened next – to know it all, dear folk now lend your ears.

One fine day, perplexed by the words of his sister-in-law,
Surawa spoke so:

Surawa (to Sangya²):

In my tender years, you were so sweet,
What brought in you, this fateful turn?
See, it's a simple urge for water,
and you're making a mountain out of a molehill!
Why do you pinch my heart so harsh,
giving a look stoic and sparse!
Is it some purpose fetid that envelops your heart?

Sangya:

Hey, why you lock your horns in vain?
No hope I see for a household chain.
Take your spouse to a separate home
at her arrival, satiate, and be calm,
And yeah! Merry make, full swing, in her cologne.

Surawa:

Hearing it all, all hopes collapse,
Fully famished, I stand.
I'll go somewhere, to spend days on alms,
How can I earn, now, to resource you?
Live happily in peace, never think of me,
I'm now set to move
For making some establishment new.

Narrator: Surawa moves out. He has decided to go for begging.
Meanwhile Surawa's wife is pressurized at her parental home to
marry someone else which she resents, and speaks to her sister- in-
law this.

² This name has been given by the translator. In the folk text it was written
as Surawa's wife.

Nanad³ to Bhaujai⁴:

(*Savitri⁵ to Shaila*) My Bhauji! It's just a request;
Why don't you settle my Gauna's⁶ date?
Roamed debauchees around, when for shopping I
had gone,
and the guys extended, hey *Bhaujai*, just lecherous
glance.
Listen, my dear, some facts, serious to share;
Burgeoning youth taxes my heart
full grown blood now passions chant.
I too, here, a woman like you.
A sweet pain, my body feels
anxious I turn, and feel lovelorn,
With folded hands, I make request-
Why don't ye arrange my *Gauna* to the in-laws?

Shaila:

Listen! *Nanad*,⁷ my anxious babe,
Honey charm shall clasp you when you're grown.
So plain you speak
I see just fun over here.
I see just fun over here,
So impertinent you, my lass!
What else just fun I'll make
I do understand it all;
why so anxious have you turned?
You'll simply repent,
the day you'll move to the in-laws.
Intimacy with man, brings nothing but pain.
Only tears would solace you,
Smiting you, there, in nuptial bed.

³ Husband's sister

⁴ Brother's wife

⁵ The translator has given this name. In the folk text it was written as *Bhaujai*.

⁶ In some cases of Indian Hindu marriage, the wife stays back with her parents even after marriage. After some times the groom's side goes to fetch her.

⁷ Husband's sister

Savitri:

Hey, just tell me, my Gauna's date
When to the in laws, shall I move?
And when shall I see my man?
I'll narrate; and I'll listen –
close and closer-tete-a-tete- my man
I'll offer myself 24/7, at my lover's call.

Shaila:

What makes you so to speak,
putting on stake, the honour of the clan?
Why a gloomy look you've donned?
Why the tears make frequent flow?
Don't put our honour at stake,
Live in pleasure at the paternal home.

Savitri:

My burgeoning youth screws me deep,
An unknown pain my heart does feel.
The breasts too unwieldy to maintain.
How can I show my ailing heart;
to you who just fiddles in *Bhaiya's*⁸ arms!

Shaila:

Tender as you are, take my advice, by heart
Succumb you'll, to the travails at the in-laws.
How should I narrate, your man's vigor
He's manly grown-up figure.
He would tax, and of course grill,
mind you! Better realize it still.

Savitri:

Don't you see my body bosom-bowed
awaiting him relentlessly, so fervent.
Murky they feel *sans* my hubby's sense

⁸ Brother

he in my arms -- we will sleep.
Content in calm this heart will leap,
with my hubby in my slam, and
I would fetch ecstasy in the bed.

Shaila: (*angrily*)

Well, once out; always out.
In case you turn up, will get no retort,
To your brother, I'll report it all,
you would never be welcome back.
How dare you argue me at this instance?

Savitri:

Consecrate be the household to you alone,
how long should I impinge into it,
convey my memo to sibling dear,
that he should bid my better half,
with whom I have to spend the lifelong.

Shaila:

Now, listen, the truth I narrate –
You are married, but your man has lost his vision;
with who shall you spend your days?
Convincing your brother for some other match,
in a better household, we'll settle you again.

Savitri:

I know, my man is blind.
Taking care of him, I'll spend my days
Just my providence – that hubby has lost his vision.
I am not here to marry, the so called, better chap.

Shaila (*exasperated*):

Should you not heed upon me, I'll kick you apart.
For now, just, get out from my verge, my sight
Enjoy yourself with your man,
go to his home, or do whatever.
(*Savitri moves out*)

Scene: Two

Narrator (*addressing the audience*): Hearing this all, the Nanad⁹ moves out collecting her belongings all. She moves towards the husband's place. On the way, she comes across Surawa. (*Savitri does not recognize Surawa, yet associating some familiarity with the dialect, enquires about the address of her in-laws.*)

Savitri:

May you please direct, hey gentleman,
the direction of Village Tappepur?
which way would does lead to it?
I'm in great mess,
frenetic, searching it,
Won't you help, sir, tracking it?

Surawa:

Well! Just tell me the name to who you'll go,
to ease you, I'm Surawa,
willing to escort you to your spot.
I know everybody in the village,
and, shall narrate everything to you.

Savitri:

Destination is Tappepur,
Jhinguru Rawat heads the clan
visit of that, today, I plan.
His son wedded to me,
I am rushing to him;
he has met his vision-loss.
Won't you help me in locating the spot?

Surawa:

What a coincident! I'm from Tappepur,
Jhinguru Rawat – my father is called,

⁹ Mentioned here as Savitri

tell me the business that you mean,
and yes, from where have you come?
Your description connotes me as your husband!
Aren't you scared?
You are! For sure! clearly tell.

Savitri:

Thank my Goodness!
Me the wife, and, you, my man!
It's our relation that brings me from father's home.
I see you in this state –
this is the saddest of all moments.
I'm at loss;
I'm totally lost – my dear better half.

