

The background of the cover features a collection of Indian folk art. On the left, a tall, reddish-brown wooden sculpture of a woman's head and neck is adorned with intricate carvings and a red beaded necklace. To its right, a wooden hand sculpture is shown. In the center, two small, square wooden plaques with colorful folk art designs are displayed on a dark green wooden surface. The background wall is a mix of white and red brickwork.

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Cover by Setu Chhaya on Unsplash. It depicts a group of clay animals standing next to each other. The animals are terracotta artworks created by the artists of the Adivasi community from Vadodara, Gujarat, India.

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No. 44

Autumn 2024

CONTENTS

Editorial

**Reclaiming the Folk—Contours, Contestations,
and Continuities**

Meenu A Gupta

v-xi

Interviews

**Evocations from the Past: History as Testimony in
Neelum Saran Gour's 'Requiem in Raga Janki': A
Conversation**

Madhukar Rai

1-10

Research Papers

A Critique of the Folk Praxis of Literary Circles

Urmishree Bedamatta

11-28

**Folklore as Cultural Resistance: Examining the
Incorporation of Oral Traditions in Fictional
Narratives of Goa in *The Upheaval* and *Kali Ganga***

Subhash Kamalkar

29-43

**The Figure of the "Other" in Retellings of Indian
Folk Tales: Children's Book Trust in the Early
2000s**

Prayag Ray and Debasmita Das

44-63

**Folk Narratives in Transition: A Comparative
Study of Urban Legends**

Sukhdeep Kaur

64-81

Cuttack Darshan: Urban Imagination and the Laukik Style in Colonial Odisha Siddharth Satpathy	82-99
Liandote Unau and Khupting-Ngambawm: Communicating Culture through Oral Narratives among the Vaiphei community of North-East India Nunchawii Hatlei	100-112
(Re)Historicizing Myth: Reconstructing Identity, Memory and Resistance in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's <i>Funeral Nights</i> Jemima Rahaman and Hasina Wahida	113-129
Haryanavi Folk Songs: A Folkloristic Analysis Devender Kumar	130-146
The Folklore of Challa in Popular Culture: A Psychoanalytic Exploration Mandeep Kaur	147-158
Folk Cosmology and Rural Psyche: Deconstructing Phanishwar Nath Renu's Select Short Stories Maitri Verma	159-174
Where is Lakhishree? In Search of the Smart and Strong Women of Bodo Folklore Latika Das	175-186
Thongchi: The Literary Voice of Arunachal Pradesh Subhashis Banerjee	187-202
Genderqueer Identity and Role Reversal of Masculinity and Femininity in the Select Rabha Folktales as Featured in <i>Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India</i> by Kaustav	

Chakraborty Rimjim Daimari	203-214
Reimagining the Mana: Uncanny Aesthetics, Caste Histories, and Folkloric Counter-Narratives in <i>Bramayugam</i> Sukanya V Mohan and Gigy J. Alex	215-233
Negotiating Performativity and Commodification: The Artistic Shift from <i>Pattachitra</i> to <i>Kalighat Paintings</i> Neha Pandey	234-250
Re-Negotiating the Contours of Folk: A Critical Study of Dynamic Alternative Indian Pilgrimage Anshulika Singh	251-267
Humour and Identity through “Parodic Dubbing”: The Punjabi Adaptation of <i>Shanghai Knights</i> Navneet Kaur	268-283
Folk Music as Resistance: Sartrean Authenticity in Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash’s Anti-Vietnam War Songs Rimpi Sahu	284-297
Yōkai and the Ethics of Eating: A Folkloric Perspective on the Japanese Food Practices Anjali A. R.	298-315
African Folklore, Traditional Religion, and Decoloniality: A Critical Reading of Nnedi Okorafor’s <i>Zahrah the Windseeker</i> and <i>Lagoon</i> Ananya Buragohain and Lakshminath Kagyung	316-333
Translations	
Harischandra: The Truth Incarnate (Translation of Nautanki Satyavadi Harischandra into English)	

Ravindra Pratap Singh 334-362

**Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena: Interrogating Life
through Poetic Vignettes**

Anup Beniwal 363-372

Poems

Archna Sahni 373-376

Book Reviews

***The Poet's Song: 'Folk' and its Cultural Politics in
South Asia* by Priyanka Basu**

Dr Tapashree Ghosh 377-380

Contributors



Editorial

Special Edition on Folk Culture

Reclaiming the Folk—Contours, Contestations, and Continuities

The current special edition of our journal marks a significant and heartfelt engagement with the living, breathing essence of *Lok Sanskriti*—folk culture—which continues to shape identities, strengthen communal memory, and provide creative sustenance to diverse communities across the continents. G N Devy and Partha Chatterjee, both prominent Indian scholars, have extensively engaged with folk traditions, albeit from different perspectives. Devy emphasises the intrinsic value of oral traditions, arguing that they offer alternative epistemologies and challenge the dominance of written, elite-centric knowledge systems. Partha Chatterjee, a political theorist and historian, approaches folk traditions from a critical perspective rooted in postcolonial theory and subaltern studies. His analysis reveals how folk traditions have been both romanticised and instrumentalised, serving as sites of resistance as well as tools for political agendas. But both assert the dynamic living form of folk traditions that are not merely static remnants of the past. Scholars employ a variety of theories and methodological tools to interpret and analyse folk traditions as the research in this field spans multiple disciplines and there are interdisciplinary crossovers that underscore the significance of folk traditions in shaping cultural identities and highlight the need to critically engage with these traditions beyond mere preservation, considering the socio-political contexts that influence their evolution and representation. This compilation of research papers reflects a multi-disciplinary and multi-regional dialogue on the symbolic, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions embedded in the practices, songs, tales, performances, and rituals of folk traditions.

Folklore is a repository of collective memory, identity, and moral instruction; it is also an emphatic mechanism that legitimises and perpetuates social hierarchies. Thus, folklore plays role of both

reflection and shaping of the group identity and even gender performativity. The customs, narratives and traditions that serve as an instrument of hegemonic control is also a contested space of alternative voices. This special volume takes a deeper plunge into the folk—not merely as a cultural artifact but as a vital epistemic and creative force that endures across time, space, and media to fathom the hidden, uncanny and invisible. The research papers in the volume range from the survival of the folk to the adaptation through transition into the digital age; they relive their dynamism with new interpretations. Urmishree Bedamatta, in “A Critique of the Folk Praxis of Literary Circles,” deploys a Foucauldian lens to argue for an authorship that resists subjection to power structures. She positions the literary figure as both creator and critic, engaged in a dialogic engagement with hegemonic discourse. Siddharth Satpathy through his reading on *Cuttack Darshan* reconstructs the city of Cuttack through *laukik* spatial imagination. For Satpathy, place becomes not just geography but a historical event—a lived and remembered space imbued with folk consciousness. Sukhdeep Kaur’s contribution, “Folk Narratives in Transition,” traces the migration of urban legends from oral traditions to their digital avatars. This transition reflects not only technological adaptation but also the preservation of collective anxieties and cultural memory. Similarly, Sukanya V Mohan and Gigy J Alex, in their analysis of *Bramayugam*, reveal how language of film can subvert canonical narratives through spatial disruption and character inversion. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts—carnavalesque, polyphony, and chronotope—emerge as critical tools in several papers for understanding the multiplicity and spatio-temporal layering of folk traditions. Scholars also draw on Jack Zipes’s fairy tale revisions, Homi Bhabha’s “hybridity,” and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “subaltern historiography” to contextualise indigenous voices within broader theoretical paradigms. Bakhtin’s *dialogic form* becomes especially fertile for rethinking folk as a space of exchange and contestation.

Folk culture is not merely an antiquated relic of the past to be archived or exoticised. It is a vibrant continuum—a resilient mode of knowing and expressing—that has long resisted hegemonic frameworks of high culture and colonial narratives of the “primitive.” Several contributions directly address questions of decoloniality and

resistance. Homi Bhabha's notion of the "vernacular cosmopolitan" elucidates how the incorporation of traditional cultural elements in literature fosters a nuanced negotiation between tradition and modernity. Paradoxically, folklore may even enter the postcolonial discourse to introduce their pre-colonial heritage to the colonised; as Ananya and Lakshminath situate in the works of Nnedi Okorafor. Their paper dwells into this aspect of decoloniality, challenging the prevalent Eurocentrism. The fluidity and orality of the folklore helps in the resistance to cultural erasure by contesting hegemony; which is also useful in the reconfiguration of communal history. Jemima Rahaman and Hasina Wahidas' co-authored research paper on Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Funeral Nights* is symbolic of folk literature as a cultural artifact that acts as a site of reclamation. Folk traditions, by their very nature, transcend spatial and temporal boundaries, undergoing continual reinvention across diverse contexts. These forms not only encapsulate evolving subjectivities and identities but also move fluidly from local settings to global discourses. The integration of folklore in literary works, therefore, extends beyond mere nostalgia; it functions as a vital reminder of the resilience and persistence of cultural practices amidst socio-economic transformations. Stuart Hall's insights on cultural identity reinforce the idea that folklore operates as a counter-narrative, preserving cultural resistance against modernising and globalising hegemonies. Mahasweta Devi echoes this sentiment, viewing folk traditions as reflective of the struggles and resilience of marginalised communities. William Bascom's foundational view of folklore as a mechanism for transmitting social norms and shaping collective consciousness remains equally pertinent.

The folk voice carries within subaltern wisdom, ecological sensibility, indigenous aesthetics, and deeply embodied philosophies that often go unnoticed in formal education systems or mainstream media. The role and impact of the folk culture is across religion, caste and gender as it instils ideological values in the imagined space of children, through satirical representation. Prayag Ray and Debasmita Das examine how the retelling of Indian folktales by the Children's Book Trust constricts or contests representations of "the Other." The inclusivity of the folktales disrupts gender normativity and sexual orientation; as Rimjim Daimri explores gender fluidity in Rabha

folktales, revealing how queering tribal folklore disrupts binary norms. Latika Das, in her reading of *Lakhishree*, finds in folk narratives an empowered vision of womanhood which is a ‘collective revisionary’ enterprise.

It is not only folk songs and performances, but also traditional art forms that continue to adapt to shifting socio-cultural dynamics. Neha Pandey’s paper examines this fluidity through the performative aspect of *Pattachitra*, which, she argues, finds a reconfigured expression in the *Kalighat* paintings—a transformation she situates within broader cultural and historical shifts. This thematic transformation is further theorised through Igor Kopytoff’s concept of the “cultural biography” of objects, which traces how meanings evolve with changing contexts. Anshulika contributes to this discussion by exploring the *yatra* tradition as a dynamic space of folklore and performance. Her analysis conceptualises *yatras* as an alternative mode of Indian pilgrimage that integrates modern interventions, including digital interactions, thus opening new pathways for performative and spiritual engagement.

Rimpi Sahu engages with Sartre’s existential philosophy to challenge the brutality of the war and the socio-political perpetration through Anti-Vietnam War folk songs by Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash. It is here that we see art not as a product but as an integral part of life, entwined with seasonal rhythms, social ceremonies, and ethical worldviews. Devendra Singh analyses Haryanavi folksongs in his paper “Haryanavi Folk Songs: A Folkloristic Analysis” which are conduits that establish collective consciousness; these can be compared and contrasted with folk songs from other regions or other subgenres under folk culture. Mandeep Kaur’s psychoanalytic exploration of *Challa* in Punjabi music and film highlights the trajectory involved in the adaptation of “Challa” which reflects the shifting representations of masculinity, migration and identity through its reinterpretations and reconfigured imaginations. A cultural symbol that embodies loss and longing not only becomes a metaphor for the diasporic existential crisis, it highlights different tensions of identity crisis.

The research papers also look into how the folk performance acts as a living archive — a cultural memory system or *mnemoculture* (Rao); these challenge the established Western epistemology of the written folk performance. Maitri Verma investigates folk cosmology in Phanishwar Nath Renu's short stories, showing how folk motifs encode rural philosophy and cosmological thought. These stories form a narrative repository of folk cosmology that roots his philosophical endeavours in the lived motifs recurring in local/regional social practices. Victor Turner's notions of liminality and *communitas* become useful in interpreting how pilgrimages and ritual performances reconstitute community and identity in digital and globalised contexts.

The contributions in this volume span the diverse cultural landscape of India, examining how local folk elements are integrated into contemporary creative and narrative practices. Subhash Kamalkar's study focuses on this integration in the context of Goa, analysing how the two novels *The Upheaval* and *Kali Ganga* incorporate Goan folklore to negotiate identity and memory. Nunchaiwi Hatlei turns to the Vaiphei, an ethnic group from Northeast India, to investigate how traditional practices are reshaped in response to changing belief systems and contemporary realities.

Moreover, the research in this volume speaks to the contemporary relevance of folk traditions. Anjali A R in her paper examines the evolving symbolism of *Yōkai*—supernatural beings from Japanese folklore—as they permeate contemporary Japanese food culture. Her work illustrates how folkloric motifs continue to inform ethical, cultural, and ecological sensibilities in present-day contexts. As we navigate through the noise and flux of digital modernity, the rootedness, spontaneity, and communitarian spirit of folk forms offer an alternative paradigm for cultural continuity and healing.

This special edition highlights regional diversity and intellectual depth in exploring folk traditions—from the sacred landscapes of oral epics to the performative resistance in Punjabi and Haryanavi ballads, from ritual performances like *Jatra* to the linguistic richness of folk idioms in regional and indigenous folk songs. This edition not only

emphasises the vitality of folk in the contemporary world but also calls for renewed archiving, translation, and critical scholarship rooted in Indian aesthetics. Folklore has also taken a digital turn by transiting into the online networked digital media. Thongchi's literary voice from Arunachal Pradesh is recovered and re-examined by Subhashis Banerjee, while Navneet's work on "parodic dubbing" highlights how humor and mimicry serve as active cultural memory in the digital era. Folklore here is seen as a living practice, rather than a static inheritance—one that resists essentialist framing and invites interpretive multiplicity. Through a case study of the Punjabi dubbing of *Shanghai Knights*—reimagined as *Butt Te Bhatti*—the paper illustrates how humour becomes a critical folk modality that is simultaneously rooted in oral traditions and transformed through digital recontextualisation. Here, parody operates not just as entertainment, but as a potent tool for reconfiguring public discourse in the digital present.

The collection of poems by Archana Singh included in this volume serves as a lyrical bridge between the personal and the folkloric, the domestic and the mythic. Together, these poems offer contemplative closures to the themes of cultural continuity, memory, ritual, and transcendence explored across the scholarly articles—asserting that the poetic, like the folk, holds the power to nourish, transgress, and transmute.

Anup Beniwal's translations of Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena's vignettes offer another poetic engagement with modern life as a lived contradiction. Saxena's lines — "*I think about those feet / which this shoe might have secured / And bow down in respect*"—resonate with a profound humility, bearing witness to everyday struggle and dignity. The translations exemplify Saxena's unique capacity to condense existential and political insight into concise, image-rich verse, reaffirming the folk imagination as one of survival, subversion, and reflection. This edition features R.P. Singh's evocative English translation of Bhartendu Harishchandra's iconic play, *Nautanki Satyavadi Harishchandra*, capturing the moral gravitas and emotional depth of the original while making its timeless message of truth and sacrifice accessible to contemporary readers.

This edition also features a critical review of Priyanka Basu's monograph *The Poet's Song: 'Folk' and its Cultural Politics in South Asia* (Routledge, 2024) by Tapashree Ghosh which offers a rigorous exploration of *Kobigaan*, a Bangla folk performance tradition. Anchored in extensive ethnographic fieldwork and enriched by archival and media analysis, Basu's study interrogates the cultural politics of authenticity, identity, and performance. It contributes significantly to the fields of folklore studies and South Asian cultural history, especially through its attention to gendered and caste-based dynamics within folk traditions. This issue also features an insightful conversation with Neelum Saran Gour, where she reflects on history, cultural memory, and artistic agency through her acclaimed novel *Requiem in Raga Janki*.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the contributors—scholars, field practitioners, and theorists—who have reaffirmed the significance of *Lokavidya* (people's knowledge) in contemporary discourse. Their work invites readers to rethink boundaries between oral and written, local and global, tradition and modernity. As we present this special edition, we hope it contributes to the broader national and academic efforts toward not just documenting folk culture, but living it.

This volume has come to fruition with the dedication and coordination of the editorial assistants — Arunjot Kaur and Chahat Rampal— for their tireless efforts in reaching out to the authors, experts and dealing with the timely communications. Prof Akshaya's continued mentorship has been invaluable in upholding the scholarly standards of this journal. Dr Kamalpreet and Pooja have joined the editorial team with a sense of discipline and responsibility. The contributions of Amolak Singh for his technical assistance from the Department, Shubham for type setting and Jatinder Moudgil, Manager Press for the publication of the present issue are gratefully acknowledged. This special edition contributes toward *Bharatiya Gyan Parampara*—India's indigenous knowledge systems— and inspires continued inquiry that is inclusive, critical, and creatively nourishing. It is a research volume that celebrates folk!



Interview

Evocations from the Past: History as Testimony in Neelum Saran Gour's 'Requiem in Raga Janki': A Conversation **Madhukar Rai**

A well renowned figure in the realm of contemporary Indian literature, Prof Neelum Saran Gour is an accomplished writer, translator, academic and an insightful chronicler of Allahabadi culture, history and folklore in many of her works- both fictional and non-fictional. Prof. Gour has to her credit six novels, four collection of short stories and one work of literary nonfiction. Over the years her works have garnered immense praise and critical acclaim owing to her delicate blend of imagination and authenticity. Her narrative style reflects her keen observations about the subject showcasing her imaginative flair supplemented by her in-depth understanding and awareness of her cultural milieu. Her narratives resonate with the ethos of northern India capturing the essence and evolution of the *Sangam city* from what it was during her childhood days to the present times. Born and brought up in Allahabad to a Bengali mother and a Hindi speaking father, she received her initial education from St. Mary's Convent Inter College, Allahabad and subsequently went on to study History, Philosophy and English Literature at the prestigious University of Allahabad passing her exams with distinction. Though she felt inclined to pursue civil services during her graduation days, a dream cherished by every other student of Allahabad University with the place having attained the popular sobriquet of being the IAS factory of the east, she later decided to join academia out of her deep interest in literature while simultaneously pursuing her passion of writing.

Her notable works include *Grey Pigeon and Other Stories*, *Virtual Realities*, *Sikander Chowk Park*, *Song without End and other Stories* and her famed novel *Requiem in Raga Janki*. Her work has featured in several anthologies and reputed journals both in India and abroad. Apart from her novels she has to her name numerous critical articles, short stories, book reviews and columns on a wide array of

subjects. A recipient of the coveted Charles Wallace Fellowship in the year 1993, Prof Gour has conducted many creative writing workshops for Sahitya Akademi and the Central University of Rajasthan, been a Writer-in-Residence at the Universities of Kent and Stirling and a visiting faculty in universities like JNU and Jamia Millia Islamia in her long and fruitful academic life.

The following is a gist of the conversation with the author about her literary journey, creative inspiration and her take on life and art with particular reference to her latest novel 'Requiem in Raga Janki' which won her the prestigious Hindu Prize for Fiction in 2018 and the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award in 2023.

(This interaction contains the ideas and opinions expressed by the author that have been documented by the interlocutor in his own words)

Madhukar: Respected Ma'am, firstly, on behalf of my entire Department of English, DDU Gorakhpur University, I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to you on your remarkable achievement. Winning the Sahitya Akademi Award is a testament to your phenomenal contribution to the world of letters and I feel extremely privileged to have this interaction with you. I am sure that your invaluable insights and authorial experiences would prove extremely fruitful for students and researchers of literature like us.

Neelum Saran Gour: Thank you very much, Madhukar for your kind compliments. I sincerely appreciate your department and express my sincere regards to your Head, all the faculty members and students wishing all of you good health, happiness and academic excellence.

Madhukar: Thank you Ma'am for your generous words of praise. Without further ado, I would like to ask you a few questions related to your literary journey and creative inspiration. Ma'am can you share your journey as a writer leading up to winning the Sahitya Akademi Award for your latest novel?

Neelum Saran Gour: Well, it's been a very prolific and memorable journey for me. As you rightly pointed out, I was born and brought

up in Allahabad and completed my education in the city itself. Being a single child of my working parents, I had ample time and liberty to invest myself in reading books which consequently opened up diverse and distant avenues of self-exploration for me. My parents were very caring and imposed no restrictions allowing me to live my life as per my own wishes. I loved my company as well as the company of my other family members which included uncles, aunts and my grandmother. I started writing at a very tender age of six, thanks to the congenial ambience at my home. I wrote plays for our school's puppet theatre, play-lets for school functions and stories and poems regularly. My characters are not people who happened all of a sudden but are the results of an inquisitive and creative endeavour that came naturally to me. I had already developed a strong passion for writing by the time I entered university. My experiences at the University further strengthened and shaped my creative acumen and I decided to devote my life to writing. Within six months of completing my Master's programme in English, I joined the Dept. of English as a Lecturer in the year 1977. Life since then has been a meaningful enterprise despite the responsibilities I had to attend to performing multiple roles of being a wife, mother as well as my teaching engagements in the university. I had to balance my personal and professional duties while at the same time ensuring that my creative work does not get impeded. I kept my writing on and managed to write a few novels on topics that aroused my interest culminating in my latest novel *Requiem in Raga Janki*.

In the year 2017 when I was completely engrossed in writing my novel, I was offered the position of Headship. I politely declined it citing my personal engagements. Six years from then, when I received the news of my novel being awarded the Sahitya Akademi I was elated. It is definitely a great moment for any writer to get acknowledged for one's work and I too am no exception. It was a surreal feeling.

Madhukar: Ma'am, How did you decide on the title of your novel *Requiem in Raga Janki* and what significance does it hold in relation to your story?

Neelum Saran Gour: The word requiem refers to a musical composition performed in remembrance of a deceased person. It's a kind of death dirge. While I was reading about the story of Janki Bai Ilahabadi, the chief protagonist of my novel and her incredible talent of Hindustani classical music by dint of which she uplifted her from a life of penury to a life of prominence after facing unrelenting horrors in her childhood, I was startled to realise how we, as a community have forgotten our social and cultural history, our legends and lore and most importantly our cultural icons like Janki Bai Ilahabadi. It's extremely pathetic that Allahabad or for that matter the entire Northern Indian landscape which was once the emporium of culture, music and performing arts started getting devoid of its rich and vibrant tradition in the wake of colonial modernity. My novel chronicles this eventual change which came with the invention of the gramophone in the early twentieth century and the crucial impact it had on Hindustani classical music which was flourishing then under royal patronage with live performances in packed concerts and only the most affluent people of the city in attendance. The gramophone significantly changed and extended the nature of audiences for the classical Hindustani music. It allowed for mass production and distribution of music recordings, making classical music accessible to a much broader audience. This technological advancement meant that people could listen to music in their homes, at their convenience. It also helped to preserve the performances of legendary artists, allowing future generations to experience their music. Despite such an illustrious history of music, it is this discernible erasure of our past glory and musical tradition that propelled me to choose this title as a musical tribute in remembrance of a forgotten musical maestro whose life and legacy needed to be told to the world.

Madhukar: That's indeed is a very interesting take on the subject Ma'am. My next question is- were there any particular authors or literary works that influenced you to write this novel?

Neelum Saran Gour: To be frank, the life of Janki Bai Ilahabadi itself was the greatest inspiration behind this novel. I was enchanted when I first came across her tale in bits and pieces rummaging through old history books, colonial archives and courtly memoirs documenting the history of classical Hindustani music and its various

ragas emblematic of different moods and occasions like happiness, mirth, anger, disappointment, joy etc. But yes, before writing this novel I had to read many things particularly about the musical tradition of Allahabad, the once prevalent kotha-culture and the different ragas in detail from various available sources. It enriched my understanding of Janki Bai's life and musical temperament. As to biographical details about Janki, there was precious little to be accessed. Only two copies of her verse collection exist, of which I was fortunate to obtain one. There is a well-researched article in the Hindi magazine 'Dharmayug' and a short film by Doordarshan about her. I explored archival lists of gramophone records such as Akbar Allahabadi's personality and poetry, the Delhi Durbar and the national movement as it evolved in Allahabad.