Surawa:

What is there in fate,
can never be late,
now tears can't make way.
You were merrily settled at home,
why have you come from there?
No quandary I see this way,
my company would, but give you pain.

Savitri:

You're my husband,
Why so dull, here you sound?
Let my world turn to ashes,
my life to become hell,
if it comes, your name to denounce.
Your feelings are splendid – my sweet compatriot,
I'll spend my days caring you around.
My duty, this life, is just devotion to my man,
My love for you, seldom has bound.

Narrator: At Savitri's statement Surawa turns the happiest of the men, and relishes it within his heart. In wife's company he goes care free, and softly sets his feelings roll.

Surawa:

We are getting late,
let's move; you guide me,
we'll reach some place a far,
in the guise of a beggar-couple
we shall spend our days over there.

Savitri:

You're my sincere man!
Why do, you sound so amateur?
We'll move to our home,
and shall spend our days there.
Nothing that Bhaujai¹⁰ construes malice in it,
once we shall show the things in detail.

Narrator: Deciding so, the couple made their way, with some unknown fear they reach home Bhaujai¹¹ is all set to reject their proposal of resort at home. As they're approaching the courtyard; watching them Sangya contrives a plan. Pat, she ignores, and her gesture shows her intent.

Surawa:

Bhaujai, your words fade!
Don't turn indifferent this way,
A little space, here we entreat.
Taking care of your kids,
I'll spend my days henceforth,
look at me, and be kind,
we, both, shall work for you.

Sangya (*indignantly*):

Get out rascal, take your way,
You won't find space over here,
Why have you come to me,
with wife, now you enjoy!

¹⁰ Refers to Sangya

¹¹ Refers to Sangya

Surawa (*irately*):

Listen *Bhauji*¹²!
I've my share in the household,
Give me my share; both in move and chattel.
You're enjoying resources mine,
and for me – even no resort over here!

Sangya:

O hello! Your share spent in wedding;
how come you, a part, claim?

Narrator: At this statement of Sangya, Savitri requests Surawa to accompany her to her father's home.

Savitri:

My Lord, let's move to my father's home,
we shall live peacefully there.

Narrator: (*Speaking so, Savitri takes Surwa to her parental home*)

Scene: Three

Savitri's Parental Home

Watching the couple together Sangya starts speaking tactfully

Shaila:

Nice is the deliberation that brought you here,
but a financial crunch scorches our household,
you know it too well.
So, take the route that brought you here,
no room, for you, is here secured.

Narrator: Listening Sangya's verdict, Savitri turns speechless and numb. She thinks for a while, turns numb as a statue and then takes her accompanying husband back. Both pent up in thoughts, all anchors lost, divinity is the only resort. So, in anguish acute, they reach a forest. Surawa falls asleep getting dead-tired on the way.

¹² Sister-in-Law

Savitri gives a gentle rub over Surawa's feet. On the other hand, Ghurawa, who had a proffer for marrying Savitri, comes to know that Savitri has attained her husband. Feeling cheated, Ghurawa takes some accomplice, and moves recklessly in search for Savitri. Ghurawa locates Savitri and Surawa in the forest. He disguises himself as a Sadhu, and speaks:

Ghurawa¹³ as Fake Sadhu:

From where have you come,
for staying at this forest?
Tell me, please,
it seems a decision wrong!
Accompany to my place,
both of you would merry-make,
Why, in vain, you experience pain

Savitri:

We're from Tappepur.
What to speak about me,
ill luck has struck upon.
We're spending our days in penury and pain,
see my husband – sleeping, journey's fatigue.
I take his care and knead his feet.
no charm can I find at other place.
The Almighty is here to take our care.
What is fated will show up for sure;
egotistic world turns worse in adversity.

Ghurawa , as Fake Sadhu:

Come to my cottage with your husband,
you'll have calm and content.
The jungle is occupied by violent beasts,
they are all there, set to harm.
The thought of staying pinches my nerve,
beware; you both may end your verve.

¹³ Ghurawa appears as a fake Sadhu . Mentioned as Ghantal also in some versions .

Savitri:

We're comfortable here, alone,
no sort of pleasure do we crave.
Our time onward is set for alms
Life always takes its course.
let the creatures do what they want.

Narrator: When Ghurawa as a Fake Sadhu fails to persuade Savitri, he comes to his real form and forces Savitri dragging. Savitri screams, Surawa wakes up listening her scream, but feels helpless in the lack of vision. With no help around, states Savitri with folded hands.

Savitri:

Sadhu,¹⁴ why are you doing this?
Hey, give it a thought:
You target and reprove my innocence,
you are assaulting a Sati like me!
Hey, speak; it is what makes a Sadhu-
such an indulgence in nasty creed?

Narrator: Ghurawa, a fake Sadhu throws away his Sadhu's cloak of
Coming into his real form, he speaks:

Ghurawa:

Now listen; find in me your husband to be,
your marriage was fixed with me,
and you deceived.
Now accept it and agree, that's it
I came here searching for you.
Your negation will bear the brunt,
mind it, lass, mind it!

Savitri:

You're sounding trash,
mind your speech,

¹⁴ Saint

You'll play, I, mean, foul with me?
A devoted wife her I am!
Why do you impose your views?
It's a clamor, throw it off, and keep away.
(Ghurawa suddenly takes out a firearm and starts bullying Savitri with it.)

Ghurawa: If you won't marry me, you would kick the bucket.

Savitri:
(looking apprehensively thoughtful)
Well, I'm ready to marry you,
but this gun frightens me of my death.

Ghurawa:
Come on, in vain you got frightened?
trust me,
I give it to you
(Ghurawa hands over his firearm to Savitri. Taking the firearm in her hand, Savitri plays with it for a while, grabbing a chance, she fires at Ghurawa and turns back to her husband)

Surawa:
Hey, what happened?
Why you screamed out,
and where have you been?
(Savitri narrates the happening in detail. Hurriedly they take their way onward. Moving ahead, incidentally, they come across one more Sadhu)

Savitri:
Hey, see another Sadhu!

Surawa:
No way, just hurry up. Sprint.
All black sheep, here, slip in Saint's robe.

Savitri:
No dear, he seems to be some sage real.