Madhukar: Janki Bai's life is undoubtedly a tale of resilience and fortitude pitched against a mountain of adversities and personal loss which she tides over with grace as portrayed in the novel. Ma'am what were the challenges that you encountered while writing *Requiem in Raga Janki*?

Neelum Saran Gour: Challenges are an indispensable part of a writer's life particularly when you are working on a subject or idea that has been barely explored in literature. As I previously mentioned when I first took upon this idea as a potential subject for my novel, I was struck by the insufficiency of material on her. This confounded me greatly as how come the life of one of Allahabad's greatest musical artists whose mellifluous renditions bequeathed an air of divine grace and enthralled her audiences that included kings, princes, nawabs and the elite and influential of the city bowing in front of her musical orchestrations could over the passage of a hundred years fade into anonymity. I took this challenge of resurrecting her life through my novel and reinstating her with the respect and recognition that she deserves in society.

Madhukar: Ma'am many readers have hailed your book as a celebration of the notion of 'female agency' through Janki Bai's life and ordeals. How far do you agree with this statement?

Neelum Saran Gour: Once a book enters the public domain it's the readers who decide its fate. However as the author, I would not negate the statement at all because Janki Bai's character does exude an air of feminist assertion, a person who coming out of the infamous dingy alleys of Allahabad where her mother was sold in a brothel and could have easily faded into oblivion decided to carve her own path. She found her muse in Hindustani classical music-thanks to her mother and was extremely fortunate to find a tutor like Hassu Khan whose strict training established her as own of the finest practitioners of Hindustani music in the Indian subcontinent. Her journey epitomizes her lifelong conflict with her fate- from being stabbed fifty six times by her suitor, a life changing incident that earned her an unusual hypocorism of 'Chhappan Churi' facing desertion by her father, a failed marriage, losing her adopted daughter to cholera and son to the evils of drug addiction. But despite her miseries, Janki Bai never compromised with her art. Music for her was not an achievement but an offering, a kind of spiritual calling that she soaked herself in every way.

Unfolding against the backdrop of colonial India, Janki's story offers us with a glimpse into the extraordinary life of a lone woman who defied societal norms and left an indelible mark on history and music. Her ascension from the sordid corridors of being a 'kothe-wali' to becoming one of the most cherished voices of her time is an example of her unwavering commitment to her vocation. It was difficult to even imagine that in the patriarchal society of Allahabad which she was a part of. Her story also makes us reconsider our popular perceptions of the kotha as a place of moral debauchery and sensual indulgence, emphasizing its importance as a bustling center of artistic and cultural patronage, something that lost its charm in the wake of colonial modernity.

Madhukar: Ma'am I came across one of your interviews published in the Times of India where you talked about how the figure of the courtesan has drawn considerable re-examination in the present times? What can be the reasons behind this?

Neelum Saran Gour: Well, Janki's story struck me for its existential reverberations, the story of an artist torn between her inner and outer

life. But talking about the courtesan culture, I think that the primary reason for this renewed interest in the life of a courtesan is the rich repository of cultural and historical essence that it imbibes. Courtesans in India, often referred to as *tawaifs*, played a significant role in the cultural and musical landscape especially during the Mughal era and the subsequent princely states. They were highly skilled in classical music, dance and poetry and were considered as embodiments of a refined culture and etiquette having been trained in the popular *sangeet gharanas* of the time. The *gharana* system in Indian classical music refers to a lineage or school of music that follows a particular style and tradition. Many of these courtesans thus played an important role in the preservation and propagation of classical music, transmitting the musical traditions of these gharanas to wider audiences. This interest thus stems from an eagerness to explore the rich history and cultural impact of these women for example Gauhar Jaan and Janki Bai Ilahabadi. Exploring courtesan culture also sheds light on the prevalent gender roles of the time, notions of sexuality and female agency. It challenges our conventional assumptions compelling us to re-examine the concocted narratives of history which have been handed down to us by historians and hence not free from their innate subjective biases.

Madhukar: Ma'am, one important message that you wish to convey to your readers through your novel?

Neelum Saran Gour: The readers are free to interpret my work as they wish to. I believe that is the essence of art. Though on a personal note, I would like to say that we need to be observant and culturally sensitive as students of literature. Janki Bai's story teaches us that one's adversities in life cannot be a deterrent to realizing one's dreams provided one is resolute and daring enough to pursue it with conviction. Secondly, we need to narrate such stories more and more. The contemporary set of readers need to know about the glorious history, culture and customs of this land. Our heritage shapes our identity. Delving into the past, knowing about the lives of important figures, artists, musicians, leaders, courtesans etc. acquaints us with their contributions in life, their struggles and resilience against all odds. And, for knowing our history it's very important for us to read, something which I find is on the wane in the new generation. It's

important for us to understand how societies have evolved, the challenges they faced and the progress they made.

Madhukar: Ma'am your opinion on the state of Indian writing in English in India?

Neelum Saran Gour: I think that the state of Indian writing in English is very good. It's an ever evolving and expanding arena. In recent years, we have witnessed a vibrant resurgence with new writers experimenting with new forms and narrative techniques. It's good to see so many young talents ranging from university graduates to even working professionals writing these days dealing with a wide range of themes, emotions and issues. Literature has branched out in unexpected ways. While this literature continues to reflect Indian culture, tradition, social values, the changing patterns of life and living, recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience, something that was lost in the concoctions of colonial discourses that brought out only one dimension of things. When we see the growth of creative writing in India and the kind of admiration it has garnered both within the country and worldwide there arises a sense of hope for the future.

Madhukar: Thanks for your observations ma'am. Ma'am over the past few years we have seen a gradual shift in literary discourses that have given rise to new fields of interdisciplinary research, spatiality studies being one of them. In many of your novels like *Three Rivers and a Tree*, *Allahabad Aria: Stories about Allahabad* or for that matter *Requiem in Raga Janki* itself you have kept the city of Allahabad as your fictional backdrop? Is it some sort of an individual fascination that most of your stories are about this city itself? How do you react when readers call you as one of the finest raconteurs /chronicles of the city?

Neelum Saran Gour: See it's not something that was pre-meditated. We need to acknowledge the fact that the spaces we inhabit have an indelible impact on our cultural conditioning, thought process and even our consciousness. Allahabad is a city I was born and brought up in, received my education and taught for four decades of my life. There is no place on earth that I know better than this city. Whether

it's my stories about the city or my anecdotal narratives of the history of my university everything has been told from an insider's perspective, collective memories and imprints culled from my long association with this place as one can evince from my works.

The city, as I have tried to portray through my novels carries a unique cultural character of its own marked by a beautiful co-existence of different cultural and linguistic traditions, a prominent center of art and music for many years. You will find people of different tongues be it Awadhi, Hindustani, Urdu, Persian, Bhojpuri, Braj Bhasha and English all in this city living together since centuries. All religions be it Hinduism, Christianity and Islam have their presence in this city. It's not only the holy Sangam of three rivers that attributes this place its identity but also a harmonious confluence of different ways of life and belief systems that imparts it a mutually cohesive and multi-cultural appeal. Coming to my novel *Requiem in Raga Janki*, the city of Allahabad is very crucial to understand the pulse of my narrative. Allahabad and the entire North India had a very rich tradition of Hindustani classical music which got significantly altered with the arrival of the gramophone. My protagonist Janki Bai epitomizes the opulence and prosperity of classical music in a city where she once came as a destitute child but went on to become its greatest cultural ambassadors. Allahabad for me is not a physical space, it's a realm of consciousness which pervades my work. It's like an omniscient observer that moves with the passage of time but does not cast away its antique charm and artistic efflorescence. However, over the years the city as I used to know it has changed considerably. With a change in political dispensation one can notice a perceptible shift in the attitudes and mannerisms and the cosmopolitan ethos that it was once known for. Anyone who has lived in this city for a long time can tell you that. The city for me is a creative landscape that holds the canvas on which I apply my brush. It's my place of belonging and comfort. But I am also critical about it. I have many reservations about the changes that this secular city has undergone in the past few years casting a sense of disconnection and defamiliarization for the natives like us. People are the same but their priorities have shifted. For me it's an integral part of my literary imagination.

Madhukar: Thank you very much, Ma'am for your insightful words. I am extremely honored to interact with you and learn so many things from your nuanced understanding of literature. Thank you very much for sparing your valuable time to speak with me about your novel. It's truly an enriching moment for me as a student of literature. Ma'am one last question of mine to end with. What honest advice would you like to give to the new generation of writers?

Neelum Saran Gour: The only advice I would like to give to the new generation is to be real to themselves, to find authenticity in their expressions. Remember, it's your originality and observation of events that sets you apart from others. Be true to yourself and listen to your inner voice. Pay attention to the world around yourself, the people, and their interactions. Be firm about what you stand for and what matters to you. Writing is not a vocation, but a calling just like any other art form. It's about finding fulfillment in your expressions and convictions. Thank you!



A Critique of the Folk Praxis of Literary Circles

Urmishree Bedamatta*

Abstract

As spaces where literary activity is shaped collectively through dialogue, critique, and collaboration, literary circles such as *sahitya sansads* and assemblies represent a folk praxis. Odia author Faturananda (1915-1995) represents the communal praxis of these groups through the figure of the “literary human” by using “everyday life” as an active space for social and cultural critique. One gets to observe the dynamics of folk praxis through Faturananda’s satirical lens when the “literary human” finds no fulfillment in solitary pursuits and seeks to integrate into a collective literary folk. Using humour as a sharp tool to examine individual and institutional behaviour, Faturananda focuses on mundane literary life—poets’ quarrels, economic woes and rivalries—to reveal how collective efforts to produce “good literature” often devolve into self-serving behaviour and performative rituals such that meetings and festivals replace real intellectual engagement, and writing becomes formulaic, trend-driven, and politically superficial. Finally, Faturananda suggests that while literary circles promise collaboration, genuine literary creation is an individual and often a lonely pursuit. As he himself was an author, and thus, a participant in literary circles, Faturananda’s critique may very well be read as a reflexive commentary on his own experience.

Keywords: Faturanada, Folk Praxis, Literary Human, Sahitya Sansad

Introduction

The “literary human” may be defined by his entanglement with literature as both a personal vocation and a societal role. This figure has been scrutinised for his creativity and contributions as well as for the contradictions, vanities, and aspirations that shape his existence.

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Michel Foucault, for example, offers a critical lens to view the “literary human” not as an isolated genius but as a construct shaped by broader institutional and social discourses. While discussing his concept of the “author-function” in “What is an Author?” Foucault argues how authorship ties the writer to networks of power, where their public identity is both a product of societal expectations and a reflection of their inner creativity. Similarly, Roland Barthes, in “The Death of the Author,” dismantles the centrality of the author in literary interpretation, and redirects focus to the text itself. This challenges the inflated sense of self-importance associated with the “literary human” while critiquing their pursuit of personal legacy over the communal and interpretive life of literature. Pierre Bourdieu’s exploration of the “field of cultural production” (37) further complicates the image of the “literary human”. In Bourdieu’s view, the literary field operates as a competitive space where writers and intellectuals vie for recognition, legitimacy, and symbolic power. Within this field, the “literary human” is simultaneously an artist and an economic agent, negotiating between creative ideals and the demands of market forces. This tension exposes the pragmatic undercurrents of literary production, where artistic endeavours are often shaped by the pursuit of financial stability and social prestige. Edward Said’s depiction of the intellectual in *Representations of the Intellectual* builds on this critique, framing the “literary human” as a public figure caught between their ideals and the compromises imposed by institutional affiliations and societal constraints. Said presents the “literary human” in a dual role, as a creator and a critic of power, and points to the contradictions inherent in their position as both insider and outsider within systems of authority.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism adds another dimension to the understanding of the “literary human”. Bakhtin (45) emphasises the inherently interactive and polyphonic nature of literature, challenging the romanticised notion of the solitary writer. The “literary human”, from this perspective, is not an isolated genius but a participant in an ongoing cultural and social dialogue. This view resonates with Thorstein Veblen’s critique of “conspicuous consumption,” where cultural production, including literature, becomes entangled with displays of social status and power (68). In Veblen’s framework, the “literary human” is often complicit in the

commodification of art, producing works that serve as markers of prestige as much as they do as vessels of meaning. Georg Lukács, in his studies of the novel, highlights the “literary human” as a mediator between individual creativity and collective social experience. Yet, Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, also critiques the practice in capitalist societies, where cultural products are commodified leading to the alienation of creators (of art) (149-222). Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters* takes this critique to a global scale, examining how writers navigate the tension between local traditions and the aspirations for inclusion in a global literary canon. Casanova’s insights reveal the inequalities and hierarchies within the literary field, exposing how the aspirations of the “literary human” are shaped by global structures of power and prestige.

At the heart of these critiques lies the inherent contradiction in the life of the “literary human”: their simultaneous dedication to creativity and their entanglement with societal, economic, and institutional forces. These forces not only constrain but also shape the vanities and aspirations of the “literary human”, who often finds themselves striving for authenticity while navigating the demands of recognition, financial stability, and public relevance.

This paper will study an author’s critique of the folk praxis of literary circles through the figure of the “literary human” and the ludicrous ways in which they engage with literature in communal settings. These literary beings are not only creators and consumers of texts but also active participants in the social and cultural dynamics of their milieu. In Faturananda, the “literary human” is an agentic site for exploring the interplay of ambition, creativity, and the social practices that sustain a literary community. This paper is a close reading of Faturananda’s satirical essays such as “Mangalabariya Sahitya Sansad” (Tuesday Literary Association), “Kalam Chhadei (Literary Rivalry),” “Kabi bheda” (Types of Poets), “Khuntinantyalochaka” (The Quibbler Critic), “Odia Sahityare Ambulance Juga” (The Age of Ambulance in Odia Literature), “Medical College re Meher Jayanti” (Meher Jayanti in Medical College), and “Adhunika Kabyajugara Pratistha” (Establishment of the Age of Modern Poetry), which examine the paradoxes and pretensions of the figure of the “literary human” and provide a unique

lens to explore the absurdities and dynamics of literary and intellectual collectives. For the purpose of this paper, all passages taken from the works of Faturananda have been translated into English by the author.

Faturananda and the Cultural Context of Cuttack

Faturananda, or Ramchandra Mishra—his lesser-known given name—stands as a unique figure in the landscape of Odia literary satire. His works blend humour, sharp observation, and an intimate understanding of the social and cultural milieu of his time to create a vivid tableau of human behaviour, particularly within the literary circles of Odisha. Faturananda's writings exemplify the imaginative use of humour as a tool to explore social behaviour, with a focus on the category of the "literary human" in the cultural context of Cuttack, where he resided for the greater part of his life. Through his satirical lens, Faturananda, much like Molière, Cervantes, Alexander Pope, and Mark Twain, illuminates the contradictions and pretensions of intellectual and literary figures.

Cuttack, often regarded as the epicentre of Odia modernity, and with its illustrious literary heritage epitomised by the establishment of the *Utkal Sahitya Samaj* in 1902, fostered an environment teeming with literary activity. This milieu of ambition, competition, and small-town politics shaped the character and behaviour of the literary human. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued in *Distinction*, social space is constructed through struggles for cultural capital, and in the literary world, these struggles are often deeply intertwined with notions of status, prestige, and the power to define what constitutes "literature." In Cuttack, the literary human becomes enmeshed in such struggles, revealing the often absurd and contradictory forces at play within this creative domain.

Faturananda himself embodies this literary persona, deriving his pen name from his natural disposition for *faturkhorī*, or indulgence in wit and banter. This term encapsulates his method, which involves a playful yet incisive critique of the literary and social practices of his time. His approach reflects a deep engagement with the everyday, both as a site of observation and as a subject of critique. Erving

Goffman's notion of the "presentation of self" in everyday life also resonates here, as Faturananda paints the "literary human" as individuals constantly managing their social persona through their involvement in literary production and public performances. For example, Faturananda explains how an author, weary of the solitary grind of reading and writing, slowly comes to the realisation that perhaps he ought to join the living, breathing community.

Why should one trek to ten different places to preach about literature or seek the opinions of his readers? Instead, wouldn't it be more efficient if ten like-minded souls gather in one spot to talk about literature? After all, ten people, with twenty hands, should be more than enough to knead the literary dough. The result? Well, it could be brilliant or utterly dreadful – it's a gamble, really. This gathering spot? It's called the *sansad*, or, more specifically, the *sahitya sansad*, the literary assembly. And when literature calls, much like nature's unavoidable summons, the literary human hurries to the *sansad*, eager to relieve himself of both his intellectual and physical burdens. ("Mangalabariya Sahitya Sansad" 1-2)

Faturananda's "literary humans" are much like Molière's characters – exaggerated types whose social pretensions, flaws, and hypocrisies are exposed for the audience's amusement. In *The Learned Women* (orig. *Les Femmes Savantes*), for example, Molière ridicules the pretentiousness of those who feign literary knowledge for social status. Similarly, Faturananda's portrayal of the literary human mocks the superficiality of individuals who, in their attempts to elevate themselves as intellectuals or artists, often expose their lack of genuine insight. Like Molière, Faturananda employs humour to reveal how individuals manipulate social roles—whether literary, intellectual, or otherwise—to mask deeper insecurities or ambitions.

Everyday Life and Humour as Method

Faturananda employs “everyday life” not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active site of social interaction and cultural production. His humour, far from being frivolous, serves as a methodological tool to dissect and critique the behaviour of individuals and institutions. Drawing on the ideas of Henri Lefebvre in *The Critique of Everyday Life*, one can see how Faturananda’s focus on the mundane elements of literary life, such as the squabbles of poets, their economic struggles, and their petty rivalries, allows him to offer a critique of the social and political tensions that shape literary communities. For example, in “Odia Sahityare Ambulance Juga” in *Sāhitya Chāṣa*, one sees Ajay in emotional turmoil after having faced public humiliation for his defence of Upendra Bhanja’s literature. He had been attacked by a Natabara who described Bhanja’s language as *bajara boli* (street language) and positioned the poet’s work within the “municipality garbage dumping yard” (*Sāhitya Chāṣa* 3) leading to a near-catatonic withdrawal of Ajay. Natabara offers an aggressive revisionist critique by supplanting literary authority with contemporary critical frameworks. The interaction between Ajay and Natabara is a theatrical representation of literary debates, ideological clashes, and the performance of intellectual discourse on an everyday basis. At the same time, it highlights the polemical extremes to which literary debates may descend such that intellectual disagreements are transformed into performative acts of dominance. Ramesh, who is Ajay’s friend, plans an intellectual ambush on Natabara by organising another literary assembly. Manipulating Natabara’s intellectual vanity, Ramesh tells him that he is the only person who can speak about the postmodern era and Natabara is elated. This shows how literary human interactions are sometimes ego-driven.

Faturananda narrates the evolution of a literary association as a social institution, from its optimistic beginnings to its eventual decline, amid the “literary human’s” entanglements with personal grievances, competitive self-fashioning, and the perpetual struggle for ideological ascendancy, offering an incisive critique of the folk praxis of the literary human.

Within the literary world of Cuttack, Faturananda's "literary human" resonates in Lodge's satirical representation of intellectuals who are more concerned with social climbing and prestige than with genuine scholarship. Much like Faturananda, Lodge uses humour to expose the social dynamics, rivalries, and pretensions that govern intellectual and cultural communities. Lodge's characters are often embroiled in the absurdities of academic life, where personal ambition and professional competition intersect. Both Lodge and Faturananda, through humour, critique the often-ridiculous nature of professional and literary identity, highlighting how personal ambition can distort intellectual integrity.

Literary Production as a Social Imperative

In a meeting of the Mangalabariya Sahitya Sansad, there's an urgent demand: "Somehow, we have to bring out a magazine" ("Mangalabariya Sahitya Sansad" 6). The *sansad* members are driven by social expectation and peer pressure, and seem troubled by the frequency with which literary magazines are produced like babies emerging from a gynaecology ward. The *sansad* needs to assert its presence within the literary field and, therefore, must publish a magazine. It doesn't matter if they have nothing unique to say. They are wracked by their failure to publish and are troubled by the threat to their visibility and legitimacy as a group of connoisseurs of literature. Faturananda tells us that their anxiety and frustration is akin to "someone twisting the tail of a cobra" (6). They are deeply conscious of the competitive hierarchy and the need to make their presence felt in literary circles. They ask, "Are all these magazine publishers ten-month-old babies while we remain a six-month-old infant?" (6). In this context, literary production functions as an economy of prestige where outputs such as books, magazines, journals serve as currency that determine the *sansad*'s status and publishing becomes a means of self-legitimation.

As the group debates what kind of magazine to publish, one notices a tension between the idealised objective of literature and the practical realities of literary engagement. First, they decide to launch a poetry magazine but drop the idea as poetry is an idle preoccupation of most "writers." It is feared that the magazine may become a

dumping ground for contributors. Besides, the rejected poets, with their fragile egos, might form a union or even resort to violence. Second, they discuss if they could start a story magazine. But doubts arise about whether short fiction alone would garner substantial readership. Also, there's a scarcity of good writers. Next, a mixed-genre magazine is proposed. Someone also suggests a "quarrel section" arguing that conflict draws attention everywhere, all the time. However, the *sansad* secretary rejects the idea saying that a *sansad* like theirs should serve society's interests and not disrupt them. Nonetheless, the proposition makes it clear that literary culture is as much about social drama as it is about intellectual exchange. The discussions reflect how the folk praxis is dictated more by established conventions and audience expectations rather than creative aspirations or innovative forms. There is considerable anxiety about what people might consume and how the *sansad* would be perceived as a literary collective. This serves as an illustration of how the process of producing literature may be dictated more by societal pressures, competition, and the need for social validation and less by a genuine artistic impulse.

We see a similar critique of the commercialisation of literature and the rise of mediocre writers in Alexander Pope's mock-epic *The Dunciad*. Pope creates a satirical universe where the "dunces"—mediocre poets and critics—are celebrated to highlight the degradation of literary standards in a world where culture is commodified. Pope's critique, centred on the vanity of writers more concerned with public status than with genuine literary creation. Similarly, Faturananda explores the literary human as a unique social category, for whom literature is both a cultural necessity and a commodity. This duality emerges clearly in "Mangalabariya Sahitya Sansad," which finally publishes a magazine aimed at guiding the public but also exposes the economic challenges of literary production. Here, the literary human is not merely a creator of culture but also an economic agent, negotiating between artistic aspirations and the realities of the marketplace. Faturananda's sharp wit and typologies of poets (*Mangalabariya* 20-23), such as the *bhua kabi* (loud, lusty poet), *barachaulia kabi* (learned but indecipherable poet), and *chhagalia kabi*, whose compositions read like neither prose nor poetry, or like both, reveal how the pursuit of literary

success often becomes a performance of social distinction, much like the “conspicuous consumption” Veblen describes in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. For Veblen, cultural consumption, like other forms of consumption, is not just about use but about displaying one’s social standing. Similarly, Faturananda’s “literary human” navigates the complex intersection of artistic creation, social status, and economic necessity, where the performance of literary success becomes as much about gaining social distinction as it is about genuine creative output.

Critics do not escape Faturananda’s satire either. In one episode, a critic lavishes praise on a puerile piece titled “Cow,” hailing it as a profound commentary on modern civilisation and drawing ludicrous parallels to T S Eliot and Ezra Pound (“Mangalabariya” 40–42). These humorous portrayals highlight the absurdities of literary personas while critiquing the pretensions of the literary world. Mark Twain’s *Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses* engages in a similar critique, humorously disassembling the work of a celebrated writer by lampooning the inconsistencies and improbable plot devices in Cooper’s narratives. Twain’s satire functions as a masterclass in literary critique, using sharp humour to reveal how Cooper’s works, such as *The Last of the Mohicans*, fall short of literary standards due to their melodrama, mischaracterisation, and clumsy writing. Both Faturananda and Twain critique the way celebrated literary figures are often held in high regard despite their technical shortcomings.