(Savitri touches the saint's feet, and offers a rubbing a massage. The Saint wakes up.)

Sadhu:

(Surprisingly)
My child, be blessed!
Express your wish!
Whatever they are, they'll see filled.

Savitri:

My only wish, Maharaj is my husband's vision
(The Sadhu touches Surawa's head, and Surawa recovers his sight. Savitri and Surawa prostrates in obeisance, and start groveling touching Sadhu's feet.)

Narrator: The couple's gratitude finds no words, simply they prostrate to the Saint's feet. *(The Saint is seen blessing the couple. Surawa has got his lost vision. They decide to come back their home.)*

Scene: Four **Surawa's Home**

Narrator: Surawa and Savitri reach Surawa's ancestral home. Sangya is astonished at Surawa's recovery of vision. Apparently, she allows the couple to stay with her. They receive welcome and enter the home. Sangya is seen with a woman who seems to be her close friend. She is a provocateur (mentioned henceforth as Kutani) by nature, and has been observing the state of affair, so close and keen. Now she is seen poisoning Sangya's mind. It may be easily construed that something unfair is set to happen.

Kutani¹⁵:

Hey! What a tantrum do you warrant,
clumsy adversity you have called!
I see uglier problems approaching your lot,
as you allowed the sister-in-law in your household!

¹⁵ A provocateur

You are ignorant of the consequences,
or have gone completely mad!
Suppose some issue is born
you'll face such a big thorn.
Half of the resources he will claim.
Come closer, and listen,
I offer an advice foolproof.
Do it so well, and yes, with care,
grow proximity with your brother-in-law,
and hatch with him some act astute,
Somehow accomplish Savitri's end.
As the bro in law becomes single
take no chance, just get mingle.
You'll see no blocks ahead,
gaily, cultivate his lands as well.

Narrator:

Delving deep into advice bleak,
prompt, she dons a thinking cap.
A shrewd design she conceives,
and sets all measures to dispense.
(A week later)
(Sangya is sitting concerned. Surawa comes and enquires the reason.)

Surawa:

*Bhaujai*¹⁶, you're feeling low!

Sangya:

Nothing, just concerned over my status,
as your wife controls the domiciliary.

Surawa:

What a fig: so is the fact!
Tell me frank, if she tortures you,
I'll oust that obnoxious, in no time.

¹⁶ Sister- in-law

Sangya:

Mere words I reek; action gives no sound.
(Facial expressions are seen, no words heard.
Sangya is seen whispering in Surawa's ears)

Surawa: *(In rising tone)*

I'm firm. Let the world doubt my paternity,
if I fail to marshal your command.

Sangya:

Are you sure? Can you dispense, as I suggest?

Surawa:

Of course! I'll.

Sangya:

If you're set to do as I say,
take your wife for pilgrimage,
switch her life off in some forest,
decompose her body immediately.
Finishing the deadlocks off,
gaily makes sweet return.
We'll have all fun together,
I'll cook your meals,
and accompany you in all hops.
Yes, my dear, in every walk.

Surawa *(smiling):*

With whom shall I spend my life
days after killing my wife?

Sangya:

Of course, with me!

Surawa:

And who'll mother my progeny?

Sangya:

Me, who else?

Surawa:

How to distinguish them? (Since, you are already married.)

Sangya:

The younger one yours! (And the earlier born, of your bro's!)

Narrator:

Listening Bhaujai's version so,
for pilgrimage with wife, he plans to go.
Reaching a forest, his joy leaps,
and sin blinds the vision hence far.
(The couple reaches a forest, and sets a space for their reclining)

Surawa:

My love, just take a nap, tiredness grasps your face.

Narrator: Savitri smiles, and feels drowsiness. As soon as she sleeps, Surawa drags his rapier for killing her. Instantly appears a Sadhu¹⁷, and holds Surawa's wrist firmly. The Sadhu speaks

Sadhu:

You bloody, sinner!
What adversities had she bore for you,
and you have fetched her to kill!

Narrator: After getting thrashed and admonished by the Sadhu, he escapes back to his home. Savitri is seen conversing with the Sadhu. The Sadhu is explaining some facts. Voice is not heard. It seems Sadhu is persuading her for some act, and she is unwilling. Now Savitri has come to know everything.)

Savitri:

I won't go, he will kill me.

¹⁷ A saint

Sadhu:

No fear at all! None is born here to kill you? I'll accompany you. You just proceed!

Scene: Five
Surawa's Home

(Savitri reaches Surawa's home. Sangya and Surawa dash at Savitri to kill her. The Sadhu is seen shielding her.)

Sadhu:

Listen carefully, if you'll harm her, you all shall meet devastation!

Sangya (*sarcastically*):

I see, a paramour has accompanied to help!

Narrator: Listening to this, the Sadhu curses them¹⁸, and instantly they turn blind. Surawa's wife is seen in requesting mode. The Sadhu is unbending, after persuasion, he gets the curse redeemed. Everybody is seen prostrating to him in remorse.)

Speak up, folks, loudly
Hail to Lord Ram and Sita!
(*God is great*)

Note: The text of this play has been retrieved from many folk performances in the villages of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The text of *Surawa Naatak* is referred to match the storyline, yet the present work is not, completely, based on that. When it comes to match the syntax, and the semantic structures of the source text of a folk dialect, with the formal register of the target language, it offers many issues and concerns concerning paralinguistic features. These paratextual elements have been taken care of in the current translation. Issues of untranslatability come up on the one hand, and the patterns of

¹⁸ Sangya and Surawa

equivalence on the other. In this context, for the practice as referred above, the translator, very modestly, proposes the term “Tanslevelization.” When we aim at transference of meaning to the optimum level of accuracy and intelligibility, and there are deadlocks of cultural contexts, nothing can sound better than the expression “Translevelization.” We match different levels, and come up with a text in new form with the same spirit.

Works Consulted

Singh, Mahadev. *Surawa Naatak*. Varanasi: Thakur Prasad and Sons Booksellers & Publishers.