The “literary human” in Faturananda does not wish to remain a solitary figure and aspires to a public persona. This shift reflects how the identity of the writer becomes inextricably linked to the broader social and political structures. In literary festivities such as *kabita patha sabha* (poetry reading sessions), the act of writing transforms from a private endeavour into a communal, performative act. These events not only create a space for literary expression but also impose a form of social responsibility on poets, compelling them to entertain, engage, and align with the expectations of their audiences. Faturananda highlights how this public engagement is deeply political, with poets composing slogans for political parties and eulogies for state leaders, thereby blending artistic expression with social utility. As Foucault suggests, the writer’s public identity is

shaped less by individual intention than by the power dynamics of the society in which they function. Poets become a conduit for political and social discourse, with their role as an “author” increasingly being defined by the political and social contexts that assign meaning and authority to their work. In this sense, the evolution of the “literary human” reflects the way the “author-function” is embedded in the larger network of power, where literary creation serves both artistic and societal purposes.

Faturananda goes beyond mere literary endeavour to present a multifaceted critique of the social behaviour of the “literary humans”. Pointing to himself as one of them, he characterises them with exaggerated traits such as *amruta behia* (shamelessness), *maskara* (clownishness), and *khilikhilia* (irreverence). These attributes, though comical, highlight the resilience and adaptability necessary to navigate the competitive and often precarious world of literary ambition. For Faturananda, literature is not merely a reflection of society but an active participant in its construction and critique. By portraying the literary human as both a creator and a product of social forces, he highlights the reciprocal relationship between literature and social behaviour, emphasising literature’s role in shaping and questioning the social fabric.

Ritual, Performance, and Absurdity in a Literary Memorial Meeting

In an essay titled “Medical College re Meher Jayanti” (Meher Jayanti in a Medical College), Faturananda shows how the “literary human’s” engagement with literature is mediated through collective rituals that prioritise performance over substance. The event is the literary commemoration of the famous Odia poet, Gangadhar Meher, in a medical college. The absurdity begins with the choice of the place for the event. The doctors and the medical students have the venue decorated with skeletal remains, anatomy posters, and surgical equipment. The speakers engage in a bizarre postmortem of the poet’s physical health, discussing his ailments and speculating on the medical history of the poet who is long dead. A doctor stands up and begins his speech thus:

Chairman and friends! Today, we are celebrating the birth anniversary of a man known in every lane of Odisha. There may be places in Odisha where not a single doctor is available, but there is no place where the late poet Gangadhar Meher is unknown. The day of the poet's birth falls exactly one month and twenty-four days after the death of the founder of modern anatomy, Henry Gray. Sambalpur, a district with a high incidence of heat strokes and the birthplace of the great anatomy teacher, the late Sanatan Pujari, was honoured to welcome the poet into its fold. Since childhood, Meher's health was frail due to a lack of nutritious food. A deficiency of vitamin D was evident, and there was also a possibility of calcium deficiency. As a child, he once fell while playing, and a minor injury severely affected his hand. If this wasn't due to calcium deficiency, then what was? However, his health improved in adulthood as he followed an organic diet. His engagement in weaving led to a slight curvature of the spine. On one occasion, he injured his finger with a spindle, which became septic and developed into an infection. (*Sahitya Chasa* 12–13)

This explains how literature is often subjected to inappropriate and self-indulgent modes of analysis. The memorial meeting ultimately descends into chaos when a speaker mentions how the poet got burnt when his house had caught fire and a student asks whether or not tannic acid ointment or gel was applied. To this, the speaker replied:

No, although tannic acid had been formulated by that time, its use on burns was not known to anyone. Instead, his burns healed completely with the application of edible coconut oil. His father, Chaitana Dev, and mother, Sebati Devi, were deeply distressed by this incident.

In 1907, in the 7th volume of *Utkal Sahitya*, he published a prose work titled *Eha Ki Pruthibira Sabda* (Is This Earth's Sound). He wrote this under the

influence of a delusion, as he kept hearing a buzzing sound—*bhon-bhon*. Sometimes, even the wise experience delusion. His perception of this sound was a sign of nervous debility.

Whatever the case may be, his body endured until April 4, 1924. On that day, the people of Odisha came to know that their venerable poet was no more. (13)

The speakers' preoccupation with everything else but what Meher wrote is a commentary on the common pitfall of literary discourse, where critics impose an interpretation onto authors, forcing the works to conform to contemporary concerns and disciplinary and theoretical frameworks. The medical students engage with Meher's literature, reducing poetry to a series of pharmacological and anatomical metaphors. They compare poetic effects to medical conditions and treatments. For example, *Tapaswini* is likened to bromide-induced paralysis, *Pranaya Ballari* is compared to opium, and *Bharati Bhabana* to quinine's bitterness against colonial rulers (*Sahitya Chasa*, 13-15).

Thus, literary discussions lead to new interpretative angles, however absurd, asserting one's intellectual dominance within the group. In this context, the act of discussing literature becomes more important than literature itself. The meeting ended with the remark of the chairman who wished to end with a respectable note about the poet: "The perspective from which you have evaluated literature has never been seen before. If literature were ever injured, I have no doubt that you would cleanse it with antiseptic lotion and bandage it with gauze" (*Sahitya Chasa*, 13). Faturananda draws a parallel between the fixation on illness and treatment and the way literary discussions in public forums revolve around tangential displays of knowledge. He makes clear the absurd dynamics of literary culture when literature is mediated through communal rituals rather than solitary, personal and informed engagement with texts. The memorial meeting, meant to honour a poet, then becomes a stage for intellectual acrobatics and literature is dissected like a clinical specimen.

Literary Manifestos and the Ritual of Exorcism

The “literary human” is not immune to internal divisions, as Faturananda humorously depicts the conflicts between the “ancients” and the “moderns.” While these debates ostensibly centre on literary aesthetics, they often mask deeper struggles for cultural authority and status within evolving literary traditions. Faturananda critiques these rivalries with humour, revealing their pettiness and the underlying social ambitions of those involved. In the essay “Adhunika Kabyajugara Pratistha” (Establishment of The Era of Modern Poetry), Faturananda shows how writers, as a group, construct movements, enforce trends, and fight for legitimacy in ways that have little to do with literature itself:

There was a great deal of enthusiasm among the budding writers that day. They had all made up their minds to establish the era of modern poetry as soon as possible; no more waiting would be tolerated. The foundation had to be laid that very day.

A large-nosed man spoke up: “What a disgrace! An entire era is about to end, yet Bhanja, Kabisurjya, and Radhanath still sit on the poet’s throne! They died long ago, but their ghosts refuse to leave. No wonder outsiders claim that Odisha has stopped producing poets! No, no, we will forcefully remove them from the collective memory of Odia people. Only then can we comfortably establish a new era.”

A poet with a Hawaiian-style shirt added, “We should hurl clumps of earth at the homes of those who still discuss old poetry. Wherever we find their portraits, we’ll tear them down. Even Mahadev fears clods of earth. Who are they to withstand them? Once people forget the old poets, we can firmly establish our foundation.”

A bald poet with bulging eyes objected: “That’s not right. Beware! Don’t speak of throwing clods. They might land on innocent heads. We need another way. Once our new poetry rises, the dark age of the past will disappear on its own. For now, let’s start writing.”

A poet in loose pyjamas stood up. “But isn’t this like tying a bell around a cat’s neck? Even if people have forgotten the old poets, we still have Mansingh, Gadnayak, Nityananda, and Routray standing like four pillars. How do you expect to leap over them? They’re not old enough to simply wait for their turn to end!”

A curly-haired poet responded casually: “Why stress over that? Four cents’ worth of potassium cyanide will take care of all four. Just invite them over and slip it into their tea. You all don’t know how Praharaj signed off from this world.”

A thick-lipped poet shouted, “Ram, Ram, Ram! Don’t talk about such sins! Why go to such extremes? If we simply make a scene in public, those four will retreat on their own. Remember how rishis and munis would hide in caves to escape worldly troubles? All we need is a loud quarrel.”

Many nodded in agreement. “Yes, yes, that’s the way.” The proposal was clearly popular. The discussion then turned to how the foundation would be established.

A restless poet declared, “We must create a new model of poetry today, immediately! To produce large quantities of modern poetry, we need a model that is easy for everyone to follow. If it’s not accessible, we won’t be able to write in bulk. In this era, numbers matter most. Our poetry must rise democratically. Now, let’s decide what our model should be.”

The model-making began. One poet suggested, “Forget those old metres and patterns; they only slow us down. Our poetry should flow like straw in the wind, with no obstacles, no need for thought or emotion. Like an infant’s babbling, just write whatever comes to mind. Editing or revising is pointless. And there should be no difference between verse and prose; everything should be unified. Even the *Malika* says: *Sarbe hoibe ekakara, na thiba vedara vichara* (All will become one; there would be no differentiation as prescribed in the Vedas).” (*Sahitya Chasa*, 17–19).

The exaggerated calls to exorcise the ghosts of older poets, throw clods of earth at those who still discuss them, and chant slogans against established writers reflect how literary movements often depend on iconoclasm, which is the rejection and destruction of previous literary traditions to assert their own authority. However, this rejection is merely performative, not substantive. The so-called revolution is less about creating new poetry than about attacking the old guard, a common pattern in the history of literary movements, where innovation may be driven by a need for differentiation rather than artistic necessity. Faturananda, thus, critiques literary movements that are often more about establishing dominance in a literary marketplace than about actual artistic renewal. The need to ‘kill’ past poets is a social strategy, not an aesthetic necessity.

In their bid to start a new trend, the group thinks of composing a “model” poem with consensus. Their focus is on *sounding* radical, borrowing from the past, and lacing it with ideological jargon.

The best choice is Rabindranath Tagore’s collected works. Every poet should own a copy. And if you add Omar Khayyam’s works, even better. You’ll get the right language from those. Also, we need to insert some communist terms. These words are very modern. In today’s era of outrage, such words captivate people’s minds.”

Where will we find those words? I haven’t seen such books recently.

No, no—there are no books for this. We’ll have to collect these words from various communist meetings and rallies.

Instead of gathering them one by one, let’s compile a list now and distribute it to everyone. That way, we can save effort.

Yes, yes! Let’s do that. Dictate the key words from Tagore and Khayyam, and also the ones I’ve noted down.

A few poets started dictating, and a list was compiled: sorrow, tears, horizon, limitless, inferior, serpentine,

separation, favourite, storm, dormant, *phagun*, *bakrayita*, don, death, marginalised, hunger, ghost, skeleton, typhoon, gambler, nasty, Siberia, tantric gestures, bloodshed, blood dawn, etc.

Then came the question of similes. The group agreed to immediately discard conservative comparisons in favour of fresh, unexpected ones. A new list was made:

Night like the highest ridge of a thatch, Day like slaked lime, Moon like tin, Sun like the lid of a cooking pot, Earth like a bundle of straw, Forest like tangled hair, River like a sacred thread, Mountain like a pile of feces, Heat like a blast furnace, Cold like ethyl chloride. (*Sahitya Chaṣa*, 20–21)

In the end, with everyone's approval, a model poem was composed.

Conclusion

A literary institution is born as a social institution when a group of literary enthusiasts gather at a common site, assuming the social responsibility of creating “good literature.” In the early days, the members tend to be charitable in thought and word but gradually become self-serving and contentious. The *sansad*, gradually, engenders a distinct category of human, the “literary human”, who becomes the primary agent in the rise and fall of the literary association. Central to Faturananda's critique is the tension between real literary production and the uncritical and populist communal rituals surrounding it. His essays bring to the fore the absurdities of literary pretensions, the self-serving behaviours that often underpin intellectual pursuits, and the vanities and aspirations that define literary and intellectual communities. We see how the identity and social behaviour of the “literary human” is shaped not only by their engagement with reading and writing but also by their entanglement with cultural ideals and expectations and the socio-economic realities of literary institutions. Most importantly, Faturananda suggests that the folk praxis of literary circles often serves as a substitute for genuine intellectual engagement. As a result, writing becomes formulaic, writers borrow phrases and trendy political rhetoric. Some

writers are obsessed with dismantling the past, exposing an insecurity about the present, in which new voices struggle to emerge outside the restrictive boundaries of collective literary identity. The “literary human” in Faturananda is overwhelmed by the easy seductions of trends, groupthink, and performative dominance, suggesting thereby that while communal spaces may fuel discussion and innovation, true literary creation remains an individual struggle.

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**Folklore as Cultural Resistance: Examining the Incorporation
of Oral Traditions in Fictional Narratives of Goa in *The
Upheaval* and *Kali Ganga***

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Abstract

This study focuses on the incorporation of oral traditions in the literary works of Pundalik Naik's novel *The Upheaval* and Mahabaleshwar Sail's novel *Kali Ganga*. These novels are a significant contribution to Konkani literature and show how Goa's folklore and folk traditions have influenced them. This study analyses how oral elements, including folk songs, proverbs, and cultural rites, are integrated into tales to augment cultural authenticity, enrich thematic complexity, and address socio-economic concerns. This paper demonstrates how oral traditions function as storytelling devices and instruments of cultural resistance and ecological consciousness. The incorporation of folklore in these literary works highlights the interplay between oral and written traditions while also offering insights into the socio-cultural and environmental issues that influence the characters' lives. The study contends that the oral traditions in both *The Upheaval* and *Kali Ganga* function as a conduit between the traditional and the contemporary, providing a nuanced depiction of Goan culture and identity amidst transformation.

Keywords: Cultural Resistance, Ecological Consciousness, Folklore, Goa, Oral Traditions.

Introduction

The incorporation of oral traditions and folk culture into literary works has been a crucial method for numerous authors in developing narratives that are profoundly anchored in a society's cultural legacy.

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Oral traditions, including spoken and sung forms such as folk narratives, folk songs, proverbs, and other genres, are vital sources of identity, legacy, and meaning in literature. By incorporating oral traditions into written writings, authors such as Pundalik Naik and Mahabaleshwar Sail construct intricate literary realms where folklore and cultural memory enhance both the aesthetic and thematic depth of their works.

Fiction, particularly in postcolonial and regional contexts, frequently relies on traditional customs to create a profound cultural connection and authenticity. Ruth Finnegan asserts that “oral traditions provide an essential framework for many narratives, serving as a foundation for literary creativity” (78). This paradigm enables authors to create narratives that reflect the lived experiences of their communities. In his seminal work on orality and literacy, Walter Ong elucidates that oral culture relies on formulae, repetition, and performativity, which serve as essential instruments for storytelling (34). Writers frequently employ these components to elicit the shared characteristics of folklore, rendering fiction more relatable to its audience.

Jack Goody posits that the transition from oral to written culture has resulted in a hybridisation of narrative forms, wherein authors use aspects of both traditions to create meaning (120). Authors like Naik and Sail adeptly employ folklore to enrich their works, obscuring the distinctions between fiction and reality. The cultural foundation is evident in the works of Naik and Sail, both of whom draw profound inspiration from Goa’s folk customs, such as *dhalo*, *fugdi*, and *saptah*. These folk-art forms function not only as ornamental or narrative elements but also as instruments for theme analysis, providing significant insights into the narratives. Mahasweta Devi contends that folk traditions are essential to regional literature, as they “reflect the struggles, beliefs, and resilience of marginalized communities” (22).

The incorporation of folklore in literature functions as a potent counter-narrative to prevailing cultural ideologies. Barbara Babcock asserts that “by integrating oral traditions into written texts, authors can contest the authority of written history and offer alternative

viewpoints grounded in the cultural consciousness of the community” (45). The works of Naik and Sail clearly demonstrate that the incorporation of traditional practices serves as a means of resistance against the hegemonic influences of modernisation and globalisation, which jeopardise the preservation of local traditions and identities. Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “vernacular cosmopolitan” underscores how the integration of traditional elements in literature facilitates a negotiation between tradition and modernity (15). The negotiation is prominently illustrated in the works of Naik and Sail, wherein folklore serves to critique socio-political and ecological matters, offering a complex representation of Goan culture.

The integration of oral traditions into fiction functions to counteract the dominant influences of globalisation and industrialisation. Stuart Hall, in his examination of cultural identity, asserts that folklore is crucial in preserving cultural resistance to prevailing narratives (392). By incorporating folk traditions into their narratives, authors like Naik and Sail establish a platform for underrepresented voices and ensure the preservation of cultural continuity. The incorporation of folklore in these works is not solely nostalgic but acts as a powerful reminder of the endurance of cultural traditions throughout socio-economic adversities. Partha Chatterjee says that “folk traditions are not static remnants of the past; they are active, living forms of cultural expression that engage with and respond to contemporary realities” (68).

Folklore and oral traditions in literature have been extensively examined across various scholarly fields. Finnegan’s seminal study contends that oral traditions are dynamic, continuous cultural expressions that predate and enrich written literature (78). Ong shows that the shift to written culture transforms narrative structures and thought, shaping how authors incorporate oral elements into written texts (34). Goody further describes the hybrid storytelling forms that emerge when oral and written techniques intersect (120). Folklore is also viewed as a tool of cultural resistance. Devi demonstrates that integrating folklore into fiction can voice the struggles of marginalised communities as a form of resistance (22), and Babcock’s study of symbolic inversion finds that oral traditions can

subvert dominant narratives (45). Another key theme is the interplay of tradition and modernity in postcolonial literature. Bhabha introduces the concept of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” to explain how folklore mediates between tradition and modernity (15). Hall highlights folklore’s role in preserving cultural identity against dominant narratives (392), and Chatterjee underscores that folk traditions are dynamic practices that adapt to contemporary realities (68). In the Goan context, Phaldesai documents folk practices like *dhalo*, *fugdi*, and *saptah*, emphasising their role in shaping Goa’s cultural identity (50). Couto observes that Pundalik Naik interweaves folklore in *The Upheaval* to counteract the disruptions of modernisation and safeguard communal values (xxix). Finally, Vandana Shiva’s *Staying Alive* provides an ecofeminist perspective by highlighting women as custodians of ecological knowledge in folklore; this view is reflected in Sail’s *Kali Ganga*, where female-centered traditions underscore the close bond between cultural heritage and the environment (44).

Cultural Context and Literary Importance of Folklore

The cultural context significantly shapes the themes, characters, and storytelling of literary works. In postcolonial literature, authors often use traditional customs, communal histories, and folklore to challenge mainstream narratives and elevate marginalised voices. The works of Pundalik Naik and Mahabaleshwar Sail, set in Goa, integrate the region’s folk traditions and ecological concerns, providing both artistic richness and cultural depth. G N Devy argues that folklore is a dynamic, influential force in social consciousness (15). In *The Upheaval*, Naik uses folk practices like *dhalo* and *fugdi* to symbolise community solidarity, contrasting them with the disruptive effects of industrialisation. These practices, far from mere cultural details, are central to the community’s identity and reflect the struggles against modernisation. Homi Bhabha’s concept of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” explores how local traditions and global influences intersect, a theme explored in both *The Upheaval* and *Kali Ganga* (Bhabha 15). Naik and Sail’s narratives highlight this tension between preserving tradition and embracing modernity, emphasising the resilience of folk traditions amid societal change.

Barbara Babcock's idea of symbolic inversion highlights how folklore can subvert dominant cultural narratives (45). Naik's *The Upheaval* shows how folk practices resist the encroachment of industrialisation and modern development. Similarly, Stuart Hall's theory on cultural identity examines how folklore shapes identity amid evolving socio-economic contexts (392). In both works, the continuation of folk traditions amidst modern challenges signals the community's struggle to maintain cultural identity.

Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist perspective is essential in understanding the gendered role of women in preserving ecological and cultural knowledge. In *Kali Ganga*, women's participation in folk traditions like *dhalo* reflects their integral relationship with both nature and culture (Shiva 44). The impact of environmental destruction, especially through mining, threatens not just the ecology but also the cultural and gendered roles within the community. Partha Chatterjee's view of folklore as a fluid, adaptive tradition is crucial to understanding the dynamic role of folk practices in *The Upheaval* and *Kali Ganga* (68). These traditions evolve in response to socio-economic transformations, ensuring their relevance despite modern challenges. Ultimately, Naik and Sail use folklore as a vehicle for cultural resistance, addressing the complex interplay of tradition and modernity. Their works offer a nuanced critique of modernisation while showcasing the adaptability of cultural traditions. By incorporating oral traditions, both authors provide a platform for marginalised voices, safeguarding cultural memory against the forces of globalisation. The cultural background in these works is crucial for comprehending how folklore operates not merely as a narrative mechanism but also as a cultural repository that safeguards communal memory. In *The Upheaval*, Pundalik Naik employs folklore to chronicle the socio-economic transformations encountered by the *Kolamb's* village community. *Kolamb* is a fictional village in *The Upheaval*. Naik integrates traditional melodies, rituals, and oral traditions into the text, establishing a literary archive that encapsulates the community's lived experiences, thus safeguarding cultural information that may otherwise be eroded by fast modernity. The act of documentation is vital in postcolonial contexts, as the written word serves to establish cultural identity and oppose the erasure of minority voices.

Furthermore, the intricate interplay between folklore and ecological awareness is a significant element of Naik's oeuvre. Naik emphasises the interconnectedness of the villagers and their natural surroundings, underscoring the ecological aspects of cultural identity. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist paradigm offers a significant perspective for comprehending this link, highlighting the interdependence of cultural and ecological activities (44). In *The Upheaval*, the deterioration of the natural environment caused by mining activities is portrayed not just as an ecological catastrophe but also as a cultural deprivation, since it undermines the customary practices essential to the community's identity. The devastation of the terrain symbolises the degradation of cultural legacy, underscoring the significance of ecological management in preserving cultural continuity.

Comprehensive Examination of Pundalik Naik's *The Upheaval*

Pundalik Naik's *The Upheaval* (originally *Acchev* in Konkani) exemplifies the utilisation of oral traditions and folk practices to express the socio-cultural issues encountered by marginalised communities. The novel is firmly set in the social and cultural environment of the pre and post mining Goa. Naik skillfully uses folkloric elements like *fugdi* and *dhalo* to make the story seem more real and to show how socioeconomic factors affect cultural identity and community unity. This comprehensive analysis aims to connect Naik's text to multiple theoretical frameworks, emphasising its importance as a work that employs folklore for cultural resistance, ecological consciousness, and identity development.

The oral texts used in *The Upheaval* are very carefully but artistically chosen by the author to portray dynamics of human relationships as elucidated through the lore of the masses. For example, the *fugdi* sung by the women to tease Nanu has deeper meaning which is only elucidated in future:

... Brother and sister walking down the path
 Tell me, O sister, tales of your mother-in-law
 Tales of my mother-in-law?
 O they remain in my heart. (Naik 30)

The women also sing about the hardships they have to undergo because of a cruel husband. This is a universal theme. They sing: the wind blows

Tearing the plantain leaf
I've made my mind.
Cruel words,
My husband's behavior
I'll go throw myself into the sea. (Naik 31)

The ritual of *Dhalo* is also used to show the emotional state of the young generation in the novel. Kesar, Nanu and Narsiv, the characters in the novel, are the representative of the future generation. Thus, it can be seen that the author intends to show the destruction of the lives of these young people who were once so happy with their surroundings before their land lay sorrowing. *The Upheaval* offers social critique on multiple levels. We see a sudden transformation of an idyllic village into a devastating mining dump and the author uses the oral texts of the native place to show how rich in culture and moral values the pre-destruction society was.

Homi Bhabha's notion of "vernacular cosmopolitanism" offers a profound framework for examining the interplay between tradition and modernity in *The Upheaval*. Bhabha asserts that the vernacular can coexist with the cosmopolitan, forming a hybrid environment where tradition and modernity converge (15). Naik's work depicts folk traditions like *fugdi* and *dhalo* as a conduit between the traditional cultural practices of *Kolamb* and the destructive influences of modernity introduced by mining activity. The peasants' hybridity is apparent in their efforts to preserve ancient customs while adapting to changes dictated by external economic forces. Naik demonstrates how folklore serves as a dynamic and adaptive phenomenon, illustrating the community's negotiation of its cultural identity in the face of globalisation and modernisation forces. Stuart Hall's idea of "cultural identity" elucidates the transitions undergone by the people of *Kolamb* in *The Upheaval*. Hall argues that the interactions between history, culture, and power constantly reshape cultural identity (392). The villagers' premining and postmining lives in the story exemplify several eras of cultural identity influenced by socioeconomic dynamics. The communal performance of *fugdi* and *dhalo* in the

premining phases represents the social cohesion and cultural vibrancy of *Kolamb*. These activities function as indicators of communal identity, representing Hall's concept that identity is formed through representation. The initiation and expansion of mining activities result in the progressive degradation of traditional practices, demonstrating how power dynamics transform the community's cultural identity. Naik's account effectively illustrates the challenge of preserving cultural continuity amidst industrial exploitation.