Singh, R.P. *Translating the Representative Folk Drama of Hindi Speaking North India into English: Remapping the Texts, Contexts and Connotations*. Report of UGC Major Research Project. 2013. Unpublished

Acknowledgements: This is the revised and updated version of a translated text that I submitted to UGC New Delhi under the report on my Major Research Project titled *Translating the Representative Folk Drama of Hindi Speaking North India into English: Remapping the Texts, Contexts and Connotations* (2011-2013).



Three Poems by Amlanjyoti Goswami

I

Final Settlement

Facts:

470 million dollars was all it took
For Methyl Isocyanate to vanish into thin air.
On an average, this translated into Rs 1 lakh each for death &
Rs 25,000/- for personal injury.
This meant 15 cents a day for each lifetime injury and only
15% of what the government asked.
Small change in 1989 for Union Carbide Corporation (UCC),
later known as Dow Chemicals.
Rafa'-dafa', so common in Hindi, is Arabic in origin – 'to
remove, dispose of, settle' things.
This 'settlement' between the government and UCC was
approved by the highest court in 1991.
It took 19 more years for the government to realise the amount
was a song.
For the dead and injured numbered far more, the data then was
all wrong.

Procedural Facts:

A 'curative' petition was filed in 2010, since all 'review'
options in law were by then 'exhausted'.
The word curative comes from the Latin 'cūrāt' which means
'to cure for, attend to'.
It took another 13 years for this petition to be 'heard'.
The lawyer for Dow said Dow wouldn't pay a *farthing* more.
'Farthing', the newspapers reported, not paisa-rupaiya-penny-
pence-dollar-or-sikka.
'Farthing' is literally '1/4th of a penny' and the coin was
discontinued in UK by 1961.
The lawyer said 'farthing' in open court, for intended effect.

The court knew its hands were tied.
There's only so much that can be done in a curative.
And even the best patients die.
This was a postscript to a case that shut ages back.

Verdict:

The settlement amount stayed the same, 34 years later.

Ratio decidendi (Latin: 'rationale for the decision'):

The settlement was 'consensual' and no liability could be pinned on Dow now.
This was only a curative and there was no fraud in the settlement.

Obiter dicta (Latin: 'that which is said in passing'):

Mere sympathy for the sufferers does not enable us to devise a panacea.
If evidence were to be led for each claimant, this would mean reopening a Pandora's box.

The actual summary:

This is law & not poetry.
Human life is priceless but ask any insurance guy if this is indeed true.

'Extraneous' aspects (irrelevant to the case):

Bhopal is now a city with a beautiful lake, a destination for weekend getaways.
Equidistant from Delhi and Mumbai, from power and capital.
You can visit tigers in Ratnapani, stay in the jungles, skirt the toxic waste.
But on certain nights, you can still hear them coughing, those sirens blaring
Those retching, unable to breathe another word.

Ethics, the very reason for law to exist:

Someone will read this and wonder if we couldn't do a little better.
If we hid behind the pillars of law, and called it justice.
If there are other grounds for appeal, to a still higher power.
If the accounts balance, for everyone in the same manner.
If ethics is the same as procedure.

II

Where did Nana Saheb disappear?

When he turned the corner
Was he on horseback or on foot?

What disguise was he wearing?
Were his eyes kohl lined or empty?

Where did he stop for tea?
Who else was with him, or did he go alone?

How did he cast a spell on them?
What did he eat on the road?

Did he climb those forbidden mountains on his own?
Was he dressed like them, in disguise, so they couldn't tell?

Nana Saheb, rebel, legend, myth, disappeared into thin air
And no one could find him.

They ransacked the palace and found nothing.
No passenger pigeon gave him away.

No one whispered, even those walls pockmarked with
bullets
With big ears, long enough to reach the Viceroy.

Did he find the peace he wanted, the calm that eluded him

While breathing a dragon's mist in the blue hills?

Did he shelter in an ancient fort far from the bloodied
plains?
How did he reach there?

No one could smell the trail, sniff all the way
To the fortress where he found rest from battle.

They say he tasted butter tea made by the hill people
And enjoyed a smile, they would give their lives to save
him.

While the battle was lost and war carried on elsewhere
And they were blasted as cannon fodder.

He knew one day, as the crow flies, someone would ask –
Where did Nana Saheb disappear?

How could no one find him?
No one knew the secret, even the hills where wispy dreams
curl into mist

And disappear into the void of time.
A different time, inside dongs, prayer wheels, praying
monks.

Outside the realm of the scepter, outside dream
They said he took up lodgings, in an ancient fort, protected
from everything

And not even God could enter those parts
Carrying blessings, where the spirits dwelled dead and
living.

If you know, tell me.
He was one of us, and he fought for us.

He could not be caught even if the Queen willed it.

This is why the search for him continues to this day.

They say he turned commoner, far from royal soldier.
They found the mother goddess, a statue of
Mahishasuramardini

In the ancient fortress of Trongsa Dzong.
They say the feeling came to him one morning

When the hill sighed and the air let him in
And told him: *no worries now*.

Though he was in exile, defeated but not lost
No place to hide, and yet he could move in plain sight

Without the red suits wondering.
The sleight of disguise, perhaps the wonder of the land

When Nana Saheb took one more step in the morning light
He saw the hills so close, and slowly learnt the sonorous
tongue

The lamas who knew their scriptures without speaking
And the prayer wheel hummed defeating all battle

Telling him of a lasting peace
That would come one day, when all this was over.

III

Michael Madhusudan Dutt

Michael Madhusudan Dutt came to me last night.
His name, but not his face, not his poems
Not his image, not his spirit.

Just his name.
I drank a glass of water.
It was past midnight.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt was passing by.
The spirits of the place, like royal courtiers,
Proclaimed his name – to barking and sleeping dogs.

To stars and chowkidars.
To those awake and dreaming.
To beeping smart phones and artificially intelligent
machines.

To poets writing copiously
On yellow notepads and compliant laptops.
To lovers sleeping after making love.

To winter dew watching from treetops
To the ghosts of childhood.
To a cold breeze blowing.