Barbara Babcock's notion of symbolic inversion is similarly apparent in Naik's employment of folklore. Babcock observes that folklore frequently undermines prevailing cultural narratives by offering an alternative viewpoint that contests established power systems (45). In *The Upheaval*, the endurance of folk customs amidst advancing industrialisation and industrial exploitation functions as a form of cultural resistance. These traditions transcend mere cultural artifacts; they embody dissent that contests the dominant forces of modernisation and affirms the community's entitlement to preserve its cultural heritage. Through the integration of these aspects into the tale, Naik emphasises the villagers' tenacity, utilising folklore to articulate their resistance against the forces that aim to exploit and displace them. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist framework offers an additional analytical dimension for comprehending *The Upheaval*. Shiva contends that women serve as the principal guardians of ecological knowledge and practices, asserting that their relationship with the land is essential for sustaining ecological equilibrium (44). Naik's narrative illustrates women participating in folk traditions like *fugdi* and *dhalo*, highlighting their function as guardians of cultural and ecological knowledge. The folk songs performed by the women illustrate their profound bond with the earth, emphasising the gendered aspects of ecological management. The degradation of *Kolamb's* natural environment due to mining signifies an ecological crisis and a cultural and gendered loss, as industrial exploitation undermines traditional roles of women. This loss symbolises the extensive influence of modernisation on cultural activities, since the degradation of the natural landscape mirrors the decline of cultural heritage.

Jack Goody's examination of the interplay between oral and written cultures is relevant to Naik's *The Upheaval*. Goody contends that the transfer from oral to written culture frequently alters power dynamics since the supremacy of the written word typically supersedes oral traditions (120). In *The Upheaval*, the documented contracts, legal mandates, and bureaucratic systems that sanction mining operations exemplify the dominance of written culture, which diminishes the oral traditions of *Kolamb*. The peasants, with predominantly oral knowledge and tradition, feel disempowered by written legalities that favor economic development at the expense of their cultural and environmental rights. Naik's narrative questions the preference for written authority over oral knowledge, emphasising the necessity of valuing and preserving oral traditions as essential elements of cultural identity. Partha Chatterjee's notion of the fluidity of folk traditions further emphasises the cultural importance of *The Upheaval*. Chatterjee contends that folk traditions are not static remnants of history but rather dynamic, living activities that evolve with modern circumstances (68). Naik's tale illustrates how the emergence of mining precipitated the collapse of folk customs, underscoring the influence of socio-economic transformations on cultural continuity. The continued existence of these activities, albeit in reduced versions, indicates their durability and adaptation. Naik illustrates the villagers' endeavors to uphold their traditions during misfortune, underscoring the significance of cultural preservation as a form of resistance and survival.

In conclusion, Pundalik Naik's *The Upheaval* is a complex interweaving of cultural, socio-political, and ecological concerns, intricately connected through folklore and oral traditions. By including folk customs into the narrative, Naik not only enriches the cultural authenticity of the story but also critiques the forces of modernisation that jeopardise cultural identity and ecological equilibrium. The theoretical frameworks of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Barbara Babcock, Vandana Shiva, Jack Goody, and Partha Chatterjee elucidate the importance of these folk practices within the narrative, emphasising their function as instruments of cultural preservation, resistance, and resilience. Naik's work exemplifies the significance of folklore in forming and preserving the cultural

identities of communities, providing a nuanced depiction of Goan culture amid socio-economic adversities.

Comprehensive Examination of Mahabaleshwar Sail's *Kali Ganga*

Mahabaleshwar Sail's novel *Kali Ganga* is a notable contribution to Konkani literature that skillfully integrates folklore, oral traditions, and ecological themes, crafting a tale that underscores the socio-cultural and environmental issues faced by Goan people. The novel incorporates diverse aspects of folk culture, such as rituals, oral narratives, and the depiction of nature as a sentient force, to examine the interrelation between human existence, culture, and the environment. This comprehensive research connects Sail's text to multiple theoretical frameworks, illustrating its importance as a work that employs folklore to confront themes of cultural preservation, resistance, and ecological consciousness. Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and "vernacular cosmopolitanism" is especially pertinent in the examination of *Kali Ganga*. Sail's tale contrasts the community's ancient practices with the demands of contemporary economic progress, thus establishing a hybrid cultural space where the past and present coexist. Bhabha contends that this hybridity facilitates a negotiation between tradition and modernity, enabling cultural practices to adapt and evolve for survival (15). In *Kali Ganga*, the rituals and folk customs integral to the community's cultural existence function as a mechanism for negotiating their identity amid socio-economic transformations. The endurance of these traditions in the face of contemporary challenges underscores the community's tenacity and adaptation, emphasising the fluidity of cultural identity as articulated by Bhabha.

Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity offers more understanding of the topics of *Kali Ganga*. Hall claims that the ongoing interaction between history, culture, and power establishes cultural identity (392). Sail's narrative illustrates how traditional rituals and the villagers' relationship with their environment embody the community's cultural identity, intricately linked to their natural surroundings. As the narrative unfolds, the intrusion of contemporary economic activity, including deforestation and industrial expansion,

jeopardises this link, resulting in a crisis of cultural identity. The villagers' endeavors to uphold their rituals and sustain their bond with the land epitomise their battle to preserve their cultural identity under external influences. This conflict exemplifies Hall's concept that cultural identity is perpetually redefined in reaction to historical and socio-economic influences. *Kali Ganga* also exhibits the Barbara Babcock-proposed idea of symbolic inversion. Babcock asserts that folklore frequently undermines prevailing cultural narratives by offering alternative viewpoints that contest established power systems (45). Sail's work illustrates how the community's folk traditions and rituals serve as symbolic inversions, opposing the industrialisation and modernisation that aim to exploit the natural environment. The depiction of rites associated with the veneration of the river Kali Ganga constitutes a kind of resistance to the monetisation of natural resources. Sail illustrates these rites as expressions of veneration for nature, emphasising the community's traditional defiance against entities who aim to exploit and deteriorate their environment. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist viewpoint is essential for comprehending the role of women in *Kali Ganga*. Shiva contends that women possess a distinctive connection with nature, serving as principal stewards of ecological and cultural wisdom (44). In *Kali Ganga*, village women are portrayed as pivotal in safeguarding cultural traditions and ecological equilibrium. Their function in executing rituals, narrating tales, and preserving the spiritual bond with the river highlights their significance as guardians of culture and nature. The portrayal of women's opposition to environmental degradation underscores the gendered aspects of ecological stewardship, highlighting the interrelation between cultural practices and ecological sustainability. The Kali Ganga River, personified and venerated by the locals, serves as a symbol of cultural identity and ecological equilibrium, with women playing an essential part in its conservation.

Jack Goody's examination of the interplay between oral and written cultures offers significant insights regarding Sail's *Kali Ganga*. Goody contends that the transfer from oral to written culture frequently alters power dynamics within a group, favoring the written word over oral traditions (120). In *Kali Ganga*, Sail elucidates the contradiction between these two forms of cultural expression. The

oral traditions of storytelling, ritual performances, and communal gatherings are depicted as essential elements of the community's cultural existence. Nonetheless, the incursion of modernity, epitomised by industrial growth and governmental interference, jeopardises the preservation of these oral traditions. Sail challenges the marginalisation of oral cultures in favor of written and bureaucratic authority by underscoring the significance of oral storytelling and social rituals. This critique corresponds with Goody's assertion regarding the power dynamics involved in the transition from oral to written culture. Partha Chatterjee's notion on the evolving character of folk traditions deepens the comprehension of *Kali Ganga*. Chatterjee contends that folk traditions are not immutable remnants of history but rather dynamic, living practices that evolve in response to shifting socio-economic conditions (68). Sail's narrative illustrates how rituals and folk traditions evolve in response to the pressures of industrialisation. Notwithstanding the disturbances induced by industrial activity, these traditions persist in holding substantial importance within the community, exemplifying their persistence and flexibility. The rites linked to the river Ganga are portrayed as developing in reaction to environmental alterations, underscoring the community's endeavors to preserve traditional continuity while adjusting to changing circumstances. The "oral" text of *dhalo* which is used in *Kali Ganga* can be interpreted at many levels. The novel is full of pathos and thus in a seemingly serious environment of the text, the presentation of a folk practice comes as a relief to the reader. It does come as an addition to the tinge of colourful oasis in the challenging desert of sorrow. But at the same time, the text of *Dhalo* plays no superficial role in the novel. The authorial intention behind showcasing the folk practice and linking it with the protagonist of the novel can have manifold interpretations.

Dhalo is a folk form which celebrates femininity. The connection of the feminine nature with mother earth and through the songs of *Dhalo*, the hardships and troubles of their day to day lives are expressed. The use of a folk practice also showcases how deeply the society in the novel is rooted in tradition. The novelist tries to show the psycho—spiritual aspects of a folk practice wherein we see the invocation of the eighteen sister goddesses and *Shiddar's* protector Gods. We see the elucidation of the belief that the Goddess manifests

itself on a woman's corpus. We also see that the corpus is believed to get transferred or continued within a family and thus, we see the transfer of the spirit's manifestation from a mother to a daughter. Manjul's mother was the female corpus manifesting a spirit of the deity named *Chakraivant* but once she passes away the manifestation of the spirit comes over Manjul. We see the entire invocation process which can be referred to as a psycho-spiritual interpretation. How every other sister of the missing Goddess invokes her and how on the beats of drums the spirit manifests in Manjul is very skillfully presented by Sail.

“ . . . But where was *Chakraivant*? The other sisters were getting agitated.
Beloved sister o *Chakraivant* !
Sweet as a flower o *Chakraivant*!
Break through the clouds
Skirt the ocean, cross the hills
Come soon! O sister *Chakraivant*
Shoo ... shooo... Sho... They hissed...” (Sail 44)

This invocation leads to the manifestation of the spirit of *Chakraivant* which used to find its human form in the protagonist Manjul's dead mother, into Manjul:

. . . the drums beat louder and faster . Manjul began twitching and swaying her head, hissing loudly all the while. She leapt on the *maand* twirling hands and moving her head round and round like a wheel . . . she broke into a song . . . (Sail 44)

The father of the protagonist considers this manifestation as natural. Ganesh opines when informed about the incident at *maand* that “the spirit wanted the mother's body all these years. Now it wants the daughter's” (Sail 45).

A strong sense of belief is seen in the spiritual manifestation into humans. A rationalist would interpret it using psycho-spiritual as well as psycho-somatic tools and might say that Manjul's behavior is the result of her longing for her mother who passed away, leaving her

behind with a lot of domestic responsibilities, but the authorial intent might be to show us a tradition wherein the deeply rooted belief prevails that the spirits find their own corpse. The practice of *Dhalo* is a very important practice from the eco-feminist point of view.

Such a glorification of femininity as the manifestation of nature is vividly brought out in the novel through the dramatic presentation of the twenty one heavenly nymphs at the Dhaalo- Maand. (Budkuley 109)

Thus, in the novel *Kali Ganga*, Mahabaleshwar Sail not only elucidates the performance of one of the most popular folk practices of the land, but also glorifies and vivifies the local culture and uses it as a backdrop on which the novel is placed. The mention of the folk art form comes at a very crucial juncture in the novel, therefore, elucidating how creatively the author makes use of the tool at hand and explores the “oral” to glorify the literary. By showcasing the folk practice of *Dhalo*, Sail not only elucidates the performance of the most popular native practice but also provides a slim glimpse of relief in what can be interpreted as a saga of lost dreams. Thus, Sail’s creative genius lies in his skillful use of the “oral” to beautify and also to boost the literary.

Conclusion

The examination of oral traditions in *The Upheaval* by Pundalik Naik and *Kali Ganga* by Mahabaleshwar Sail presents a complex representation of Goan culture and identity amid the challenges of industrialisation. By including elements of folklore—such as folk songs, proverbs, and rituals—into their narratives, both authors underscore the durability and adaptation of cultural traditions under socio-economic problems. The works highlight the role of oral traditions as significant instruments for cultural preservation, ecological consciousness, and communal resistance, offering an alternative narrative to prevailing ideologies of progress and development. This analysis elucidates the interdependent relationship among folklore, cultural identity, and ecological equilibrium, emphasising the role of women as guardians of both nature and cultural legacy. Ultimately, *The Upheaval* and *Kali Ganga*

illustrate how literature functions as a conduit for cultural memory, addressing the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity and promoting the conservation of indigenous knowledge systems. These narratives present a persuasive appeal to acknowledge and respect the socio-cultural and ecological wisdom inherent in folk practices, which are essential for the sustainable future of Goan communities and beyond.

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**The Figure of the “Other” in Retellings of Indian Folk Tales:
Children’s Book Trust in the Early 2000s**

Prayag Ray* and Debasmita Das**

Abstract

Children’s Book Trust (CBT) is a major, though understudied, publisher of English-language children’s literature in contemporary India. This paper seeks to examine how the figure of the “other” is constructed in some of its collections of Indian folktales in English, such as *A Garland of Tales: Seventeen Folk Tales* (2008) and *Folk Tales of Himachal Pradesh* (2009). This paper examines the productive tension that ensues when rural folk tales, initially an alternate discourse against the dominant classes’ discursive hold, are repurposed or instrumentalised in the interest of securing the hegemony of the dominant social order in modern India. While there are few child protagonists in these stories—unsurprising, given the *ur* texts’ status as folk tales—the tales are replete with figures of marginality: the differently-abled (physical and mental), dwarfs and giants, foundlings, victims of colour and caste prejudice, the elderly, and women within patriarchal structures. By analysing the construction of the “other,” this paper aims to explore how the representation of these figures in the works of early 2000s is implicated in socialising and securing the child outside the book, at a pivotal moment in Indian history, when the secularist values of the Nehru-Gandhi vision of India are giving way to Hindutva.

Keywords: Disability, Folk Tales, Globalisation, Hindutva, ideology, Indian Children’s Literature

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Introduction

Children's Book Trust (CBT) is a prominent publisher of children's literature established in 1957 by cartoonist K Shankar Pillai. It has marketed itself as progressive and trendsetting by publishing "well written, well illustrated and well designed books for children" (CBT "The Institution") mainly in English, but also in Hindi and regional languages. CBT has published both original stories of a secular nature and retellings of religious, mythological, and folk stories. The paper focuses on three volumes of the latter sort: *A Garland of Tales: Seventeen Folk Tales* (2008), *Folk Tales of Uttarakhand* (2008), and *Folk Tales of Himachal Pradesh* (2009).

The existing critical work on CBT is sparse, despite its eminence in the field of children's literature. The only chapter-length study of their short stories is by Citra Rahmatika. This essay takes a linguistic approach, using content analysis to discuss the quality, readability, and gender equality of a single collection of 17 stories. Besides this, CBT is mentioned in two survey essays that provide histories of Indian children's literature. CBT's importance in the field and excellent production quality are noted by both Manorama Jafa and S K Ghai. Given the reach and impact of CBT and the paucity of critical work, a need for close reading of their stories was felt. There is no extant work on the ideological leanings of their books or their intersection with Indian politics, and it is this research gap that this paper seeks to address.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to outline the contestation of ideological forces in these stories, as the secular, socialist values enshrined in the Indian Constitution vie with a nostalgic, revanchist Hindu nationalism idealising the mythic past, as well as Western liberal values brought in with globalisation, each attempting to instil its hegemonic values in the imagined child reader. The idea of the "other" becomes crucial in understanding the process of identity formation and power dynamics in these stories. With its roots in Hegelian philosophy, the "other" as used here implies the counter to the social "self" and indicates the marginalised people of different sections of society against whose alienation the normative Savarna middle-class man establishes his identity in these tales. The readings

undertaken seek to “unveil and critique the effort to establish a ‘sovereign Subject’ over and against a constitutive Other” (Felluga 202) that is evident in these retellings. It will be argued that CBT’s folktales tend to construct women, the socially ostracised, foundlings, elderly people, dwarfs and giants, differently-abled people, the mentally ill, victims of colour prejudice, animals, and supernatural beings as the “other” to the protagonists, the consolidation of whose normative identity reaffirms middle-class ideologies while denying various “others” adequate representation. In the following two sections, an attempt will be made to historicise this process of “othering,” relating it to the changing Indian economy at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Retelling Myths and Folk Tales in Twenty-first Century India

The market phenomenon of Chetan Bhagat in the early 2000s broadened the readership of Indian literature in English. The demographic shift from elite to popular influenced the market, generating a keen interest in the retellings of mythological or folk stories (Valančiūnas 193). The Indian book market was gradually dominated by mythological works “reinterpreted to suit contemporary needs” (Lutgendorf 366). This growing fascination with revisiting the tales of the “old times” is inextricably linked with the economic liberalisation of 1991 and the rising prominence of the Hindu nationalist sentiment. Analysing the association of economic growth and the notion of the Hindu, Aravind Rajagopal claims that prior to liberalisation, the idea of the “Hindu” was commonly marked as conservative, antiquated, and irrelevant, which was then equated with the sluggish economy of the country. The spirit of liberalisation marked the need for reimagining the figure of the Hindu, the “metonymic of India” (Rajagopal 35). Multiple retellings of the mythological tales attempted to historicise Hindu culture as timeless and relevant to modern times. Most of these retellings eulogise historical or mythological figures, reflecting the Hindutva ideology of reclaiming and popularising grand tales of valour and heroism omitted from the history textbooks—stories of patriotism that are the need of the hour, with “history becoming a contested site in the country” (Singh and Sharma 136). The re-imagined mythological or folk stories tend to bridge the gap between the past and contemporary

times, thereby forging a continuum and resolving the tensions between regional folk narratives and global, metropolitan values.

Narratives of Cohesion in Divisive Times

While folk tales in their original forms are often associated with resistance, capturing the desires of the common man against the discursive hegemony of the ruling class (Ghazoul 128), we find that the *retellings* of these folk tales by CBT serve very different purposes. Close readings of these stories will outline how they attempt to forge a collective identity by moulding a communal past and, in the process, perpetuate dominant social ideologies. Thus, ironically, folk tales that were once sites of resistance are repurposed as a weapon to uphold the social structure.

The incendiary historical circumstances of the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century India provided the impetus for this essentially conservative attempt to shore up a collective cultural identity. At the time, Indian urban and semi-urban spaces were marked by rapidly changing social dynamics. The economic recession of the 80s and 90s gave way to liberalisation and resulted in an increase in class mobility. Child rights and education reforms (Right to Education Act of 2009, Bachpan Bachao Andolan led by Kailash Satyarthi), civil liberties and freedom of speech movements (increasing criticism against POTA, AFSPA in regions like Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast), anti-discrimination campaigns by the LGBTQ+ community (2009 High court ruling), activism against religious violence and minority rights (Godhra Riots 2002), activism against gender-based violence and discrimination (Reproductive rights, Bilkis Bano case, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005), and the growing momentum of Dalit movements destabilised the culturally-enshrined heteronormative values of the upper-caste male citizen of India. The reconstruction of the age-old tradition of folktales, then, catered to the upper-caste male anxieties and the middle class's desire for social stability by providing them a familiar stable space in the "simpler times" of the nostalgic past.

In the following section, a close reading of these retold folktales will be undertaken and the same will be organised according to the type of “othering” evidenced in the story. “Othering” takes place on at least three grounds—class and caste, the body, and gender.

Class and Caste Others

A close reading of CBT’s folk tales, reveals how binary opposition involves positing a laudable middle-class, upper-caste subjectivity defined against other classes and castes. While middle-class values are celebrated, both upper and lower classes and castes are tacitly denigrated.

In “The Heavenly Kheer,” a heavenly elephant becomes an agent of chaos in a small village, stealing bananas, but also enabling villagers to enter heaven by holding on to its tail. Identified as Eravat, the elephant mount of Indra—King of the Gods—and thus, placed within a Brahminical discourse, it helps the protagonist taste heavenly kheer and is not a negative figure entirely. In the climactic action of the story, villagers hold hands and attempt to hitchhike to heaven, holding on to the elephant’s tail. However, when their leader (holding the tail) is asked to indicate the exact quantity of heavenly kheer the villagers will eat, and he gestures with his hands to describe the quantity, he loses hold of Eravat’s tail, and the whole chain of villagers fall to the ground. The moral seems to be that the logic of measurement—characteristic of merchant and trading castes—is incommensurate with heavenly rewards. The animal “other” in this story is, thus, implicated in a critique of middle and lower-caste values and the enshrining of upper-caste hegemony. Furthermore, if we focus on the illustration accompanying the story, we may note the visual similarity between the white elephant on a blue background and the symbol of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—a Dalit and lower caste political movement resurgent in the decade the book was published.



Fig. 1. Illustration to “The Heavenly Kheer” by Neeta Gangopadhy (Jain 9)

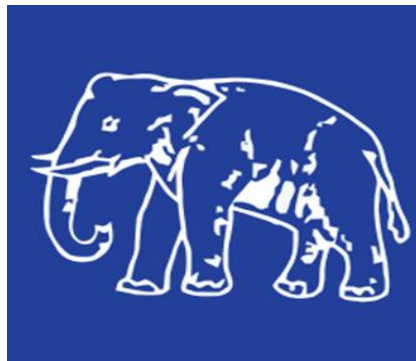


Fig. 2. Bahujan Samaj Party Elephant Symbol (Wikipedia “File: Elephant Bahujan Samaj Party.svg”)

The image thus vividly suggests the chaos and disruption of the social order caused by the ascendancy of this political force. The

story seems to cast a humorous glance on the misguided masses of India, desperately attempting to climb beyond their station via the agency of the elephant (BSP).

Another folk tale critiquing the yoking of mercantile values and religiosity is, “The Real Service.” In this story, greedy merchant Jaswant Singh’s attempts to bribe his way into heaven by constructing a lavish temple (using a small percentage of his wealth) are critiqued, and he is the foil to the selfless social service of the protagonist, middle-class Sukhi. Sukhi looks after plague-riddled villages and spends his life serving god through action. It is only when Jaswant Singh distributes his wealth amongst the poor, the story suggests, that Yama Raja will guide him to heaven. This is a story underpinned by the socialist, welfarist ideals enshrined in India’s constitution, and seems critical of bourgeoisie values.

The traditional folk-tale ruling class—the rajah and his court—are not spared in these stories either. In “The Land of the Lazy,” one of the most disturbing stories in these collections, King Sombalraj is a lazy king whose lethargy is so extreme that he stops rising from his bed and attending court. He is also an obese glutton, eating many large meals a day, and is so indolent that he cannot bother to chew—having liquified food poured down his throat instead—or talk, communicating by winking. He builds a palace for other lazy people like him, and his friends Sombalnaathan, Sombaldas, and Somberi—three of the most slothful people in the kingdom—live there in bliss, too lethargic to move from bed or bathe, taking liquified meals poured down their throats. When there is a fire in the palace one day, all three friends are too lazy to move, even to save their lives, and burn alive out of their disinclination to exert themselves. Their deaths serve as a lesson to King Sombalraj, who eventually mends his ways.

The story is a satire that most likely originates in legends of the supposed hedonism and vice of Mughal nawabs. One is reminded of apocryphal tales of the invention of Galouti Kebab and the *aaloo* (potato) in biryani by gluttonous rulers such as Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. It is tempting to interpret this tacit denigration of India’s Muslim rulers as relatable to Hindutva’s “current attempts to obliterate Mughal rule in official history” (Thapar 141). Though

NCERT's deletion of the Mughals from school textbooks has happened only recently, the BJP's earliest attempts to do so can be dated to the early 2000s (Thapar 137).

What is most troubling is the story's depiction of eating disorders and depression as moral vices. Although the 'ur-story's presumed antiquity, as well as its satirical, deliberately hyperbolic nature might obviate or render presentist a critique of the story based on twenty-first-century expectations of political correctness, mental health awareness and body-positivity, passages of the retelling seem like textbook descriptions of the onset of depression:

After a while the king's laziness worsened. The king never left his bed unless it was absolutely essential like for taking a bath or going to the toilet.

Then came the worst stage. The king felt it was unnecessary to take a bath and refused to get out of the bed... Earlier the king felt brisk enough to ask questions and answer to queries. Now he didn't even want to open his mouth to speak. (Madhavan 19)

Rather than feeling any sympathy for such depressed victims of eating disorders, the implied child reader is insidiously oriented towards the middle-class norm of hard work, as these "lazy" characters are literally burnt alive in their own fat. The story exemplifies Terry Eagleton's suggestion that ideology is "action-oriented"—"capable of furnishing their adherents with goals, motivations, prescriptions, imperatives, and so on" (47).

The subaltern classes and castes are equally subject to critique in these stories. In "Honey Seeds," the dacoit Lakhia—a representative of the so-called "criminal tribes" such as the *Thuggees*—is demonised, while the shrewdness of middle-class protagonist Dhondu is celebrated. Lakhia has attempted to steal baskets of *laddoos* from a lavish wedding, and Dhondu—a trickster figure—is able to outwit and humiliate him. Lakhia is eventually thrashed by a mob and booed offstage, so to speak. The story presents Lakhia as an egoistic dacoit representative of a kind of gauche machismo

condemned by these stories—his hyper masculine physique, unseemly ambition, and egotism are characteristics condemned by the normative middle-class ideology.

The Body

In this section, it will be argued that although these retold folktales are clearly shaped by the influx of political correctness brought in with globalisation, ostensibly critiquing forms of body-oriented discrimination, they tacitly uphold the normative (male, able) body while requiring extraordinary feats of deviant bodies in order to *earn* human dignity.

Since the unkind take on obesity in “Land of the Lazy” has already been discussed, another story, “Gentle Giant,” retold by Ramendra Kumar will be taken up. “The Gentle Giant” *seems* to make a case against body-shaming and stature-based discrimination in redeeming a misunderstood giant. Binda is a gentle giant living on the outskirts of a village that has discriminated against his family of giants for generations. He earns the friendship and trust of a little girl named Tuk-Tuk, who is open-minded and does not judge him based on his appearance. The end of the story sees the giant performing a rescue of the entire village during a flood, and thereby proving his benevolence. While the overt moral seems kind to Binda, it is noteworthy that he has to ingratiate himself and perform exceptional feats in order to deserve basic human dignity. The story upholds the exceptionality of gigantism even while condemning discrimination against the condition. The illustration accompanying the story is interesting in that it displaces Binda from the mythic tradition of giants, typically either *rakshases* (monsters) or *asuras* (demons)—beings of immense strength and supernatural abilities, such as Kumbhakarna, Bakasura, and Ghatotkacha, and inserts him into the fabric of the everyday.

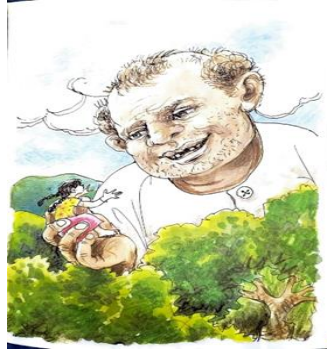


Fig. 3. Illustration to “The Gentle Giant” by Neeta Gangopadhya (Kumar 49)

Clad in dhoti and kurta and looking unkempt but essentially like a harmless middle-aged man next door, Binda is a figure on the borderlines between myth and modernity. Arguably, the giant represents the milling masses of rural India, and the little girl’s embrace of this figure represents the story’s socialist injunction to the elite English-speaking reader to open her heart to the lower orders.

“The Rat Prince” is another tale undermining its own attempted political correctness. Here, a king attempting to ensure male heirs offers his five wives magical apples. Since one of the apples was nibbled on by a rat, one of the queens gives birth to a rat while the others bear human sons. Unable to disown the child, the king accepts the rat prince, who is subjected to contempt from his brothers. Growing up, the rat prince models himself as kind, honourable, and intelligent. One day, when the siblings skip school to seek adventure, they get lost in a jungle and, despite their rat brother’s warnings, visit the hut of a mysterious old lady. It is later revealed that the old lady is a witch who wishes to kill the brothers. They are ultimately saved by the rat brother’s ingenious trickery. Grateful, the human brothers and the king decide to accept him and offer him a section of the kingdom. The story reflects the oversimplification and sentimentalisation of the issue of discrimination. While discrimination against deviant bodies is ostensibly criticised, it is noteworthy that the “othered” character’s ingratiating behaviours are

normalised, their bodily “otherness” only tolerated when their moral probity is proven through exceptional acts, and their inclusion is premised on the exclusion of a gendered “other”—the witch.

King Vikramaditya is the subject of many folk tales, and it was not surprising to find a story centred on him in these collections. “Deeds, Action, Fate, And Hope” tells us about a poor Brahmin seeking alms from the pious king Vikramaditya. The king donates generously to the Brahmin, but on the way home from court, the Brahmin is robbed of his possessions by the god Shani. When King Vikramaditya later questions Shani, he is cursed to lose all his limbs and is left in the form of a limbless stump. A kind peasant discovers the king in stump form, lying abandoned in a forest, and adopts him. One day, the peasant visits another king’s court, attending the *swayamvar* of this king’s daughter. Worried that the king would be outraged by the presence of a disabled person at the court, the peasant places Stump-Vikramaditya outside the castle. At the *swayamvar*, a garland-throwing elephant is to decide who the ideal husband is. When the garland thrown by the court elephant falls on Vikramaditya repeatedly, the princess accepts the disabled man as her husband, unaware of his true identity as a king.

Later, Deeds, Action, Fate, and Hope (personified) appear at the court to determine their relative superiority over each other. Stump-Vikramaditya is called upon to offer his insight. As the first three personifications return the “stump” his three limbs, he claims that none of them is the greatest. After all, Vikramaditya became a stump despite his good deeds, selfless actions, and royal birth (his fate). As Hope forms his final limb, he declares Hope as the greatest, for without hope, he would not have survived this long. The narrative is a harrowing tale of normalised ableism that not only avoids addressing the discrimination faced by differently-abled people but also normalises their mistreatment through a sentimentalised tone. The deformed king is dehumanised as a “stump”—the word “stump” is repeatedly used—and cannot return to his kingdom as a ruler before surviving the acid test of establishing his moral credibility. This captures the process of “othering,” where losing one’s social position is presented as a natural consequence of the loss of the “apex” male body. Neither Shani nor the prejudice of the court is ever

questioned, but Vikramaditya is celebrated for his hope, stoicism in the face of difficulty, and perseverance, further glorifying the idea that so long as a man acts per the dominant value structure, he can climb his way to the top, negating his status as the social “other.” Thus, we find that through their representation of differently-bodied “others,” the narratives prescribe and naturalise moral codes that ultimately decide whether the marginalised person shall be rewarded or punished while never questioning the politics of “othering” itself.

Women as the Gendered Other

This section will discuss how women are portrayed in select stories, arguing that by and large, CBT’s folktales uphold traditional gender norms. Patriarchy is usually normalised, and women “otherised” as the second sex—their traditional roles as wives, cooks, and domestic goddesses, upheld as norms.

“The Best Bridegroom” tells the story of a competition between rival princes for the hand of an unnamed princess, overseen by the princess’ father. Only ostensibly the protagonist, the princess functions more as a conduit through which male relationships and male power dynamics are negotiated, exemplifying Eve Sedgwick’s theory of homosocial desire in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). As Sedgwick notes, “in the presence of a woman who can be seen as pitiable or contemptible, men are able to exchange power and to confirm each other’s value” (160). The “delicate doe-eyed” (23) princess, a somewhat pitiable and indecisive figure, cannot choose between three suitable, princely bridegrooms, and her father decides to test the men in order to arrive at a decision. They are asked to travel for a week and come back with gifts for the princess. The first and the second princes return with a bag of precious stones and a sword, respectively. This gift exchange is underpinned by a logic of equivalence that reinforces in the child reader’s mind the reification or objectification of women as commodities amongst other commodities in a network of economic exchanges between powerful men. The third prince, who is ultimately gifted the princess’s hand, returns from his travels with nothing. He has, he explains, been unable to bring any gift because his time was taken up in tirelessly serving ailing and embattled citizens who came

to him for help. The princess's father sees his concern "about the welfare of the people" (27) as the correct value in a son-in-law. With not even a token to give to his to-be wife, this work-obsessed man's prioritising of public duty over private matters is celebrated. The story normalises the patriarchal, capitalist work ethic that subordinates domesticity to public duty, enshrining the labour that preserves the existing dominant culture. Furthermore, while it seems to place the price of a good wife above the price of jewels or swords, it does seem to suggest that labour can be substituted for a woman, thereby tacitly positing an equivalence between selfless service and womanhood.

"Kali Charan's Kitchen" is another story that normalises traditional gender roles, as it tells the tale of the family of patriarch Kali Charan. Kali, a happy and successful widower, has seven sons and runs a business. However, after he has "found suitable brides" for his sons and "married them off" (39), he finds that the joint family's kitchen is not what it used to be. Now that there are seven women in the household, the male cook can retire (the story presents this as a given). But "too many cooks spoil the broth" (41), and the quality of service declines. The story normalises Kali's dependence on women to serve him food, and when they are late, it presents his outrage as justified. Kali finds that his guests are dissatisfied with the food the new wives serve, some finding stones in their food and others finding the meat raw: "Unless things ran smoothly on the domestic front, his business, he knew, would soon crumble and be ruined" (41).

What is troubling is the story's mingling of traditional gender norms with the language of business management. While the author claims to be drawing on a folk tale, Kali's business operations are discussed in distinctly modern, corporate terminology. For example, the phrases "business dinner," "important client," "bargain," "the deal he was trying to swing," and "Kali Charan's firm" (40-41) all suggest that this "traditional tale" allegorises modern, bourgeois realities. Later, the discourse of 'Organisational Behaviour' is used to outline the flaws in the seven wives' managerial and leadership styles.

Read against the grain, in a deconstructive mode, the story seems to think through and tacitly acknowledge the gendered tensions in many “modern” Indian households, where corporate lives are upheld by women’s domestic labour. The story is rife with unacknowledged patriarchal fears: when Kali attempts to diagnose why his kitchen is failing, his catalogue reads like an exhaustive list of misogynistic fears about uncooperative, independent, desirous, and financially empowered women:

They had become lazy and irresponsible, preferring to while away the time watching the wandering entertainers who came to their door with performing monkeys, bears, and so on. A couple of them spent most of their time in bed, while others preferred to gab about the town, visiting friends and frequenting shops selling the latest merchandise brought in from across the country. (41)

Attempting to resolve the situation, Kali comes up with a test. When Kali attempts to distract the wives away from the kitchen and into the garden, only one wife (the youngest) refuses the temptation and remains in the kitchen, playing the idealised role of dutiful cook. Her foregrounding and idealisation are clear in the illustration to the story:

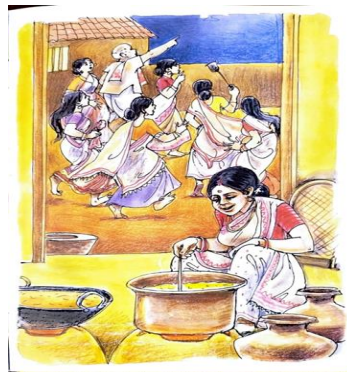


Fig. 4. Illustration to “Kali Charan's Kitchen” by Neeta Gangopadhy (Phukan 43)

The subtle message—catch them young and indoctrinate—exemplifies what Terry Eagleton calls the “action-oriented” nature of ideology (47). The youngest wife, having proven herself to be the most dutiful, is now put in charge of the kitchen, with the other wives serving under her. While the last passage of the story seems to imagine the now-ideal kitchen, its hyperbolic register seems to acknowledge the fantastic expectations placed on women:

If one was in charge of the shopping, *another* was to look after the cleaning. If one was to supervise the serving, *another* was to see that there was a constant supply of firewood. *Yet another* [italics mine] was in charge of personnel, that is, she was to see to it that the servants had all they needed and worked efficiently. (44)

The rhetorical use of repeated “one...another” and finally, “yet another,” lends the passage a sense of hyperbole. The unlikeliness of this magical seven-wife kitchen solution when juxtaposed to modern, monogamous realities would remind the reader that, in fact, the usual custom is to coerce one woman to play all seven roles. The story’s embattled, insecure patriarchy surfaces in the tensions it elides, in the impossible conjurings it demands in a fantastic register.

The patriarchal idea of an “ideal wife” is further consolidated in the story “The Topsy-Turvy Wife.” Nek Ram, a kind man of docile nature, wishes for a simple, homely wife but is married to Madhu, a rebel who refuses to accept his commands. While beautiful and otherwise fitting as perfect “wife material,” Madhu behaves in direct contradiction to instructions. She refuses to sit on a palanquin and chooses to ride on a pony on the day of her marriage, against the wishes of Nek Ram. Later, she refuses to cook, dress, or act according to her husband’s wishes. A frustrated Nek Ram asks her to go to her parents for a few days, and on the way, Madhu falls into a river. She would have drowned due to her rebellious nature, but Nek Ram appears just in time to save her. This tames Madhu, who decides to become more agreeable to Nek Ram. The story depicts how women who do not fit into prescribed roles and social codes are “othered.” Madhu appears as a caricature of the feminist idea of a woman with

agency who challenges patriarchal norms. The new bride refusing to use the palanquin and instead opting to ride the pony, a practice followed by the grooms, is presented as humiliating and emasculating for her husband. The firm will of the woman is represented as her being headstrong and insensible. As the illustration reveals, Madhu is wilful, likes to take charge, and occupies male-dominated spaces, much to the chagrin of male onlookers:

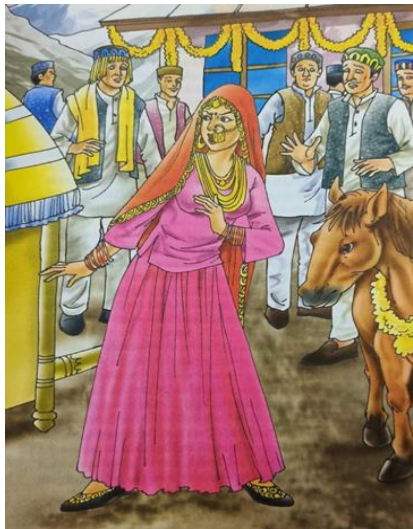


Fig. 5. Illustration to “Topsy-Turvy Wife” by Amit John (Nath 100)

While her expression reflects her determination and rejection of gendered roles, the baffled expressions of the surrounding men point to their fear and confusion about the unusual acts of a newlywed bride. However, Madhu is inevitably punished by the immanent laws of the universe for demeaning the gendered social structure that the elite middle-class patriarchy naturalises. The story shows that even such “topsy turvy” wives can be “tamed,” and it is only once Madhu succumbs to the value system and sacrifices her agency that she is celebrated as a “good wife.”

Finally, “Brother Went Hungry, I Slept” glorifies ambitionless hard work and selfless acts by women. Bhaguli is a married woman

infamous for her deep sleep, as even natural disasters cannot wake her when she sleeps. After learning that her brother will visit her, she decides to finish all the household chores before his arrival. However, tired from the housework, she falls asleep. When her brother visits her, he discovers his sleeping sister, waits for a long time, and departs, leaving gifts that he had brought. Finding the gifts after finally waking up, Bhaguli is mortified that her brother was left hungry. She was so ashamed and grief-stricken that she ultimately turned into the local bird that, to date, cries, “*Bhai bhukho, maisoyi*” (“brother went hungry, I slept”). Bhaguli’s story highlights the duties of a woman and how failing to perform those duties affects the self-worth of women who have internalised the patriarchal gender roles. The narrative presents Bhaguli’s agony at failing to feed her brother as the ultimate tragedy since this is equivalent to her failing as a woman. Her transformation into a bird is an act of dehumanisation for failing to follow the social structure. Her fate—to repeat her sin in the form of a verbal confession—serves as a cautionary tale to other women.

Conclusion

As noted by Ferial Ghazoul, post-colonial narratives often reshape cultural patrimony received through folk heritage to render it compatible with the contemporary values of the dominant class (Ghazoul 127-128). Close readings suggest that this process of remoulding and reshaping ancient stories in the interest of the cultural hegemony of the elite is very much at work in CBT’s retold folktales. English-language children’s literature in India primarily caters to urban elite or aspirational classes privileged enough to provide their children with primary education in English (Superle 26). On the other hand, the vernacular folk tales date back to a pre-industrial society and embody pre-modern, largely rural and majoritarian cultural values. What happens, then, in the process of repurposing the latter for an elite readership? Interestingly—and somewhat ironically—stories that in their original form belong to the subaltern majority and often inscribe their discursive resistance to various forms of class and caste oppression are here appropriated to secure the rule of the bourgeoisie by normalising and universalising its values.

However, the process of securing this cultural hegemony through retellings is by no means simplistic or monolithic, attesting to the complex political and economic history of India in the first decade of the twentieth century. The three ideological forces which were outlined in the 'Introduction' are often mutually incompatible and exert varied pressures on the ur-tales, making these collections heterogeneous and internally fissured. The Nehruvian values enshrined in our Constitution remain tangible in many tales, with stories such as "The Real Service" and "The Gentle Giant" enshrining egalitarian, socially just morals. Meanwhile, the Hindu nationalist impulse of forging a cohesive national identity by revisiting the ancient past, rediscovering there a golden age of traditional gender roles and social hierarchies, is also amply evident, particularly in the stories comprising *Folk Tales of Uttarakhand* and *Folk Tales of Himachal Pradesh*. Finally, a push towards the political correctness characteristic of contemporary Western liberal discourse, significantly impacting the upwardly mobile classes of a globalised India, particularly in their corporate culture, is also weakly present. Stories such as "Rat Prince", "The Gentle Giant", as well as other stories which could not be discussed at length here—such as "The Dark Born" by Manoj Thomas,^{xii} criticising colour prejudice—evinces a struggle between overt political correctness and source material incompatible with Western liberalism. Each of these contending forces is didactic; each is, in its own way, framing an ideal child in a manner typical of children's literature, attempting to "secure the child who is outside the book" (Rose 2). There is no ideological uniformity here. As Terry Eagleton reminds us, "the advanced capitalist order is in no sense a successfully achieved unity, riven as it is by major conflicts and contradictions." CBT's retold folktales reflect the complex political realities of the turn of the twenty-first century, and succinctly illustrate Eagleton's suggestion that "the dominant ideology in advanced capitalist societies is internally fissured and contradictory, offering no kind of seamless unity for the masses to internalize" (35).

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Folk Narratives in Transition: A Comparative Study of Urban Legends

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Abstract

Folklore encompasses the cultural narratives, practices, and traditions passed down through generations. Folklore is often misunderstood as belonging to a static, rural past, untouched by urban or literary influences, when in fact it permeates both traditional and modern urban contexts. Urban legends, a form of folklore, express contemporary concerns about personal safety in urban areas, where danger can be found in everyday objects like cars or bathrooms. The paper delves into the evolution of two American urban legends, *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*, from their oral origins to contemporary digital adaptations. This study utilises Linda Hutcheon's "Adaptation theory" and Trevor J Blank's theory of "Digital folklore" which views folklore as a dynamic process gaining new interpretations. Urban legends have maintained their credibility with the "FOAF" (friend of a friend) structure. The study explores the relationship between traditional oral narratives and modern adaptations, revealing how these narratives have evolved to address contemporary issues like gender, safety, and vulnerability, and how urban legends have become cultural artifacts that effectively convey societal fears and anxieties.

Keywords: Adaptation Theory, Digital Adaptation, Film Adaptation, FOAF Structure, Intermediality, Urban Legend

Introduction

Folklore represents a collective form of expression shaped by shared experiences, beliefs, and wisdom. Folk narratives have long served as mirrors of societal values, fears, and aspirations, evolving alongside the cultures that create and share them. Folklore is a

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communal product, formed and reshaped by collective processes of recreation and reinterpretation (Leach 15). Over time, its definition expanded to encompass not only these historical practices but also modern traditions of material culture. Folklore, a crucial pedagogical tool in non-literate societies, is undergoing a significant transformation in the digital world transitioning from oral and written traditions to dynamic digital adaptations (Blank 9).

This paper explores the evolution of two iconic urban legends—*The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*. Studying these legends in digital spaces is a relatively underexplored area, but examining their adaptation and influence in digital media provides insights into broader digital storytelling patterns. In this paper, for the analysis of earlier versions of *The Killer in the Backseat*, Jan Brunvand's *Too Good to Be True*, *The Mexican Pet*, and Carlos Drake's *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*; *Indiana Folklore* have been drawn upon (Brunvand 45; Drake 210). The earlier versions of *Bloody Mary* are analysed with reference to Alan Dundes' *Bloody Mary in the Mirror*, along with versions documented in *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. The analysis of digital adaptations of these legends draws upon a range of sources, including *YouTube* channels *After Dark* and *Why Is It Trending*, the 1998 film *Urban Legends*, the short film adaptation *High Beams*, and for *Bloody Mary*, the video game *Identity V* and the 1992 film *Candyman*. By using comparative approach, this paper aims to explore the linguistic, thematic, and performative changes that occur during the transition from folklore to digital folklore. Trevor J Blank's theory of digital folklore, proposed in *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction*, is employed to analyse the functioning of these legends in virtual space. This facilitates the transmission of vernacular expressions and cultural meanings across corporeal and virtual worlds (Blank 10). Linda Hutcheon's "adaptation theory" examines the transformation of these legends across mediums (20), while Freud's symbolic interpretation provides insights into the subconscious fears embedded in them. Media adaptations and *YouTube* channels reveal how urban legends blend traditional elements with modern aesthetics to engage contemporary audiences.

Folklore and Urban Legends: An Overview

As R D Jameson suggests, folklore serves as immediate and potent evidence of the human condition which reveals how communities and individuals navigate their fears, aspirations, and the quest for elusive security (Jameson 23). Gertrude P Kurtah argues that reshaping folk materials, driven by aesthetics and capitalism, does not diminish their authenticity; it helps them survive and spread, preserving their original cultural context (Kurtah 44). Understanding American folklore is crucial for analysing urban legends like *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*. Folklore is often misunderstood as belonging to a static, rural past, untouched by urban influences, when in fact it permeates both traditional and modern urban contexts (Brunvand 28). Urban legends, known for their fast narratives, bizarre themes, and universal appeal, have gained popularity due to their accessibility and cultural resonance, making them ideal for adaptation.

Urban legends, a subgenre of folklore, are stories that reflect modern anxieties about personal safety in urban spaces. They are not just fictional stories, but also reflect societal fears, anxieties, and moral concerns. The “friend of a friend” (FOAF) structure in legends enhances authenticity, immediacy, and emotional and cultural resonance across generations (Brunvand 13). Urban legends persist despite digital advancements, due to modern fears, gender roles, power dynamics, and societal shifts in technology dependency and urban violence. The depiction of women as vulnerable reflects societal anxieties about urban safety, reinforcing gender stereotypes and fears of male aggression. As evolving narratives, urban legends both mirror and respond to cultural fears, which Brunvand classifies as “living folklore” (4). Brunvand, in the introduction of his work, *Too Good to Be True* explains that urban legends often push the boundaries of believability. Urban legends are polished, realistic stories with bizarre or comic incidents that seem far from reality. They are well-balanced, clean, concentrated, and polished, and are often structured to be factual, making them seem too good to be true. Brunvand defines urban legends by their folkloric qualities of “oral repetition and variation,” which are the distinguishing characteristics of any folklore (5).

Echoes of the Past: Traditional and Early Print Versions of Urban Legends

“All matter is translated into other matter.”

—Kate Atkinson, *Not the End of the World*

Kate Atkinson’s statement encapsulates the idea that though the material form of folk legends that is spoken word, print, or visual media changes but the underlying themes, emotions, and societal fears remain intact. In folklore studies, rather than viewing alternate versions as “corruptions,” scholars understand that adaptations allow legends to evolve alongside the cultures they inhabit. Each version acts as a cultural mirror, highlighting shifts in societal fears, norms, and attitudes.

This section aims to explore the material variations in the traditional versions of *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* by adopting a comparative approach. At the heart of all versions prevails a core narrative structure in which there is a female character who is unaware of a hidden danger in her car. A man hides in her car to kill her, but a third party intervenes, preventing the attack. The moral lesson is vigilance and safety. Urban legends serve as cautionary tales, teaching societal values like safety and distrust of strangers, and fostering situational awareness.