To lightning striking suddenly, without reason.
And the name stayed on our tongues
In the chowkidar's footsteps, drowsy with mist.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the original enfant terrible, my
salaam.
May you be happy, may your spirit roam free.
May you find the lines you are looking for –

Inside the arms of this page
Near these letters that fly on a whim
Even two hundred years later.



POEMS by Jaydeep Sarangi

1

Wheels of Stones

Rites in stone, forgotten Kalinga Kings
curved spells of mystic light piercing eerie life carvings
through the ancient stones, where the moon retrieves.
a spectral embrace by each curve of the wheels. All lighted.

Silent stone horses' wheels, the chariot-shaped temple
emerge from the depths of sand
of the blue sea carrying the Sun God.

Konaraka stones stand as deep as time gyre in full
figuring courtships and intimacy,
erotic mudra forms link lives freeze in time.

Time's fairy makes her mark on these desirous stones,
in stories deep, where moments leer.
The early rays play in-between the hard stones
The Sun rides on time's big life wheels.

2

Ruins of the Relationship

Before all our roads lead to the ruins of Pompeii
I shall take you to Mount Olympus
Will visit all doors of poetry
You may sit beside me and write for the stars
I may see you writing and writing till the world is dark

Before you can say something
Your ears listen to oracle of hearts
You crave for divine poems
I will tell you the story of Orisis.
You look at reflections of a Goddess.

Today's ruins were prosperous habitations
Where mind travelled and travelled
Flew over Krios and Tyria
Your dreams, my imaginations
All are in so many books.

People will write our names together
They never mapped the ruins of hearts
Separated by small rivers emptying in the Ionian Sea.

3

The Rainbow Land

My good friends on the banks of the Richmond are saviours
Of intents, no selfish clasp, no hard hitting the world
Wilsons is their home, a shoulder
To cry on, to lie on; seasons are memory.

The unseen singing birds sang for years
Created new history of desires and cries
Into the colour green I dip my brush
I draw a circle with locks, waiting to meet them in hunger.

Painted shopfronts, a walkway arbour and great Widjabul
people
I cannot rest from meeting, connecting all with the blue sky
to my land of Dulung.
Rainbows come and go in Nimbin rocks. Small village girls
Keep their language alive that turns mud houses to new
idioms.

We stand face to face, books to books.
Two lands are parallel doors of history
Talking to each other in a language; not Hebrew, not Greek
Where Dulung meets with Tweed, then flowing together in
soul spaces.



BOOK REVIEW

Defiant Whispers: A Dalit Woman's Poetic Odyssey

Rajesh Kumar Jaiswal

Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Poems of Chandalini: Poems by a Bengali Dalit Womanist*, translated and edited by Zaini Mitra and Jaideep Sarangi, Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, Bolpur, West Bengal, 2023, Pages 88, Rs 275.

Poems of Chandalini by Kalyani Thakur Charal offers an unapologetic portrayal of the layered injustices endured by Dalits, particularly Dalit women, in Bengal. Through its fierce and resonant voice, the collection transcends mere literary expression, presenting instead a manifesto of resistance as much visceral as it is eloquent. Thakur's work is a profound reckoning with caste, class, and gender, where every poem thrums with raw urgency, invoking the unspoken histories, lingering traumas, and audacious hopes of a community too often muted in the wider cultural discourse.

Kalyani Thakur (b. 1965), a notable Dalit woman poet, is a powerful voice in Bengali literature, documenting the struggles of Dalit women through her writings. Winner of the Sparrow Literary Award for her autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* ("Why I Write Charal"), Thakur has published four poetry volumes, essays, and stories under the title *Chandalini* ("Untouchable Woman"), drawing from her caste-based discrimination. Through her magazine *Nir*, she amplifies Dalit women's experiences. Thakur views her poetry as an activist endeavour, suggesting that writing poems is participating in a "cultural movement" (70) that goes beyond the literary boundary.

Thakur's poetry vividly re-imagines Dalit womanhood, simultaneously proud and defiant. It reveals an intimate but piercing glimpse into the lives of Dalit women, whose experiences are doubly obscured by both caste and patriarchal structures. In this collection, Thakur transforms pain into power, wielding her words with the

precision of an insurgent, a disruptor, and a witness who stands firmly within the gaze of casteist and patriarchal Bengal. Her voice is unyielding, bearing both the weight and light of Ambedkarite resistance, which insists on dignity, self-worth, and collective action. Thakur embodies the Dalit womanist spirit, broadening the landscape of Dalit literature with a textured, nuanced critique that intersects with the multiple marginalized identity fault lines.

A poem (41) worth quoting from the collection—"My grandfather was prohibited / From stepping into the tol premises. / My father became literate / Using palm leaf and ink of charcoal / After a long struggle"—is a powerful encapsulation of the generational trauma that Dalit families endure. The poem is rich with imagery that speaks to the dehumanization of Dalits experience, as seen in the line, "Oh! God! Cow dung is holier / Than the touch of a dalit!" This stark image articulates the painful reality of untouchability, wherein even the most abject substances are considered purer than the human bodies of Dalits. Thakur's language is sharp and exposing, making visible the everyday humiliations that Dalits face. The poem also critiques the continued use of casteist slurs by her colleagues, such as "Chamar, Charal, and Dom," highlighting how casteism is not an artefact of the past but a pervasive reality in contemporary Bengal.

Thakur's poetry challenges the myth of Bengal as a caste-free society and critiques the failure of Bengal's intellectual and political strata, casting an unforgiving eye on the hypocrisies embedded in nationalist and leftist discourses. With unwavering clarity, she dismantles the notion of Bengal sans caste-hierarchies and discriminations, progressive haven—a saga that has only worked to conceal entrenched social hierarchies. In perhaps one of her most provocative lines, "Marxism and Manuism are mixed together here. The vote is yours, and the ruling mine" (50), she brings to light the uncomfortable paradoxes of Bengali political consciousness. By positioning Marxism alongside Manuism (the ancient caste codes), Thakur critiques the double standards within leftist and nationalist ideologies, exposing how they subtly perpetuate casteist structures rather than dismantling them. This linguistic strategy, pairing an imported philosophy of class with an indigenous doctrine of caste

hierarchy, is a powerful indictment of the contradictions that lie beneath the veneer of egalitarian rhetoric.

The translators' decision to label Thakur a "Dalit womanist" is particularly significant, as it places her within a framework that goes beyond traditional feminist ideologies. Womanism, as a concept, is inherently dialogic, open-ended, and rooted in the lived experiences of women of color. In the Indian context, Dalit womanism addresses the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender, offering a more nuanced understanding of social justice than mainstream feminist movements. Thakur's poetry is deeply aligned with these principles, as she slams the patriarchal structures within Dalit communities. In one of her more striking poems, she writes, "Reading the morning news / The virtuous wife laments loudly. / Thinned alta is left uncared. / Vermillion red head / Is rubbed with the thumb of the dead body" (60). This critique of the "virtuous wife" exposes how patriarchal ideals of purity and chastity continue to oppress women, even in death. The poem exposes the hollowness of that ritual, revealing how these societal roles entrap women within a cycle of purity, obedience, and self-sacrifice. The text speaks Thakur's complex critique of patriarchal mores within Dalit communities themselves, suggesting that the realization of freedom needs both an internal and external uprising.

The translators' choice to frame Thakur within a "Dalit womanist" lens adds another layer of depth, situating her poetry within a global discourse that addresses the unique oppressions faced by marginalized women of colour. This conceptual positioning is significant, as it places Thakur in a lineage that dialogues with but also diverges from mainstream feminist paradigms. Her critique of caste and gender is sharp, but her poetic devices are drawn from everyday Dalit life, situating her work in a language that belongs to the community, resisting the cultural aestheticization often imposed by mainstream literary institutions. Here, we see the emergence of a "counter-aesthetic" where each poem defies the expectations of polished Bengali poetics, replacing them with the gravel of lived experience and the rough edge of unembellished truth.

Thakur's poetry is radical not only for its content but also for its form, which pushes against the sanitized conventions of Bengali

literature. Her metaphors are grounded in the material realities of Dalit life, from cow dung (ironically more revered than Dalit bodies) to broken utensils and thin reed mats. These images are unrefined, and they signal a shift in aesthetic values, suggesting that beauty in poetry need not be divorced from the embrace of social struggle. Her work challenges Bengali literary tradition to accommodate these voices, thereby asserting that literature itself must evolve to reflect the diversity of human experiences.

The volume's inclusion of an introduction and interview adds further resonance to her work, framing it within a larger discourse while allowing Thakur's own voice to emerge unfiltered. However, the absence of footnotes for certain Bengali terms used in several poems—like *Dhaak*, *Fatna*, *Grambarta*, and *Tol*—poses a challenge for non-native readers unfamiliar with these cultural references. These terms, if briefly explained, would enhance accessibility and deepen the readers' engagement with Thakur's cultural nuances.

In closing, *Poems of Chandalini* reads like a declaration—a sustained, fearless testament to resilience, dignity, and the audacity to dream beyond the shackles of caste. The poet's invocation, "Wake up black men and women! / Thousand-year-asleep men and women / Wake up! (63)," is a clarion call, one that pulsates with a deep-rooted hope despite the odds. This awakening, as Thakur envisages it, is a reclaiming of history and identity that defies both silence and submission. Hers is a poetics of survival, of re-imagining oneself in the face of a society that insists on invisibility.



BOOK REVIEW

Poetic Tributes to Jayanta Mahapatra

Jaydeep Sarangi

Ashwani Kumar. Ed. *Scent of Rain: Remembering Jayanta Mahapatra*, Red River, Chennai, 2024, p. 290, ISBN 978-93-92494-93-2, Rs 499/ --

Scent of Rain is a felicitous tribute to Jayanta Mahapatra and his long-standing literary creations. He supported poetry by the young and old with maximum beneficence. Mumbai-based noted poet and political scientist Ashwani Kumar's anthology is redolent with the poet's relationships with people living in small towns and villages, rivers passing by and ruins of the past at various levels, all these are his uneven catalogue of poetry. Poet Adil Jussawala, the author of *Trying to Say Goodbye*, pays his sincere tribute to Mahapatra "The garden's earth yawns, / It has a pink tongue. It has ears" ('The Garden's Earth Yawns,' 15).

Mahapatra's writing career lasted for more than five decades. Like many great poets of all ages, his poetry is vigorously intense, sensuous and it breathes with Indian images and the landscape. Anamika dedicates her poem, faithfully. She is nostalgic:

Aged mountains bless trees

With longevity.

Plants know to say nothing

They know to be, to be quiet. ('Silence Roars,' 21)

Nature has long been the muse of writers from different lands, mythological legacies and cultural contexts, who map human life, instincts and feelings poignantly. They are map makers of the human race. Jayanta Mahapatra is one of them. Robin Nagangom, a significant contemporary soul maker from the North East India,

describes his feelings for Mahapatra and his vision in his poem 'Days': "After Sunday prayers fall silent / And bells fade away in the hills" (78). Many of Robin's early works were published in the *Chandrabhaga*, edited by Jayanta Mahapatra.

The quiet house of poetry is quieter now. Memory comes silently and soothingly. Noted poet Sudeep Sen gives a vivid pen picture of Mahapatra's intimacy with quiet music of the age and art even when poetry is not advised to read and write: "Words come gently on paper, slowly ripening/ Like mangos, green to amber, or orange, to red." ('The Gentleness of Memory,' 231)

Mahapatra's material descriptions of the indigenous landscape and people dwelling therein is accompanied by his historical vision, becoming a fascinating gift. Sonnet Mondal's dedication, 'Grandpa's Veranda' reminds us Jayanta Mahapatra's iconic poem on his grandfather:

Grandpa used to sit on a protrusion
of the veranda in our old house.
He used to nod subtly
to acquaintances walking by— (223)

After Jayanta Mahapatra's demise unwarranted solitude patrols Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack. The city is not extravagant with sunlight. Extraordinary Bibhu Padhi arrests the moment with his beguilingly lucid words,

Keep the priests away, weep like a child
I am sure, the long-lost god
shall appear behind your tears,
and ready for compromise. ("Puri" 60)

Cuttack-born prolific inward looking poet Bibhu Padhi approximates his feelings of loss with the sea's patience and the rock-cut wheels of Konarak. Bibhu Padhi's poem is a collage of varied impressions and psychological imprints at multiple levels.