The Killer in the Backseat is an urban legend originating from real-life incidents in remote locations and popularised by popular culture. The Ogden, Utah version, recorded in *Indiana Folklore*, introduces suspense with the savior’s involvement. The Chicago legend, recorded by Larry Miller in 1965, reflects racial tensions in American cities during the 1960s. In New York City, an incident in 1964 grounded the legend in reality. The narrative shifts between regions, illustrating how gender roles can change in adaptation. However, the focus is on the professional competence of the detective, rather than vulnerability (Brunvand 30). Folklore’s adaptive capacity is evident in the core tale, which evolves based on local anxieties, race, safety, and social dynamics. Female vulnerability, victimhood, and the male savior complex recur in most versions. Traditional folktales were shared orally to encourage

communal vigilance, but digital adaptations have made people feel isolated and intensely personal. The focus has shifted from delivering communal messages of caution to generating thrill, suspense, and shock for individual viewers. Urban legends have evolved to focus on private spaces, like cars, bathrooms, enhancing the sense of vulnerability in these once-safe environments. Brunvand's *Too Good to Be True* discusses the use of "pseudo-verification" strategies in urban legends, such as the "ritp" or "rip" approach, where a narrator claims to have read an incident without providing a reference, and the FOAF formula, which makes it difficult to trace or verify.

In *The Choking Doberman*, Brunvand includes a version of the legend documented by Ann Landers, characterised by its direct and cautionary narrative style. Prioritising pragmatic warning over dramatic suspense, this rendition underscores latent threats, particularly those faced by women in private or domestic spaces, thereby evoking fear through everyday vulnerability. *Urban Legends 666 Absolutely True Stories That Happened to a Friend*, by Thomas J Craughwell, recounts the legend *The Murderer in the Backseat*. The story revolves around a woman who accidentally becomes a target while leaving a Phoenix shopping center. She is followed by a car flashing its high beams, and after fleeing to her brother-in-law, a police officer, she discovers the man in the other car was alerting her to an armed assailant in her car. The story is set in a modern urban setting, reflecting societal concerns like crime and loneliness (Craughwell 60). Drake's version incorporates rural or small-town settings, highlighting the importance of modern vigilance and law enforcement in contemporary society (Drake 102).

Drake's version features characters that are more archetypal, such as farmers, townsfolk, or mythical figures from local lore, rather than focusing on law enforcement and modern threats. Traditional folklore contains moral lessons that are more related to community values, such as the importance of hard work, honesty, or respect for nature. The Craughwell version adopts a straightforward narrative style that reflects the journalistic approach to urban legends, often presenting them as "true" stories. This style adds an element of credibility and immediacy that appeals to contemporary audiences. Another version of *The Killer in the Backseat* is recorded

in Cheryl Herbert's *Night Chase*, a collection of true stories for young readers, featuring a suspenseful urban legend with three key messages: lock your car doors, look beneath the car before entering, look in the back before entering, and be mindful of your surroundings, especially at night. The story has been adapted for younger audiences through social media, with modern elements like smartphones and text messages, where a friend alerts the woman through phone calls instead of face-to-face interaction.

In some adaptations, the woman is proactive—checking her backseat before entering the car or aware of her surroundings. In contrast to the *Indiana* version, where the woman is primarily a damsel in distress, these variations challenge traditional gender roles by portraying female characters with agency. Some versions feature a darker twist, where the assailant successfully harms the woman, or the story concludes with ambiguity regarding her safety. That is the reason why scholars find the title misleading. As Xenia Cord suggested that *The Assailant in the Backseat* may be a more accurate descriptor, as the man is always detected before he can act on his intentions. The linguistic approach to analyse *The Killer in the Backseat* highlights significant differences between its traditional and digital adaptations. Labov recognised six structural elements: Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Result, and Coda (Labov 22). Traditional stories follow a clear linguistic framework, while digital adaptations alter key information to create suspense and engage users through hypertext or interactive media. Digital platforms are transforming the way urban legends are interpreted and shared, fostering new forms of communal re-creation that merge traditional folklore with modern technological narratives.

From a psychological standpoint, *The Killer in the Backseat* taps into two core fears: isolation and the unknown (Dundes 50). The unknown threat in the backseat symbolises unseen fears and hidden dangers in familiar places, challenging our sense of safety. Urban legends are retold in the third person, relying on suspense and anonymous narratives, while survivor accounts, told in the first person, bring raw emotional intensity and blur the line between myth and reality, amplifying the impact of the legend. These narratives tap

into our instinctive fears and make routine acts like driving alone memorable.

The *Bloody Mary* legend is a haunting urban legend rooted in superstition, mystery, and societal fascination with the supernatural. It involves adolescent girls repeating Mary Worth's name in front of a dimly lit mirror, causing fear and intrigue. They enter a darkened room, chant variations of "I believe in Mary Worth" with a flickering candle, and dare each other to summon the vengeful spirit. The name of the spirit varies, but the core concept remains the same: a vengeful female spirit is said to scratch the summoner's face. This rite is typically performed at gatherings like parties or summer camps, emphasising the social aspect as a thrilling experience. The name of the spirit varies—from "Mary Worth" to "Mary Lou," and even "Kathy." "Bloody Mary" is a historical and cultural mythological figure, associated with violence and vengeance, with Mary I of England being a prominent historical reference. This fascination with female figures with violence and vengeance is evident. The public burnings during Mary's reign, intended to reinforce Catholic orthodoxy, led to fear and resistance, earning her the nickname "Bloody Mary." Elizabeth Báthory, a seventeenth-century Hungarian countess, is also linked to the Bloody Mary myth, accused of committing crimes against young women. This diversity underscores how the *Bloody Mary* myth has been shaped over time, blending historical elements with evolving social and cultural fear.

Urban Legends by Thomas J Craughwell, presents Mary Worth, as a disfigured woman from seventeenth-century Massachusetts. She is branded as "Bloody Mary" by children who mock her scars and later chant her name to summon her spirit in a mirror. The story's terrifying appeal is heightened by a vengeful ghost with clawed hands attacking children through a mirror, highlighting themes of vengeance, supernatural retribution, and fear of mirrors, which are common in horror folklore. Indiana folklore versions of ghost stories and spirit conjuring incorporate unique elements based on local history or cultural fears. For example, Indiana folklore leans towards tales set in rural or small-town contexts, with ghosts tied to the land (such as abandoned houses or graveyards) or local tragedies. Moreover, the variations in the *Bloody Mary* tale, with different

names like “Mary Whales,” “Mary Johnson,” or “Mary Lou,” suggest a shared cultural motif across the United States—similar to *La Llorona* in Hispanic folklore. The “Bloody Mary ritual”, a practice where young women use mirrors to predict future spouses or deaths, has evolved from a divination practice to an entertainment form. The ritual’s language varies across cultures and regions, and social media platforms use shorter phrases to engage viewers. The legend’s unsettling nature is heightened by various outcomes. Mirrors in folklore are metaphors for confronting fears and truths, acting as portals between physical and spiritual worlds. Covering mirrors in homes with deceased loved ones prevents spirits from being trapped. The “Bloody Mary ritual”, rooted in tradition and folklore, may symbolise the transition from girlhood to womanhood, particularly menstruation. Dundes suggests this ritual helps young girls navigate their identities through fear, transformation, and social bonding, influencing psychoanalytic interpretations.

Bill Ellis, in his work, *Lucifer Ascending* discusses the concept of a “mythic realm” created by magical rituals, where participants temporarily step outside their mundane existence and engage with mythic figures and supernatural forces. Ellis argues that occultism allows marginalised individuals to “vent their own social aggression” (Ellis 27). The text explores the diverse “Bloody Mary” chant variations, highlighting their cultural influence and adaptability. It explores how these elements, including mirrors and darkness, can be altered, and the methods of summoning the chant, which can be influenced by timing and atmosphere. Alan Dundes, in his article *Bloody Mary in the Mirror*, provides ten variants of the urban legend. The text discusses various variations of the “Bloody Mary” chant, highlighting their adaptability and cultural influence. Each variant includes a mirror, darkness, and the chant, with variations demonstrating how these elements can be modified. The text delves into the various methods of summoning Bloody Mary, their cultural significance, and their ability to be influenced by timing and atmosphere. However, “text 9” in Dundes’ article suggests male involvement, reflecting societal views on gender roles, where female experiences of bodily change are shrouded in mystery and fear, while male experiences are perceived differently.

In the film version of *Bloody Mary*, the depiction of blood streaming from the top of the head is a striking visual element that heightens fear. The Freudian concept of “Bloody Mary” symbolises fear of bodily changes, life, death, and transformation, linked to power, fertility, and fear. The “blood running down her face” symbolises physical injury and internal turmoil from growing up, fearing losing control over one’s body. Freud’s theory of “upward displacement” in the context of blood issuing from the head becomes a metaphor for the repressed anxieties surrounding the transition from girlhood to womanhood, symbolising a repressed fear of transformation and bodily autonomy.

Thus, the printed existence of urban legends like *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* preserves their content and encourages their reinterpretation. Brunvand argues that folklore is dynamic and adaptable, allowing legends to adapt to societal values and technological advancements while maintaining themes of fear, humor, and social commentary.

Digital Adaptations: New Mediums and Interpretations

“Adapting is a bit like redecorating.”

—Alfred Uhry

Alfred Uhry’s comparison of adapting to redecorating aptly captures the idea that just as redecorating transforms the appearance of a space without altering its structure. Urban legends are being adapted with modern elements like technology, new fears, and contemporary settings, with digital platforms like *YouTube* and social networking enhancing their performance and transmission, making them crucial for studying legends, hoaxes, and jokes. This section examines digital reinterpretations of *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*, focusing on their depictions across various mediums. These urban legends in the current era of netlore are not fixed tales; instead, they constitute a dynamic process of negotiation and reinterpretation within digital communities. According to Hutcheon, adaptations are usually viewed as “minor and subsidiary” in comparison to their originals; this is also true of digital copies of urban legends (Hutcheon 19).

Traditional narrators of these legends may feel that digital versions found on *YouTube* channels such as the *Why is it Trending?* lack the realism of oral storytelling. These adaptations, however, could be justified for bringing these stories into the modern era and making them available to a wider range of people worldwide (Blank 62). Hutcheon's theory highlights the importance of digital adaptations in modernising urban legend stories, challenging the hierarchy between originals and adaptations. Hutcheon suggests that adaptations are dynamic texts influenced by social and cultural experiences, rather than mere formal replications. Traditional urban legend audiences focus on risks, while contemporary digital audiences prioritise privacy and safety.

An important analytical perspective is offered by Hutcheon's idea that the "adapted text" is plural and exists laterally rather than vertically (Hutcheon 53). Urban legends have multiple coexisting versions, with no preference given to any one. Each retelling coexists laterally, reflecting distinct social or cultural influences. Hutcheon argues that adaptation is a type of repetition that involves change, even without intentional modification. The concept of digital storytelling is applicable as it adapts to new platforms while maintaining a recognisable story line and central theme. The earliest adapted version of *The Killer in the Backseat* appears in the 1998 film *Urban Legends*. The film explores the cultural anxieties surrounding urban legends through a series of murders on a college campus, each staged to resemble a well-known urban legend. Michelle Mancini is murdered by a hidden attacker in her car, a nod to the "killer in the backseat" legend. Natalie and her friends become aware of these murders, and Brenda hides in the backseat with the intention to kill her. A violent struggle ensues, and Brenda is thrown from a window. The 1998 film *Urban Legends* reimagined the classic story of Michelle Mancini's death, transforming it into a complex exploration of grief and vengeance, with ambiguous motives and fear-evoking fear. Brenda, the driver, as an antagonist driven by revenge for her fiancé's death.

The urban legends often follow a straightforward narrative arc: setup, confrontation, and resolution. But in movie adaptations, they employ a multi-layered narrative structure interweaving various

urban legends and personal stories (Blank 70). This movie has a contemporary setting of university and modern cultural elements, such as college party scenes and modern technology tools for communication. It resonates with a generation that was navigating new social dynamics and heightened fears about violence and crime on campuses. Another digital adaptation is featured on the *YouTube* channel *After Dark*. The tone of *After Dark*'s adaptation of *The Killer in the Backseat* is eerie as the murderer serves as the narrator. The suspense and horror in a murder story increases when the killer's intentions and actions are revealed, adding psychological depth and prioritising horror over moral warning. Drake's version features a pursuing driver who alerts the protagonist, while *After Dark*'s version leaves the killer unchecked, killing the protagonist and stealing her car, neglecting saviors or police involvement. This shift reflects a darker, more sinister tone, emphasising fear over community intervention. Another version, featured on the *YouTube* channel named *Why is it Trending?*, introduces striking shifts amplifying horror and suspense. In this animated version, Penny, a young girl, leaves work at night and drives along a deserted road. She encounters a car behind her, which signals with lights. Fearing the car, she accelerates and hits her rear bumper. When she arrives home, she sees the chased car. The driver, a short and frightened man, warns her not to open the door and calls the police. A man wearing a trench coat and an axe attacks the driver, dismembering him. Penny's body is found in her home, but the killer remains unidentified.

In contrast to previous iterations, in which the automobile behind only honks and flashes its lights to warn, in this adaption, the car approaches so closely that it actually collides with Penny's vehicle, intensifying her fear. This change intensifies the chase, turning it from a spooky hint to a full-on run. In a chilling twist, the driver who tries to warn Penny meets a brutal end at the hands of the killer, who then targets Penny as well. This shift removes the typical "saviour" role, turning the hero into a victim. The digital version emphasises the killer's visual identity—a figure in a trench coat with a bloody axe—shifting the tale from a simple warning to a full horror narrative. These adaptations heighten the women's portrayal as the classic "damsel in distress." Another adaptation of this legend named, *High Beams*, is a short film by Stephen Simmons which is

inspired by Alvin Schwartz's work *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (Schwartz 45). The film adaptation of Schwartz's urban legend uses flashing headlights to build tension but portrays the killer as nervous rather than menacing, creating ambiguity around his intent. The modern setting and familiar cars add realism, grounding the legend in a relatable context by adding layers of realism.

Bloody Mary, an urban legend, has been adapted into interactive games like *Identity V*, where she is renamed the Bloody Queen. The game combines historical details from Marie Antoinette's story with the mythology, with the Bloody Queen wielding a mirror as a weapon. The game's "Aqua Mirror" feature adds tension to the story, while scripted objectives and rewards transform passive folklore consumption into active engagement. The game's well-placed position and the ability to trade places with the mirror image enhance its appeal. Ellis asserts that folklore practices have evolved with the encroachment of modernity, but they still serve the basic functions: addressing fears, anxieties, and the need for social connection (Ellis 27). Digital adaptations of *Bloody Mary* reinforce this idea. On *YouTube*, participants engage in the ritual with cameras, capturing their reactions and sharing them (Ellis 30). Video technology enhances the authenticity of supernatural experiences, making them more accessible while broadcasting participants' reactions to a wider audience. This "legend-tripping" in the digital age becomes a shared ritual, where participants not only confront their fears but also engage in collective storytelling (Ellis 35).

The *Bloody Mary* legend has left a lasting imprint on popular culture by appearing in films like *Candyman*, *Urban Legends* and television series like *the X-Files* (Blank 75). These digital adaptations have altered the psychological impact of the mirror. For example, a horror video may use edited footage to show *Bloody Mary* emerging from a reflection, adding a layer of visual realism absent from traditional storytelling (Blank 77). This change affects how audiences perceive the legend, shifting from a personal, introspective fear to an external, spectacle-driven experience (Blank 78). Fears of surveillance and the loss of privacy in the digital age parallel the fear of confronting one's reflection. The story was earlier confined to physical spaces—bathrooms, mirrors, and campsites—

where the fear was immediate and shared by a small group (Dundes 115).

Alan Dundes' analysis of Bloody Mary highlights the cultural and psychological tensions experienced by pre-adolescents, arguing that the ritual reflects pre-pubescent anxieties, particularly about menstruation and the transition from childhood to adulthood. The presence of blood in some variations of the ritual is symbolically connected to the first signs of physical and biological changes in girls. The ritual primarily practiced by young girls highlights the gendered nature of folklore, as it is both a "legend" and a "game." This debate reveals the fluid character of folklore. The mirror serves as a boundary between reality and the supernatural, and the choice of location, bathrooms, is intriguing as they are private spaces where individuals often confront their physical selves and engage in rituals of cleanliness.

In the short film, *Dark Fun Original*, the ritual is shortened to just two repetitions, using visually shocking horror elements. The hand appearing to twist the actress's neck introduces an unexpected, physical manifestation of the spirit. The earliest tale often lacks post summoning hauntings, with the encounter limited to the mirror. In film, however, the haunting extends into the real world. Lights turning off and the spirit's voice calling the victim's name creates a more immersive and menacing atmosphere. The use of cinematic devices, like writing on the mirror ("I am here") and sudden physical violence (the neck twist from behind), adds a tangible danger that moves beyond the abstract, psychological fear of the original version.

Candyman (1992) is an adaptation of *Bloody Mary*. In both, the ritual of speaking a name into a mirror is central. The act of invoking "Candyman" five times, rather than three times as in *Bloody Mary*, serves to heighten suspense and create a sense of ritualistic dread. This change not only emphasises the summoning act but also reflects the gravity and inevitability of supernatural retribution. In *Bloody Mary*, the mirror connects the summoner to the ghost world, causing psychological tension. "Candyman" elevates the mirror's symbolic power, allowing a vengeful spirit to physically manifest brutal violence. This shift intensifies the horror and addresses social issues

like systemic racism and racial injustice in America. “Candyman” replaces the female spirit with a male spirit rooted in Gothic narratives of racial violence, making the horror more poignant than *Bloody Mary*’s ambiguous motivations.

In the 1998 film *Urban Legends*, Brenda and Natalie invoke the urban legend “Bloody Mary”, evoking terror and impacting young adults’ group dynamics. The film uses ominous lighting, suspenseful soundscapes, to make the ritual visceral. In *X-Files* Season 3, Episode 13, Brenda chants “Bloody Mary” to see her future husband’s face, associating the legend with predicting one’s future. Bloody Mary becomes a tool, exploring adolescent fantasies and fears, and resonating with cultural dynamics, especially in youth and media-driven contexts. The 2007 short film *Dead Mary* showcases the adaptability of folklore through the change of the chant from “Bloody Mary” to “Dead Mary.” Digital renditions of urban legends are compared, demonstrating how they preserve essential elements while updating for modern audiences. As William S Burroughs so eloquently put it, “Adaptations may become quite legitimate adoptions,” highlighting the transformational potential of reimagining stories. In addition to guaranteeing urban legends’ survival, these adaptations enable them to flourish in novel settings while maintaining their essential narrative frameworks.

The Digital Renaissance of Folklore: Exploring Urban Legends through Trevor J Blank’s Lens

Trevor J Blank’s *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction* explores how digital platforms transform folklore, creating a hybrid form where users actively contribute to evolving narratives. His theory reveals how digital platforms fundamentally reshape folklore’s creation, dissemination, and transformation. Media technologies bridge virtual and corporeal worlds, influencing behaviors and beliefs. Digital media has transformed urban legends, like *The Killer in the Backseat*, by incorporating modern weapons and surveillance systems, reflecting current technological anxieties. Digital platforms allow for the “reproduction and adaptation” of folkloric forms, even in the face of technological change (Blank 73). Moreover, digital adaptations of

The Killer in the Backseat often evoke communal responses, with viewers commenting and sharing these versions creating a digital interaction, in turn reflecting Blank's "emergent cultural scenes" (Blank 29) where the audience consumes while becoming a part of the folklore process. *Bloody Mary* too has evolved from oral folk to digital platforms like *Reddit*. Users retell the legend in video formats, accessible globally. Digital adaptations often incorporate modern settings, augmented reality, special effects, and modern twists, such as ghost-hunting apps or AR simulations, to create a more immersive experience for viewers (Blank 35). Digital urban legends have become popular platforms for sharing personal encounters and discussing myths, blending supernatural elements with modern social behaviors. These platforms serve as digital "folkloric hubs," combining shared cultural elements and local adaptations. Mass media has democratised access to folklore, making it globally recognisable. Networking sites adapt urban legends with modern fears, showcasing fluidity and modern expression.

Blank in *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction* addresses the use of Wi-Fi-enabled devices that have evolved these legends into "shareable" legends that leverage the viral nature of digital communication. Networking platforms facilitate the swift dissemination and remixing of legends, allowing for diverse interpretations and reimaginings, such as the Twitter account of *The Killer in the Backseat*. Folklore is shaped by the social context within a culture, with Malinowski's *Myth in Primitive Psychology* emphasising the importance of understanding the conditions under which it is performed and experienced. Folklore lacks dynamic elements without context, and urban legends were traditionally told in social settings using tone, gestures, and facial expressions. Digital storytelling platforms now transform the narrator's role, using sophisticated techniques like editing and effects to enhance narratives, enhancing the impact of urban legends. The integration of *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* into digital culture showcases a "cyclical, symbiotic influence" between traditional and digital forms of storytelling. Blank argues that technological advancements have reshaped folklore by shifting it to digital formats such as viral videos and social media trends. This paper adopts an adaptive analytical approach to examine how digital

media transform and perpetuate urban legends as evolving cultural narratives.

Conclusion

Urban legends, such as *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*, have evolved to reflect societal anxieties and serve as tools for navigating the complexities of the digital age. Digital folklore fosters participatory storytelling, enabling audiences to consume and contribute to these narratives. The shift from traditional storytelling to digital forms has created more personal and solitary horror, transforming ordinary scenarios into intensely suspenseful experiences. Modern adaptations through memes, social media, and *YouTube* focus on individual suspense and shock, with regional and cultural variations available. The study offers an expansive framework for further investigation, particularly in the context of evolving technologies and shifting cultural landscapes. Hutcheon's "Theory of Adaptation" highlights that these legends are more than derivative texts; they are cultural artifacts that continually transform to resonate with new audiences. The study of folklore in the digital age provides insights into how people negotiate their identities and cultural memories in a rapidly changing technological world.

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Cuttack Darshan: Urban Imagination and the *Laukik* Style in Colonial Odisha

Siddharth Satpathy*

Abstract

Govinda Rath was a printer and book trader in late nineteenth-century Cuttack, Odisha. He composed and published a verse narrative called *Cuttack Darshan*. Literally, *A View of the City of Cuttack*, the narrative takes the reader on a tour of the city, and shows him the most prominent features of the urban landscape. This paper offers a reading of the poem and argues that it draws upon pre-colonial *laukik* or folk spatial imagination to make sense of the experience of dwelling in the colonial town at the height of the British Raj. The *laukik* style consists of two topological devices, *parikrama* or circumambulation and *darshan* or seeing. The style was often at work in the pre-colonial literary genre of *sthala-mahatmya* that described the significance of places of pilgrimage. Rath mobilises these topological devices to describe the town of Cuttack as a site of pilgrimage for the educated and progressive middle orders of the region. In the process, the poem constructs a subject-position that at once celebrates as well as resists absorption into the colonial modern. On the one hand, this subject is deeply aware of the town's increasing embedment in what has been described as the colonial state space, a space that was marked by the presence of the colonial state and the progress it ushered in. On the other hand, he also looked for spatial experiences that went beyond the confines of the state space.

Keywords: Colonial Modernity, Dwelling, Place, Cuttack, Folk, Govinda Rath, *Laukik*, Spatial Imagination.

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Dwelling in the Locality

Govinda Rath was a teacher, antiquarian, printer and book trader in colonial Cuttack in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century. He was a crucial, but largely under-studied, figure in the history of Odia literary modernity. In 1884, he composed and published a verse narrative titled *Cuttack Darshan*. Literally, *A View of the City of Cuttack*, the poem takes the reader on a sight-seeing tour of the market town that served as the seat of colonial administration in the province. This paper offers a reading of the poem and reconstructs a short history of dwelling at Cuttack at the height of the Victorian empire. Writing such a history is possible only when we treat a place as an event. Scholars have argued for such a treatment. Place is not merely a geographical location. It is not only about *where* one is situated. It is also about *how* one is “together with others,” that is, how one engages with others. And *who* they all aspire to “become together” (Casey 23). In other words, place is something that we experience (Casey, 30). It is not only a natural experience. Rather, it is a cultural experience as well (31). In this sense, a place becomes historical, that is, it acquires a historicity. It becomes an event that unfolds over a long period of time (Casey 32). And the event is about “the experience of being” in a place and “becoming part of the place” (Casey 33). This history of place at Cuttack is reconstructed in order to argue that Rath’s poem represents a folk or *laukik* style of inhabiting the locality. He borrows this mode from pre-colonial discursive traditions, and deploys it to construct a subject-position that at once celebrates as well as resists absorption into the colonial modern. In other words, this folk or *laukik* spatial imagination enables the poet and his narrator to dwell in the colonial urban space.