Poetry for Mahapatra is a door to reach out hearts of his countrymen. His poems capture the fuzzy differences between

absence and presence, arrivals and departures, shadow spaces between objects and spells of rain of rites. Ashwani Kumar, the editor in his dedication compares Mahapatra with great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, whom Mahapatra considered as a champion artist: “I can’t tell you everything/ But I often hear Pablo’s voice between memory and time.” (‘Pablo Neruda in Gaya’ 50) Mahapatra was a mentor for many poets, critics and translators. Jamshedpur based poetess and one of the curators of *Hearth Within* Basudhara Roy, records her indebtedness for Jayanta Mahapatra. She elegantly writes of Mahapatra’s fascination for rivers. Mahanadi is his source for poetic thoughts and feelings:

I have returned every night to a river
which has preserved in her meanders
the pinnate stories of my youth. (‘Rehabilitation’ 56)

Jayanta Mahapatra’s training in Physics made him cerebral, straight-thinking, law-bound, specific, precise, cryptic and terse. His idioms are rich with the flavor of his culture and traditions. He writes poetry that is intensely personal and fits in the parameters of contemporary world poetry written in different cultures. According to Sahitya Akademi award winning author, Arundhati Subramaniam,

At first
it’s nostalgia—
a downpour of kisses
under a weeping umbrella.” (‘A First Monsoon Again’ 40)

Like many other Indian English poets from Orissa, ‘rain’ is Mahapatra’s one of the stock images. Arundhati’s love without a story captures Mahapatra’s fascination for the monsoon rain. H. Shiva Prakash translates from his poem Kannada: “I am your translator/ Let me translate your untimely tears (.)” (‘I Am Your Translator’ 82)

Mahapatra’s poems are like healing herbs. All his followers are translators of his hope, zeal and longings. Noted author Mani Rao in the poem ‘Chandrabhaga’ expresses her longing for Mahapatra and

his art, "In the shadow/ of the moon/ See you again." (p. 137) We wait for the timer's wondering self. We keep longing. *Scent of Rain* is Sahitya Akademi award winning poet Jayanta Mahapatra's linkages with the world of poetry and his poet-followers in the truest sense. His magazine *Chandrabhaga* played an important role in literary canon making in India and beyond.

There are so many poets, published in *Scent of Rain*, who had personal/intimate relationships with Jayanta Mahapatra and his house. Many visited his residence in Cuttack in monsoons. Many poets and scholars of poetry have his hand written letters in their personal treasury. All of them hold his silent yet subtle moves as life's precious gift. His encouragement is a vital dose for aspiring minds. Urna Bose translates her sincere feelings in the poem 'Sorrow': "Cast a spell on you, hold your free will captive/ a dark addiction, on such black onyx mornings" (p. 248). We follow patterning of repeating what is music to our ears. Urna unfurls how sorrow sits at the edge of the bed. Jayanta-da is no more and we miss him. We remember him repeating many times, "Love is as strong as death." No wind, no storm can wither away love of a great poet.

Scent of Rain is about returning to the writer and his craft. Jayanta Mahapatra's publications and appearances in seminal poetry journals and magazines all over the world carved a prominent space for Indian English poetry in the 1970s. This handsome anthology, with 189 poets, records how our hands meet, part and dreams like faith making flower-boats of relationships. A must read!



BOOK REVIEW

Mysteries Unrevealed

M. Jayadaarini

S. Hussain Zaidi, *R.A.W. Hitman: The Real Story of Agent Lima*, Simon & Schuster (S&S India), 2023, p. 304, ISBN13: 9789392099632, Rs 499/--

R.A.W Hitman: The Real Story of Agent Lima by Hussain Zaidi, that reads like a crime novel, chronicles the real-life incidents of Lucky Bisht, an NSG commando. A bestselling crime writer, Zaidi's narrative style is gripping and fast-paced, and his language, lucid and rich. The gripping style of narration, typical of certain categories of fiction, blends with real-life incidents in his writing. Unlike many of his books that are based on Mumbai Mafia, this book narrates the parallel real-life incidents of Agent Lima— allegedly assigned the duty by the R.A.W, India to eliminate the two dreaded criminals, Raju Pargai and Amit Arya of Uttarakhand, and Lakshman Bisht aka Lucky Bisht— arrested for the twin murder of the same criminals. And the story goes on ...

R.A.W, India is said to have appointed Agent Lima to eliminate the dreaded criminal, Raju Pargai, who indulged in extortion, illegal arms trade, kidnapping and killing. If need be, he was instructed to also kill Amit Arya, a lieutenant of Raju Pargai. Well-equipped Agent Lima astutely befriended Pargai and Arya and lured them into buying Kalashnikov. On the way to purchasing the weapon, Pargai and Arya were gruesomely killed near the jungles of Bhowali (Nepal border), Uttarakhand at midnight on 6th September, 2011.

Lakshman Bisht, the PSO of the Indian politician, L.K. Advani at the time, had come home in Haldwani, Uttarakhand in the end of August, 2011 to visit his sickly mother. On the morning of 6th September, 2011, he was arrested from his residence on the charges of killing Pargai and Arya. He served as an under-trial prisoner till he

was released on bail in March 2015. On 6th March, 2018, after all the enquiries and arguments, he was acquitted from the case. The narrative alternates between the preceding events to the twin murder, Bisht's tricky, elusive play with the enquiring officers, his fascinatingly challenging training period at Tel Aviv and his notorious and frustrating period of imprisonment. This method of narration compels the reader to keep moving forward in order to finish the jigsaw puzzle, thereby making complete sense of the story. More interestingly, the enigmatic and zestful nature of Lucky Bisht and his extraordinary experiences themselves render the scope for such a pulsating, non-linear narration.