Colonial State Space and the *Laukik* Style

Scholars have described the formation of a colonial state space in India in the nineteenth-century. After the Mutiny of 1857, the colonial state sought to consolidate its territorial authority in India (Goswami 43). It developed an elaborate bureaucracy and carried out survey and measurement of land. It also undertook enumerative exercises and produced ethnographic knowledge about the people. Besides, it set up massive infrastructures for communication and

transportation. All these aimed to provide the state with an increasingly invasive presence in the colonised society (Goswami 43). This project of territorial consolidation went hand in hand with the expansion of imperial capital. Metropolitan political economists came to see colonies not so much as separate countries but as “outlying agricultural or manufacturing estates” of Britain (Goswami 44). British capital, they argued, flowed into the colonial spaces and turned them into “inner supplements” of the British imperial-global economy (Goswami 44-45). These two historical processes of territorial and capitalist expansion worked to “transform the geographical space of colonial India into a commodified, ‘second-order’ space embedded within...the broader imperial economy” (Goswami 45). Scholars have described this second order space as the colonial state space. It bore the marks of the “state-works,” the visible material embodiments of the colonial state’s authority and its civilising mission. It included the official buildings such as the courts of law, prisons and military barracks, the infrastructures of communication such as the roads, railways and telegraphs, and the projects of irrigation (Goswami 46-47). The colonial state wished to naturalise this second order space. It constructed and disseminated official maps and made modern geography a central aspect of school education (Goswami 132). This naturalisation of colonial India as a second order space involved a dismissal of pre-colonial Indian modes of spatial representation as inadequate (Goswami 143).

Rath’s mobilisation of the folk or *laukik* spatial imagination is an argument against the second-order status of the colonial space, against colonial pedagogical practices that sought to naturalise colonial spatiality. *Cuttack Darshan* employs traditional religious topological devices of *parikrama* and *darshan* to demarcate Cuttack as a site of pilgrimage for the emergent Odia middle-class. Before tracing this reconstitution of the colonial state space as a site of pilgrimage and drawing out its significance, a short reflection on the notion of the folk or *laukik* is in order.

First, the author relies on those strands of folklore studies that do not see “folk” and “urban” as antithetical experiences. Rather, the urban is conceptualised as one of the several sites wherein the

“traditional” and “unofficial” culture finds articulation and helps people to respond to the pressing issues of the contemporary world (Dorson 46). Here, folk does not necessarily represent “a world different from the centers of power, wealth, progress, industry, and intellectual and political activity in the metropolises” (Dorson 33). Rather, it signals engagement with “contemporaneity and modernity” (Dorson 48). Second, the author draws upon those scholarly insights into *laukik* which do not see it as a lesser term in the binary of great and little traditions wherein *shastric* constitutes the grander term. Instead of this “upstairs/downstairs” view, attention is paid to “context sensitivity” and “reflexivity” as modes of organisation at work in narratives (Ramanujan 8). While *shastric* reflects more of a doctrinaire position, *laukik* refers to a more embedded-in-the-world position (*Hinduism* 25). And both could be treated as different registers of cultural expression that comment on each other—they “invert, subvert, and convert” each other (Ramanujan 8). In addition, all translations from original sources in Odia language to English are undertaken by the author. Let us now turn to Govinda Rath.

Antiquarianism and Printing Culture in Cuttack

Govinda Rath’s reconstitution of the colonial state space as a site of pilgrimage relied on his vocation and profession—he was an antiquarian and a printer. Antiquarian enterprise arrived at Cuttack in the last quarter of the century (Bedamatta 405-422). The educated urban intelligentsia worked to collect, edit and print old Odia literature. Two broad trends emerged. On the one hand, there were societies and collective enterprises such as the Utkal Bhasoddipani Sabha and Cuttack Printing Company. These concentrated on high literature such as *kavyas* and epics. On the other hand, there were individual print-entrepreneurs who concentrated on folk and *laukik* genres and brought out cheap popular editions for mass consumption. This distinction was not set in stone. There were overlaps between the two trends. Nevertheless, these emerged as two pole positions in a spectrum.

Rath epitomised the latter position. He presided over a successful marriage between folk and *laukik* traditions and urban mass media. He compiled, edited and printed about eighty tracts in Sanskrit as

well as Odia. For instance, *Parashara Krishipaddhati* and *Acharya Siksha* were compilations of Sanskrit aphorisms on proper methods of agriculture, and ways of conducting an everyday moral life. As regards his Odia language tracts, *Dhagamalika* was a compilation of proverbs and sayings in circulation in the region. *Bata Osa Katha* was a compilation of a folk verse narrative in Odia. *Haria Tanti* was another folk tale in Odia verse. Invariably these tracts were priced cheaply. Rath's editorial intervention was often minimal. Consider, for instance, the sixteen-page tract *Mahabahu Chautisa*, priced at five paise, it brought a song composed in the raag *pancham baradi* by Kavisurya Baldev Rath to the print market. On the last page, Rath, the printer, addressed an editorial comment to the reader: "At some places in this book, the meaning is not clear. At a later time, we desire to publish a glossary along with this book. If someone has an old manuscript [of the text] kindly send it to us. We will be deeply obliged" (*Mahabahu*).

Rath's typical style of engagement with the folk or *laukik* and print market received contemporary acknowledgement. Fakir Mohan Senapati, the most prominent Odia novelist of the period, wrote the following verses commenting on Rath's caste-identity, vocation and profession: "Praiseworthy indeed is Rath's brahminhood / printing tracts priced at an anna or two // Good indeed, nice indeed, may this continue as a means of livelihood / one or two manuscripts may continue to be printed" (Senapati 24). Gopabandhu Das, the most prominent local leader of the Indian National Congress, described Rath as a "lok nayak" or "people's leader" for his legal and social activism to protect the interests and rights of the "praja" or common people in an obituary, and observed "if a history of the people of contemporary Odisha is ever written, it will remain incomplete without taking into account the life and work of Rath" (Das 8-9).

Laukik Spatial Imagination: Early Modern Traditions

Cuttack Darshan draws upon an older tradition of topological literature in Odia. There is room to study two verse narratives—*Bedha Parikrama* (henceforth, BP), *Bedha Bula* (henceforth, BB)—as examples of Odia literary engagement with the sense of the place in pre-colonial times. BP and BB were picked since Rath himself

compiled these two verse narratives and published them together for the first time in 1895. BP consists of sixty-one couplets and BB consists of thirty-five quatrains. Both are meant to be sung priced at four *paisa*, this tract of sixteen pages aimed at popular circulation. Rath's act of publishing these narratives, from different eras of the pre-colonial period, as companion pieces should be read as a self-conscious attempt at constituting a *laukik* canon of topological literature in Odia. Both BP and BB are concerned with the temple of Jagannath at Puri. *Bedha* is a place-name: it refers to the area that surrounds the main temple within the larger sacred complex. It is dotted by various other deities and sacred features. The usual mode of visiting Jagannath includes a circumambulation of the temple through the *bedha* and the *darshan* of the various deities enshrined therein. Both *parikrama* and *bula* refer to this circumambulation. The verse narratives invite the reader to circumambulate the temple; the narrators tell him all about the deities and sacred features he needs to see. BP is counted among the compositions of Balarama Das who composed the *Jagamohana Ramayana* in the sixteenth-century. From internal evidence, BB is by one Janardana (*Bedha* 8). The second one is assumed to be of a later age.

BP and BB broadly belong to the genre of devotional literature known as the *sthala mahatmya*. Written in both the classical language of Sanskrit as well as diverse vernacular languages such as Odia, the genre can be described as pilgrim manuals. They typically elucidate the glory or *mahatmya* of a particular sacred place or *sthala*. This is accomplished by presenting a series of mythological narratives about the place and by pronouncing the tremendous spiritual and material benefits that accrue to the visitor of the site. They usually include details of specific topographical features of the place and some geographical data so that one might navigate the sacred place more easily (Smith 1-2). Medieval Sanskrit language *sthala mahatmya* about Puri—Vacaspati Misra's *Purusottamaprakasa* and Raghunandana Bhattacharya's *Purusottamakshetrattva*—recount both mythological narratives and glorious benefits, and put emphasis on the prescribed rule or *bidhi* of circumambulation (*pancathirtha pradakshina*) to be followed by a pilgrim to the temple town. The ritual of circumambulation helps to demarcate the sacred space and establish the visitor as a pilgrim (Schneibel 106-107, 114, 115-6).

BP and BB testify to the vernacularisation of the Sanskrit tradition of composing *sthala mahatmya* about Puri. While BP is more *shastric* (scriptural) in its orientation, BB is more confidently and jubilantly *laukik* or popular. BP explicitly presents itself as a *sthala mahatmya*: “Bedha Parikrama extols its glory; listening to it will bring us joy / listening to it, will do away with endless dangers” (*Bedha* 9). The author submits that he closely follows the prescribed rule or *bidhi* in his narrative about Puri: “I write as per the *bidhi* about the sacred field of Puri; do not find fault in me / I am no great scholar; have erroneously tried to make my small wisdom well known; thus says Balarama Das” (*Bedha* 16). BB makes no reference to any *bidhi* outside of the narrative itself, which suggests that the process of vernacularisation of the *mahatmya* genre in Odisha had grown in confidence by the time Janardana wrote his piece. Instead, BB derives its authority from the folk narrative frame it employs: Shri Rama, the divine hero, shows Sita, his wife, around the *bedha* of the temple at Puri, and thereby, instructs the ordinary readers and listeners in the practice of circumambulation. Janardana concludes by drawing attention to this unique narrative choice of his own and by locating himself firmly in the tradition of *bhakti*:

“What is not seen
I narrated that O Lord,
And rendered it visible.
Bestow mercy on me,
O Beloved of Sita.
O Raghupati,
May this mind remain at your feet” (*Bedha* 8).

In their attempt to construct a sacred landscape in words, BP and BB face two specific challenges. First, they must find a way to insert a series of geographical sites into a well-ordered narrative sequence without having recourse to the methods of modern cartography. Second, as Axel Michaels points out, the religious sense of the space always refers to something beyond the geographical features located in the place. This something beyond is the sense of the sacred, which cannot be observed but rather felt within. A site is no holy place if the religious sense of space is not understood. The challenge, then, is to find a way to represent religious notions of merit, grace or

liberation in the landscape (“Mappings” 131-143). BP and BB mobilise the notions of *parikrama* or circumambulation and *darshan* or seeing to address these issues.

BP and BB use temporal markers instead of cartographic ones to create a narrative sequence that describes a place. Michel de Certeau’s analysis of spatial stories helps to see how cartographic markers operate. He describes two kinds of narrative modes, tour and map. A tour describes movement or journey from one place to another. A map renders one or more places visible. These modes thus invite the reader either to move from place to place or to see a place in relation to a host of other places. Language employs both the modes to represent space. A description, de Certeau observes, usually oscillates between either “going (spatializing actions)” or “seeing (the knowledge of an order of places)” (de Certeau 119). Consider, for instance, the hypothetical narrative sequence: if you travel ‘x’ number of steps to the east of the entrance you come to ‘a’; if you look to the north-east of ‘a’, you see ‘b’ which is ‘y’ feet in height. Attention needs to be drawn specifically to the tour. In de Certeau’s analytic model, the movement from one place to the other is organised via cartographic markers. These markers provide details about direction and distance— ‘to the east of the entrance’ or ‘x number of steps’ etc. In contrast, BP and BB mobilise temporal markers to insert a series of geographical sites into their narrative sequence. For instance, after seeing x, one sees y. And then, one proceeds to z. The narrative texture is marked by phrases like *tahinra antare* or “after that”, *tathi pare* or “and then”, *ethu anantare* or “after this” and *ete dekhi kari* or “having seen this much.”

BP and BB do not allow the reader to map the place or the journey. They assume that the reader or listener already knows the geographical site and the route. For instance, the opening verses of BB do not give a sense of the geographic direction in which the narrator wants the reader to proceed: “Holding Sita’s hand in his own, [Rama] proceeded to the *bedha* / and pointed out to her the deities therein / ‘See, O, beloved, / the Lord in His eternal repose’” (*Bedha* 1). Similarly, the narrator in BP says:

First, go and see *patita pavana* at the *simhadvara* /
see also *kasi visvanatha* on the twenty-two steps
as he dwells on *brahma* in its full form (5)
behold the *bhoga mandapa*, bow your head,
all your sins are washed away here /
. . . proceed now to lord *vighnesvara* (Bedha 9)

The narratives draw attention not to the cartography of the tour around the temple but rather to the subject that tours and the objects he sees. It is akin to the touring of a spectator in a museum or art gallery. The movement between the objects is less important than what the subject sees. *Parikrama* or circumambulation in BP and BB is then not a cartographic practice.

BP and BB convey the sacred experience of the tour around the temple by rendering *darshan* a dialogic event. It involves three positions; those of the pilgrim, the guide and the deity. The guide and the pilgrim see the deity; the guide narrates a mythological story about it while the pilgrim listens attentively; finally, they together expect benefits that accrue from the visit. In BB, Rama is showing Sita around the *bedha*. If Sita occupies the position of the pilgrim, Rama serves as the guide as they move from one deity to another:

. . . the beautiful icons of the brothers Rama and
Krusna /
Kamsa's enmity brought them into hiding in Gopa-- /
behold them, /
they will erase all our sorrows (Bedha 9).

The dialogic nature of *darshan* is also present in BP. The *bedha* enables the formation of a community that sees, communicates and expects. This collective act gestures towards that religious experience, which establishes the *bedha* as a sacred space. *Darshan*, thus, is not a form of appropriation, as the act of *seeing* is in several colonial narratives; it does not establish proprietorial relationships between the viewer and what he sees. The emphasis is on how the former is transformed. This transformation takes the shape of becoming joyous or *harasa*; growing free from pain or *kasta*, sorrows

or *duhkha*, anxiety and fears or *bhiti*, dangers or *sankata*; and finding eventual liberation from the *samsara* (*Bedha* 5, 6, 9).

Parikrama and Darshan of the City of Cuttack

Cuttack Darshan uses the pre-colonial *laukik* topological devices of *parikrama* and *darshan* to dwell in the colonial urban space and engage with the experience of colonial modernity. The narrator is a resident of the town. He invites a friend, who comes to visit him from elsewhere, to embark on a guided tour of the city. The relationship between Rath's narrator and the friend is akin to the relationship between the narrator of the BP and BB and the pilgrim who comes for a circumambulation and sight of the *bedha*. The tour of the town takes the rough shape of a *parikrama*: if one traces its course on a map of the city, they will find it roughly going round the geographical place and coming to an end at the site where it begins. The *parikrama* in this late nineteenth century topological narrative reveals a greater degree of cartographic sensibility. It provides details about the routes in the city and helps the reader to know the direction in which he proceeds:

See, my friend, let us return and go to another place.
Let us stand on the *chowk* of the Chaudhury *bazaar*;
Look around once in all directions.
The route to the west goes to Banka *bazzar*,
Many a gentleman reside there.
Now, let us proceed to the north
We will see many a sight, pleasing to the eye.
(*Cuttack* 5)

However, this new engagement with cartographic sensibility, a nod to colonial modernity, is supplemented with the *laukik* device of employing temporal markers to insert a series of geographical sites into a narrative sequence. Phrases familiar from BP and BB— *ethu ante* and *e ante* or “after this”—reappear in Rath's narrative.

After this, proceed for some distance,
The Chandan Mandap looks so beautiful.
Come out to the front and see the pond,

Lord Binod Bihari enjoys his boat-rides in this pond.
(*Cuttack* 5)

The *laukik* or folk stylistic device operates as an “aside” and lends the narrative that engages with its own present time, an old-world tone (Dorson 64).

The *parikrama* in *Cuttack Darshan* is also accompanied by the experience of *darshan* of the city. Rath conceptualises the town as an art gallery or a theatre where a sequence of scenes unfolds one after another as the *parikrama* proceeds. Just as the pilgrim and his guide move from one site to another around the *bedha*, so do the nineteenth-century narrator and his friend. For instance, as he looks at the full river that flows on the south of the city and the colonial law court where the Collector presides over trials, Rath comments on the *abhinaya* or the drama that unfolds in the natural and the human worlds of Cuttack:

The royal palace stands on the banks of the river
Kathajodi
The collector presides over trials here
One can see again and again
The dramas the king of waters and the king of humans
enact. (*Cuttack* 2)

The event of *darshan* in the colonial-modern poem retains the dialogic structure found in BP and BB. The narrator and his companion collectively see a sight; narrate and listen to a story about the sight; and expect beneficial results from the actions performed. For instance, a *darshan* of the layered ethnic composition of the market for English and *desi* textiles:

Come, O friend, and the wise [readers],
have a novel and wonderful *darshan* of,
the beautiful houses of the Marwari people.
A wide public road passes in the middle,
Double-storey houses stand on both the sides.
Have you heard, *nua-sadak* is the name of the road!
This is the market for British clothes.

Marwari people sell British clothes
 And earn a lot of money.
 Our desi-people do not take to earning profits
 By trading in British clothes.
 Here after, have a darshan of Chaudhuri bazaar
 [Your] eyes will be pleased today.
 In a wondrous manner, many shopkeepers and peddlers
 Have arranged [and displayed] a variety of commodities
 Cotton and silk clothes of the *desi* variety
Desi merchants trade in them. (*Cuttack* 4)

In a gesture that is reminiscent of BP and BB, Ratha presents both *jnana* or knowledge and *sukha*, *harasa* or pleasure and joy as the benefits one would derive from a *darshan* of the town. As they begin the tour, the narrator says, “Come, my friend, let us go / for a *darshan* of the town! / Much wisdom will it bestow” (*Cuttack* 1). And, also elsewhere in the poem, he observes, “My friend, let us leave the fort behind and go else-where / the heart, broken with sorrow, will grow joyous” (*Cuttack* 20).

A Pilgrimage to the Colonial State Space

By employing the pre-colonial *laukik* spatial categories of *parikrama* and *darshan*, Rath reconstitutes the colonial state space at Cuttack as a site of Odia middleclass pilgrimage. His poem constructs and narrates the lore of the colonial state and Odia civil society. The visitor to Cuttack derives *jnana* or knowledge. He comes to learn about the work of the colonial state. He also learns how Odia educated intelligentsia, landed elite and commercial entrepreneurs participate in the colonial project of civilising modernity. This edification leads to an experience of joy. *Cuttack Darshan* devotes ample narrative space to the built environment of all official buildings—the treasury, the court house, the collector’s office, the military cantonment, its canteens and parade grounds, prisons (*Cuttack* 2, 5, 7, 10); to all colonial projects that provided transport and communications—telegraph offices, post offices, steamboats (*Cuttack* 20, 21, 24, 25), and also to feats of colonial engineering projects—network of dams and canals (*Cuttack* 25). Narrative space is also devoted to other spatial markers of the English civilising

mission—industrial workshops with their smoke emitting chimneys, the clock tower, the saw mills, and the foundries (*Cuttack* 24-25); social clubs, ballrooms and racquet-ball courts (*Cuttack* 19); European housing projects with their straight and wide streets, well-ventilated spacious residences, gardens and porticos (*Cuttack* 21). Each of these features of the colonial urban environment receive vivid descriptions—their lore inspires varied feelings of joyous hope, wonder, and begrudging admiration. The lore the narrator constructs around European housing projects in the town serve a representative instance:

O friend come along this straight and wide road
See the settlements of the English men.
Boundary walls run along both sides of the royal road
One can see them run for a long distance.
How beautiful looks the gate!
[So also] the garden on the front of the house!
Creepers adorn the thatched roof of the veranda of the
buggy-house
Rangnali flowers please the eyes.
Clean and lime-washed house, [stands] well spread-
out.
It has many doors for air-ventilation
The way we differentiate between houses
The Whites do not have a similar rule.
Adorned with many embellishments
The house looks so beautiful as if gods would desire
it.
Many white men and women,
Sitting in their buggies, move along this road.
Why should they care for any one?
As fast as wind they fly [along the road].
Bathing in the dust of the wheels of the horse driven
carriages,
Walk along black men, and think in their hearts
What pleasurable Indra-hood do these enjoy!
We do not have that written in our destiny. (*Cuttack*
20-21)

Darshan of Cuttack is also a *darshan* of the emergent Odia civil society. The narrator and his companion move from one significant spatial marker of the work of the civil society to another, as well as narrate and listen to the accompanying lore: the diverse educational institutions in the town which have been built with private donations from Odia kings and *zemindars* (*Cuttack* 3,30-31), the printing presses and town libraries set up by the citizens (*Cuttack* 30); the primary commercial districts in the town and their trade links with the port cities of Bombay and Calcutta (*Cuttack* 3-4, 9). The poem also narrates lore wherein the local *nagarika* or citizen is the protagonist: his public-minded petition to higher colonial authority against an unpopular local water tax (*Cuttack* 31), his consumption of bourgeois forms of recreational leisure (*Cuttack* 29) etc. The description of the Cuttack Printing Company, the most prominent establishment of its kind in the town in the second half of the nineteenth-century serves a representative instance:

Nearby, good friend, one can see,
 The tall two-storey-building of the printing
 company;
 This building houses the printing press that publishes
 many a book;
 With a lot of effort, babu Bichitrananda established
 this company;
 Maharaj Bhagirath was much helpful—he donated
 generously to this cause;
 Working as the secretary of the company,
babu Gaurishankar has made profits for the
 shareholders;
 This building, dear friend, houses the Utkal Samaj;
 Through debates and arguments, many a decision are
 reached on this platform;
 This is also the venue where the residents of the town
 congregate for diverse meetings,
 and pass resolutions. (*Cuttack* 7)

Resistance

However, the trope of pilgrimage helps Rath to simultaneously resist the second-order spatial status of Cuttack. Mediating as it does between a pre-colonial *laukik* spatial imaginary and the experience of dwelling in a late nineteenth-century colonial town, Rath's *parikrama* and *darshan* construct a *mahatmya* of the town of Cuttack. For the narrator and his friend, the *mahatmya* of the town is not dependent on its relation to other locations in the British empire. Production of relative space—space defined not so much as a locatable object but as spatial relations and networks spread over regions, nations and the globe—acquired momentum in India with the advent of colonialism and the rise of industrial capitalism. However, dominance of relative or abstract space, scholars have argued, did not “imply the annihilation of concrete spaces with their particular qualities” (Ahuja 43). Concrete space here refers to an understanding of space as a locatable object, as a natural, absolute, and fixed object. Rath mobilises the *laukik* to allude to the persistence of the concrete and absolute values and understandings of space. These notions comment on the colonial state space. This is particularly the case when the narrator and his friend visit the sacred sites of piety—the diverse temples and routes of festive processions in and around the town. The following is a typical description:

The street is particularly wide at Chandni Chowk
Buildings of many colors are there in the thousands
Sweet coconuts—this fruit is deemed auspicious
People are selecting and buying this fruit [from the
vendor],
And, having fun.
What do I say about the *mahima* (glory) of this *chowk*
When the deity arrives here in procession on the night
of *dashahara*
It is as if the wealth of the heaven comes down on to
the earth
Who else besides a reflective man can cherish the joys
of such a sight! (*Cuttack* 32)

The reflective man who stands at the *Chandni Chowk* on the night of the *Dashahara* and relishes the *mahima* or glory of the place does not necessarily dwell in that moment in a second-order space. He is aware of the colonial state space and participates in it. At the same time, he creates for himself spatial experiences that do not remain limited to the rhythms of the state space. These alternative spatial experiences allude to the concrete and absolute understandings of space. These two languages of spatial expression, colonial and *laukik*, comment on each other. The *laukik* mode of narration enables the narrator to recreate a concrete spatial experience, to appreciate the *mahatmya* of the chowk, and thereby, resist an unequivocal absorption into the colonial state space at Cuttack.