A striking feature of the book is its critical foreword by Neeraj Kumar, an Ex-Delhi Police Chief. One pertinent point Mr. Kumar makes is, he is sceptical of the details of Agent Lima's operation since no intelligence agency would reveal their modus operandi. Zaidi too, debatably, does not give specific details of his references for Agent Lima's story in "Acknowledgements" though he details all his other sources. It must also be noted here that Zaidi meticulously gives rather descriptive references than mere citations at the end in almost all his non-fictions. Further, Mr. Kumar says he could not fathom Lucky Bisht's proud revelation of his story in public keeping in mind his position, an NSG Commando. However, it is not new for an Indian commando to make his story a book since we already have Mohanlal Baskar's *An Indian Spy in Pakistan* and Maloy Krishna Dhar's *Open Secrets*. Besides, Zaidi did not only rely on Bisht's story-telling, but also on interviews with related people, photographs (included in the book) and documents. Thus, with its arguable subject, the book is intriguing to discuss. Its catering to the growing interest in life stories coupled with its unique, gripping style of narration and the unrevealed mystery whether Agent Lima and Lucky Bisht are one and the same, render it a book of interest and scope to both common readers and researchers.



Book Review

Testament of Resilience

Sruthi S

Aisha Sarwari, *Heart Tantrums and Brain Tumours: A Tale of Misogyny, Marriage and Muslim feminism*. C. Hurst & Co., 2023. p. 456, ISBN: 9781787388932, Rs 1790/-

In the expansive realm of human existence, emotions stand as a profound and often mystifying force that profoundly shapes our lives. From the ecstatic highs of love to the depths of despair, emotions wield the power to sway our thoughts, actions, and even our physical well-being. Aisha Sarwari, an accomplished writer and seasoned researcher in the field of psychology, embarks on a compelling exploration that transcends conventional understandings of emotions and their impact on human health. Through a skilful blend of scientific inquiry and personal narratives, Sarwari challenges readers to question the traditional boundaries that delineate the emotional and physical realms. With meticulous research and compelling anecdotes, Sarwari endeavours to illuminate the intricate interplay between emotional well-being and physical health. She poses thought-provoking questions that delve into the depths of the human experience: Can emotional upheaval contribute to the development of brain tumours? Can the treatment of brain tumours impact emotional states and vice versa? By courageously addressing these inquiries, Sarwari leads readers on a captivating journey through the labyrinth of the human psyche and the complex dynamics of the mind-body connection. Through her insightful exploration, Sarwari invites us to reconsider our understanding of emotions and their profound influence on our overall health and well-being.

Heart Tantrums and Brain Tumours: A Tale of Misogyny, Marriage and Muslim Feminism by Aisha Sarwari is a riveting narrative that dives deep into the multifaceted journey of women,

juxtaposing the struggles of misogyny, marriage dynamics, and the evolving context of Muslim feminism. Through introspective storytelling, readers are immersed in a profound exploration of societal constructs and personal resilience, gaining insights into the complexities of womanhood within traditional patriarchal settings. Sarwari's narrative challenges readers to critically examine their own beliefs and attitudes towards gender equality, sparking conversations and inspiring action towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society. At its core, the narrative examines misogyny and its pervasive impact on women's lives. Drawing from personal experiences and those of others, the author sheds light on the subtle yet profound manifestations of gender-based discrimination in everyday interactions and societal structures. From microaggressions to systemic barriers, the narrative uncovers the layers of oppression that women navigate, prompting readers to confront the realities of sexism and advocate for change.

A central theme in the book is Sarwari's examination of marriage within traditional cultural contexts. She confronts the expectations placed on women to prioritize familial and societal obligations over their personal aspirations. By sharing her own experiences, Sarwari challenges conventional notions of love and partnership, redefining marriage as a relationship built on equality, respect, and mutual growth. Her reflections expose the emotional conflicts that arise from navigating societal pressures and advocate for a more balanced and fulfilling approach to romantic relationships. Sarwari also critiques the imbalance of power dynamics in traditional marriages, arguing that these imbalances are reflective of broader systemic inequities. Her call to action is a shift toward egalitarian models of partnership where both individuals can thrive without being confined by rigid gender roles. In doing so, she envisions marriage as a liberating rather than a limiting institution.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Heart Tantrums and Brain Tumours* is its exploration of Muslim feminism. Sarwari boldly interrogates patriarchal interpretations of Islam that have historically silenced and marginalised women. Her narrative celebrates the diversity and strength of Muslim women who challenge stereotypes, reclaim their agency, and advocate for gender justice within their

communities. By amplifying these voices, Sarwari breaks away from reductive portrayals of Muslim women as victims, instead presenting them as active participants in shaping their destinies.

A particularly striking aspect of the book is its critique of cultural and societal norms that perpetuate inequities. Sarwari scrutinizes how these norms not only restrict women but also impose rigid expectations on men, perpetuating cycles of inequality. By doing so, she advocates for a collective reimagining of societal roles, encouraging men and women alike to challenge the status quo and embrace more equitable frameworks. The personal dimension of Sarwari's narrative lends the book its emotional depth. Her candid reflections on her own life experiences offer a window into the struggles and triumphs of a woman grappling with entrenched gender norms. Through these intimate accounts, Sarwari fosters a sense of solidarity among readers, inspiring them to confront their own challenges with courage and determination. Another key strength of the book lies in its forward-looking approach. Sarwari does not merely critique existing structures but also envisions a future grounded in justice and equality. Her emphasis on collective action underscores the transformative potential of solidarity and shared purpose in dismantling oppressive systems.

In *Heart Tantrums and Brain Tumours*, Aisha Sarwari delivers a powerful and thought-provoking narrative that challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about gender, power, and societal expectations. Her incisive analysis, coupled with her personal storytelling, makes this book an essential read for anyone interested in feminist thought, cultural critique, or the complexities of womanhood in patriarchal societies. It is a rallying cry for change, urging readers to imagine and work toward a more inclusive and equitable world. This is not just a memoir or a critique it is a testament to the resilience of women and a call to action for all who aspire to a future where justice, equality, and dignity are universal realities.

Notes on Contributors

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