Conclusions

Cuttack Darshan enables one to write a history of dwelling in the colonial city. The verse narrative mobilises pre-colonial *laukik* modes of spatial representation so as to invest older cultural meanings in the modern experience of living in a colonial space. It presents the second order colonial town as a site of pilgrimage for its educated middle-class readership. Older categories of *parikrama* and *darshan* are reworked. They help the narrator to recognise the significance of his town as a locality of the British world order. At the same time, they help him to resist its second order status. As a site of pilgrimage, Cuttack refuses to remain confined to the second order space in which the imperial global economy embeds it. The *laukik* enables the town and its narrator to articulate this refusal and thereby, constitute Cuttack as an event in colonial India.

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Liandote Unau and Khupting-Ngambawm: Communicating Culture through Oral Narratives among the Vaiphei community of North-East India

Nunchawii Hatlei*

Abstract

Oral culture, as defined by Walter J Ong, is “a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing and even of the possibility of writing.” Due to the absence of writing, an individual’s verbal memory is a “valued asset” in those cultures. In the present day, the narratives, songs, speeches, riddles, tenets, etc., that had been passed on in the verbal form, became the carriers of a community’s cultural development and progress. Stories have come to be shaped by their social conditions, and it is in this way that an intertwined relationship exists between oral art forms and the society that produced them. Looking into the oral tradition and lore is an important part of understanding the culture of any community around the world. A study of the varied practices, festivals, rituals and attire of the people is necessary in order to decode the signs embedded in the oral narratives of the people. Not much was known about the tribes of North-East India. They reside in the geographical region known as “Zomia,” as termed by Willem van Schendel. The paper is a study on the cultural narratives of the Zo ethnic group of North-East India who were historically isolated from the rest of the country. With special reference to the Vaipheis, many ancient ways of life, tradition, beliefs changed with the acceptance of Christianity in the twentieth Century. Much of the customs have been modified in keeping with the change in the belief system of the people. However, the customs and beliefs of the pre-Christian era continue to live on in the narratives passed down orally. These tales preserve the distinct cultural heritage of the community along with the interpretations of the world the Vaiphei people inhabit. This paper will discuss the communication

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of culture and traditional beliefs as seen in the tales of the Vaiphei community. Selected tales will be analyzed in relation to the issue of communication and interpretation of the cultural signs and symbols embedded in the oral narratives of the people.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Cultural Narratives, Memory Studies, *Mizo, Vaiphei*

The term ‘oral narrative’ refers to the tales, legends, and myths that are passed down orally from generation-to-generation. It is part of a larger body of works or literature known as oral literature, traditional literature or folk literature that is delivered by word of mouth. Folk literature is an essential part of a people’s folklore and understanding the culture of a community. The study of folklore, thus, encompasses several disciplines such as linguistics, cultural studies, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, comparative religion, mythology, and literature. It is, therefore, impossible to give a single definition of the term ‘folklore’. Vladimir Propp defines Folklore as “... the art of oppressed classes, both peasants and workers, but also of the intermediate strata that gravitate toward the lower social classes. One can speak with some reservations of lower middle-class folklore, but never of the folklore of the aristocracy” (Propp 5). Another folklorist Dan Ben-Amos defines folklore as “an organic phenomenon . . . so accordingly, folklore is one of these three: a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, or a kind of art . . . Folklore is not thought of as existing without or apart from a structured group . . . its existence depends on its social context . . . As an artistic process, folklore may be found in any communicative medium; musical, visual, kinetic, or dramatic. . . . In sum, folklore is artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 14). From these, we can understand that folklore is a vehicle to communicate the culture and history of a community. Far from being mere entertainment, oral narratives encode values, beliefs, and historical consciousness, making them vital cultural signs worthy of close analysis.

In the context of communication of culture and indigenous knowledge, the idea of tradition and a certain involvement with the past is ever present. Stith Thompson stressed on the importance of tradition in the study of folklore: “The common idea present in all

folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record” (Thompson 134). Moreover, the association of folklore with the study of the past cannot be ignored as “folklore is an echo of the past, but at the same time it is also the vigorous voice of the present” (Sokolov 15). Regarding the connection of history with folklore and oral literature, the historian Collingwood remarks, “The past which the historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which is, in some sense, still living in the present” (Carr 20). Folklore is, thus, more than survival of the past but also the presence of the past in the present, albeit in new shapes and structures.

While folklore and history have certain similarities, it is different in several ways. Folklore uses symbols in elaborated narratives and in rituals to encapsulate, or intensify experience and provide a release from reality. Folkloric evidence is different from historical documentation because it often constitutes fantasy, but that does not detract it from its truthfulness or significance. Alan Dundes claims, “It is not easy to find a rationale for the irrational, to make sense of ‘nonsense,’ but that is what folklorists seriously interested in interpretation must try to do” (Dundes 27). Dundes’ emphasis on interpretation is significant as it points out multiplicity of interpretation of a singular event in a literary work can occur. While focused on interpretations, folklorists are equally concerned with aesthetic and expressive aspects of culture and the people and societies that make and respond to creative acts. This collection of traditional material is preserved and passed on from one generation to the other. As it is being handed down the ages, it has with it versions and variations shaped by memory, an immediate need or purpose, and the degree of individual talent. Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin in their essay ‘Interpretation and Identity: Can the Work Survive the World?’ pointed out that “multiplicity of meaning, subtle and complex ambiguity, is frequently a positive and vital feature of literary discourse” (John and Lopes 93). Thus, multiple interpretations and openness of interpretations are not signs of confusion, but rather strengths that allow for creativity and literary discourse.

The importance of memory in oral narratives cannot be stressed enough. It can be used to formulate a history of marginalised people. While memory is regarded as not being credible in a traditional historiographical study, it is effective in formulating an alternative history or in unmasking marginalized accounts of events or time periods. Jan Vansina notes that remembering is an activity – a recreation of what once was (147). The oral tradition of a people in recreating history and culture is important; however, it may also be marred by time. The concept of memory, that is, recollecting and remembering past events, is essential in making auto-ethnobiography accounts of the people. Jawaharlal Handoo observes that, “an oral tale originates in the mind and is preserved by memory, carried by memory by skilled narrators in traditional language” (137); thereby, acknowledging through this remark the importance of memory in the study of folklore. According to Maurice Halbwachs, the society impacts the mind to the extent where the latter reformulates the memories, and this informs an individual’s own recollection of events through the prism of the community. Paul Connerton asserts that “images and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances” and that memory is not individual but a cultural one (Connerton 4). Jan Assmann calls the process of recollection of memory as “cultural” and considers “memory” as being able to be realised in and through the processes of social communication, just as it is with respect to consciousness that individual memory functions. Due to the absence of written accounts, these oral traditions have to be understood as a means of a community imparting knowledge to the next generation and as a means of remembering what once was. For the purpose of this paper, all oral narratives have been translated into English by the author.

In the case of the *Vaiphei* indigenous community of the North-East of India, several of their folklore can be seen as capsules from the past that continue to shape contemporary society. The community in question belongs to the *Mizo/Zohnahthlak* ethnic group, also known as *Chin-Kuki-Mizo*, who are among many of the ethnic groups of North-East India that geographically share the borders of neighbouring countries - China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. They reside in the Indian states of Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, Meghalaya, parts of Tripura, and Nagaland. The mythical belief of the

Zohnahthlak is that, originally, they came out from *Chhinlung*, *Sinlung*, *Khul*, or *Khur* which means ‘covering rock,’ which may be interpreted as present-day Silung in China, bordering the Shan State in the East. Several attempts have been made to rationalise the myth or *Khul*. One song that verifies this myth goes as:

*Ka thang e! Khul ah ka pian in Aw/ Ka chun le Zua’n
thangnan chembang ei chawi e;/ Namtin Guallai lawi
ang ka thang e!*

(I am famous! Since I was born from *Khul*; / My
parents praise me in the village of many people; /
Among many people I am famous). (Soilalsiam 61)

Although historians are not in exact agreement concerning the origins of these tribes, they do not deviate from the fact that these *Zo* tribes share a common root and were a migratory race. One common finding of historians and scholars who study the history and origin of these tribes is that they had been together at one point of time and gradually migrated south-west from China through Burma (Myanmar) to their present settlement in the North-Eastern states of India like Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and their peripheral regions. Political unrest, forced labour, and natural calamities compelled the people to move on to the Chindwin Valley, then onto the present Chin State in Myanmar. They then moved eastwards, across the Tiau River, and settled in present day Mizoram. However, the strong Pawi warrior tribe forced them to move northwards for survival. Ultimately, a section of the population decided to part ways with the others at one point, and this is remembered in the phrase “*An vai in an phe*” in the Duhlian dialect meaning “All of them departed” and the name given to the families that departed then, *Vaiphei*, stuck ever since then. The path north led them from the hills to the valley of Manipur and this move is recollected in a folksong titled, *Phaigam zawtna La* (*Song of Migration to the Plains*) which runs as follows:

*Saka Pawi pâ n kê l bang ei naw a,/ Al bang i da man
in/ Teimei Vangkhua lam bang zawn ing e/*

(Like goats, the Northern Pawi man chased us, / With heavy hearts and heavy steps/ We trudge towards the Teimei (Meitei) plains). (Khuphau 6)

When the Central Government started ‘schedulisation’ of the tribal population after India got her independence in 1947, a majority of the ethnic communities residing in the state of Mizoram preferred to identify themselves as *Mizo*. This was formalized when the Lushai Hills District Act, 1954, was passed by the Indian Parliament. On the contrary, the *Zo* community that settled in Manipur further diversified into different sub-tribes with nomenclatures of their own. Among the numerous tribes, the *Vaiphei* were one to have been recognized in the Constitution of India in accordance with the Scheduled Tribes Order of 1950 (Vaiphei 6).

Prior to the arrival of the Christian missionaries, the *Vaiphei* language had no writing system. Impressed by the success of J H Lorrain and F W Savidge in creating a *Mizo* alphabet from the Roman script, a similar *Vaiphei* alphabet was made by the efforts of Watkin R Roberts, a Christian missionary, with the help of the first converts of the community, *Pu Thangkai* and *Pu Lungpau*, in the year 1911 (Chawnmang 5). Literature came into print from this time heralding a new chapter in the progress of the community. However, tales of the people continued to be passed down orally recalling the days before the Gospel came to them. The customs and beliefs of the pre-Christian era continue to live on in the narratives passed down orally. These tales preserve the distinct cultural heritage of the community along with the interpretations of the world the *Vaiphei* people inhabit. This paper will discuss the communication of culture and traditional beliefs as seen in the tales of the *Vaiphei* community.

To understand the tales that will be discussed, an understanding of *Vaiphei* cultural values and beliefs is required. *Vaiphei* society is a patriarchal one with a heavy emphasis on respect for elders. Anyone older to the individual is greeted with the prefix ‘U’ before their names. A married man/woman is no longer called by their given names, rather they are acknowledged by the name of their first-born child. For instance, Mr Lalpu and Mrs Khualnu are now known as “Tingcha’s Father” and “Tingcha’s Mother” - Tingcha being the

name of their first-born child. It is also considered inappropriate to call one's parents by their names as *Vaiphei* community accord a high importance to parents and elders. With regards to their belief system, the *Vaiphei* believed in a supreme being known as *Pathian*. Every object in nature is believed to be the abode of spirits, referred to as *Huai*. The people would offer sacrifices to the *Huai* that lived in their surroundings to appease them as well as to seek good fortune, be it in times of harvest or war. The blood and flesh of pigs, dogs, fowls and *mithun* (*Bos Frontalis*), were used in those sacrifices. Rites were performed at the location selected for *jhum* cultivation to cleanse the land of spirits before work began.

The *Vaiphei* were a people that were attuned to the natural world and beliefs arose due to their encounters with supernatural forces. One such superstitious belief is that one must never treat death in a flippant manner or perform the rituals and ceremonies as a source of merry making. In the case of death in the family, the corpse would be propped against the middle post of the house in a sitting position while the family prepared for the funeral. This is known as '*Sanglai*' and the dead body would be dressed up and his/her coffin would be packed with provisions for their journey to the afterlife. This custom was seen as a proper farewell for a family member and it was also a mandatory ritual for family members (Paukhawkai 5).cWith regards to the afterlife, the *Vaiphei* believed the soul heads either to the *Mithi Khua* (Village of the Dead) or *Pialgal/Pialral* (Home of the Warriors). Entry to *Pialgal* was only for the brave warriors, *Thansua-pa* or *Thangchhuah-pa* who had successfully hunted different animals and had collected the heads of enemies. *Mithi Khua*, on the other hand, was the place everyone could enter into regardless of their status. In the *Mithi Khua* (land of the dead), the souls of the dead continue their earthly occupations. They even have to construct houses for their dwelling. The souls of the dead feel pain and hurt, eat and sleep and work in the *Mithi Khua*. But life there is supposed to be only an imitation of earthly life.

The following section will focus on how oral narratives evolve and differ based on the speaker, context, and time. Oral narratives of people evolve through time and space, taking into account the creativity of the narrator and the context in which he/she tells the tale.

Folktales are dynamic and evolve based on time, audience, gender of the narrator, and immediate context in which they are narrated. The tale of *Liandote Unau/Liandovate Unau* is well-known among the Mizo community. Different versions of the tale exist depending on the region and the variant of the language used by the narrator. While the *Vaiphei* called it *Liandote Unau*, the *Lusei/Duhlian*-speaking community knew it as *Liandovate Unau*. The name of the younger brother also differs according to each narrator, where it changes from either 'Thanghau' or 'Tuaisiala' depending on the narrator. We will look at both the versions of the tales in the *Vaiphei* and *Lusei/Duhlian* languages in order to understand how tales can evolve depending on context, speaker and time.

The story of the two brothers, Liando/Liandova and Thanghau/Tuaisiala who were orphaned due to the death of their father and the remarriage of their mother, is a tale that preaches familial love and loyalty. The brothers had a hard childhood filled with neglect, abuse, and near-starvation. At one point, they are believed to have had to split a millet grain into two to share and fill their hungry bellies. As they had no immediate family to look after them, the brothers were shunned by the village. They would only get the leftover food from a feast, and their requests for food grains would be answered by tossed baskets of rice husk. Their fortune, however, changed when the villagers gave the discarded bladder of a python as their share of its killing. The brothers discovered that the bladder contained precious bells, gongs, necklaces, and gold coins which made them wealthier than even their village chief. Among the *Vaiphei*, these treasures are said to have been the property of a *Pawi* (name of a community) merchant who was swallowed by the python. While in the *Lusei* version, the identity of the merchant is believed to have been from the *Paite* community. This change in the merchant's tribe can be interpreted in the manner in which, the mentioned tribe in the respective versions of the tale, probably lived in close proximity to the narrator's tribe. Hence, changing the name of the community made it easier for the listener to identify better with the man who was the benefactor of the brothers' wealth.

Since times immemorial, the motif of entities that bless humans with unimaginable wealth has been present in many cultures.

However, the blessed ones would either become greedy, or overreach their limit, or they would forget their roots and become arrogant, both leading to their downfall. This type of moralistic story is popular with parents or grandparents, narrating it to youngsters to drive home the lesson that pride goes before a fall. This value of humility and respect for tradition is taught to *Vaiphei* children with another episode from the tale of *Liandote Unau*. The story goes that Liando marries the daughter of the village chief and gives them a bride-price befitting her status. Once again, a difference is noted in the name of the lady, said to be Sialchawng among the *Vaiphei*; while known by the name of Tuaichawngi among the *Lusei*. Back to the story, the news of the wealth of Liando and Thanghau spread to the neighbouring villages when their mother came to confirm the rumours. She is said to have travelled due to her greedy disposition, and not out of love for her sons. She dies tragically after throwing herself from a tree, in regret over losing out on the wealth her sons gained. On her passing, Liando is reluctant to conduct the last rites - 'Sanglai' for his mother, and instead hangs her corpse in his granary where he kept a dog to lick the dripping blood to keep the floor clean.

As already mentioned, the *Vaiphei* would perform last rites for the dead for at least three days with the body placed in the centre of the home. The lack of respect for traditions and rituals by the brothers can be interpreted as either wilful ignorance or arrogance in their material success. The tale of the two brothers can be interpreted as a moralistic story of familial love and bonding. Alternatively, it is a cautionary tale of the perils of greed, revenge and disrespect to elders. *Vaiphei* society is one in which values such as altruism, self-sacrifice, community-sharing, and respect for elders, are prized over individualistic outlooks. Also, superstitions and fear of the unknown marked their lives as well. As a result, reluctance to perform traditional roles and sacrifices is seen as an act of perversion and detrimental to community living. Several symbols embedded in the story will make sense only for an audience well-versed in the myths of the people. Traditionally, a snake or python is considered a source of wealth and prosperity in tribal lore. In the famed *Chhinlung/Khul* origin myth of the people, the ancestors of the people were said to emerge from the cave after a brave warrior slayed the serpent that was guarding the exit. He earned the moniker 'Zahawnga' meaning

“opened the way for hundreds of people” and was widely respected. After their migration, the people who became the *Mizo*, began to populate the world and prosper in time. The tale of the two brothers wherein they gain wealth from the bladder of the dead python, reiterates the motif of dead serpents being a repercussion to material success and social mobility. Food and drinks are important aspects of one’s culture and often many stories are tied to the concept of dietary concerns. In any ritual or ceremony, *Zu*, traditional fermented rice-beer is a mandatory part, especially when a maiden’s hand is to be asked for marriage. *Zu* was a staple of any festival or feast, and the number of *Zu-hai* (barrels of *Zu*) around the porch indicated the wealth of the person throwing the feast. The drink was also used by the village priest when he had to chant incantations. Anyone with an ailment would get sprinkled with *Zu* while the priest performed the necessary ceremony. Divination was also done with the help of *Zu*. The villagers of yore would place a bowl of rice wine and drop a leaf on it to divine whether their expedition would be successful or not. In another instance, *Zu* was used to cleanse the house after death had occurred in the family. The priest would sprinkle the wine around the corners of the house to please the spirit and he would request the soul to depart peacefully to the Afterlife. With the acceptance of Christianity by the community, some of these practices have stopped while some have been modified.

Tea has now replaced the importance of *Zu* in all cultural events and ceremonies. The phrase “*Zu dawm*” (“brought *Zu*”) has been altered to “*Thingpi dawm*” (‘brought tea’) with regards to the hand of a maiden in marriage. Previously, a death ritual would not be complete without the men sipping on *Zu* and performing the last rites of the dead person. Nowadays, tea is served for all coming to pay respect to the dead person. Burial ceremonies are conducted according to the Christian faith. The following tale of *Khupting and Ngambawm* will be an examination of how the concept of *Zu*, socio-economic status and magic are represented in oral narratives. Although ancient *Vaiphei* society was egalitarian, one’s socio-economic status played an important role in courtship and marriage. In the tale of *Khupting leh Ngambawm*, the star-crossed lovers could not be together because of differences in status and wealth, even though their mothers had promised to marry their children when they

grew up. One version of the tale had the explanation of Ngambawm being a shapeshifter, as the reason for Khupting's mother going back on her word. Another narrator based the refusal on Ngambawm being an orphan and, thus, not rich enough for her daughter. Different narrators, therefore, give differing versions of the tale based on the audience and time.

With regards to the cultural significance of *Zu*, Ngambawm could not even afford to bring *Zu* while asking for Khupting's hand in marriage. Her family mocked him for the disrespect they felt he gave to them. While the usual bride-price was *mithun*, beads, necklaces and gongs, the first step towards marriage started with a pot of *Zu* being brought and decisions made over sips of rice-beer. Ngambawm had to skip this mandatory step due to his poverty, yet the interpretation made was that of disrespect for tradition and wilfulness. In the context of how oral narratives evolve through time, this episode from *Khupting leh Ngambawm* serves as an important marker of the change from ancient to modern society. To an audience of children below ten years of age, the story was changed from "not bringing *Zu*" to "not bringing tea". The change was made as the young audience were only familiar with *Zu* being an intoxicating drink. Secondly, the cultural practice of marriage proposal with a pot of *Zu* had evolved from drinking *Zu* to drinking tea in modern times. Therefore, in this oral narrative, we can find aspects of culture communicated through motifs and symbols.

In conclusion, an analysis of *Vaiphei* oral narratives demonstrates the importance and significance of several cultural artefacts and symbols which may be lost to a casual observer or to a person who is not aware of *Vaiphei* culture. Communicating culture through the oral and visual medium has been a mainstay of education and entertainment in olden times. A single narrative may be interpreted in multiple ways which will all be accurate. The space folklore occupies in saddling several fields of study is enormous, and we get glimpses of our history, our culture and our heritage from the folksongs, dances, legends, myths and tales of yore. And more so in the North-east of India, where the customs and beliefs of the pre-Christian era continue to live on in the narratives passed down in the verbal form. These tales preserve the distinct cultural heritage of the

community along with the worldview of the *Vaiphei* people. The discussion on how oral narratives evolve and differ based on the speaker, context, and time was focused on only two tales, namely *Liandote Unau* and *Khupting leh Ngambawm*. It has been noted that there is much work to be done with regards to the folk literature of communities from the region. Northeast India has much to offer in terms of folk material with its diverse population and cultures to work with, and the hope of meaningful discourses not only between history and literature, but also involving several disciplines of study which will catapult the region into further prominence as well.

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(Re)Historicizing Myth: Reconstructing Identity, Memory and Resistance in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Funeral Nights*

Jemima Rahaman* and Hasina Wahida**

Abstract

Folk traditions function as a significant medium for storytelling, serving to preserve the lived experiences, beliefs, and values of various communities. In North-East India, where colonial histories and national integration policies have frequently marginalised indigenous voices, folklore emerges not merely as a cultural artifact but as a form of resistance. This paper investigates the role of folk narratives as sites of resistance within North-East Indian literary texts, with particular emphasis on *Funeral Nights* (2021) by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. This study employs theoretical frameworks established by Mikhail Bakhtin and Jack Zipes to argue that folk narratives, characterised by their inherent fluidity and processes of oral transmission, function as instruments for contesting hegemonic structures and reconfiguring historical memory. Furthermore, by incorporating contemporary theoretical perspectives, including Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Dipesh Chakrabarty's subaltern historiography, this paper contends that the identified folk narrative, through its oral traditions and communal foundations, effectively disrupts colonial and nationalist paradigms while facilitating a counter-hegemonic discourse.

Keywords: Cultural Resistance, Folk narratives, Historical Memory, Identity, Mythology, Subversion.

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Introduction

Folk traditions in North-East India have significantly contributed to political resistance movements, extending beyond the scope of literature. For instance, the oral traditions of the Khasi and Naga communities have preserved critical narratives of colonial resistance, which are frequently marginalised in mainstream historiography. These traditions assert indigenous sovereignty and challenge official state narratives. The incorporation of folk songs in political protests, such as those associated with the Naga insurgency and the Assam Movement, further demonstrates the vital role of folklore in contemporary struggles for identity and autonomy. The subversive potential of folk narratives can be analysed through Bakhtin's concept of the "carnavalesque," which illustrates how storytelling can invert social hierarchies and contest the established authority (Bakhtin 10). In the novel *Funeral Nights*, storytelling is portrayed not only as a means of sharing experiences but also as a powerful act of defiance that reinforces the cultural autonomy of the Khasi people. Furthermore, as Nongkynrih elaborates, "Our stories are our past, our memory, and our defiance against the forgetting imposed by others" (Nongkynrih 56). This perspective reinforces the idea that storytelling is an act of resilience, providing a counter-narrative to dominant cultures that often aim to erase or marginalise Indigenous voices and histories. The concept of "hybridity," introduced by Homi Bhabha, is particularly pertinent in this discourse. Bhabha posits that colonised subjects engage in a complex negotiation of identity, frequently resulting in a cultural fusion that challenges rigid notions of history and power (Bhabha 112). This understanding of hybridity underscores how the Khasi people, through their storytelling traditions, assert their unique identity while simultaneously engaging with and reshaping external influences. Thus, *Funeral Nights* illustrates that storytelling functions not only as a medium for collective memory but also as a form of cultural resistance against erasure. Additionally, Jack Zipes' assertion that folk and fairy tales serve as counter-narratives to dominant ideologies is particularly relevant. Nongkynrih's work exemplifies how folklore operates as a mechanism for resisting cultural assimilation, ensuring that Indigenous histories and traditions remain central in the literary discourse of North-East India.

Folk Narratives as a Tool of Resistance against Cultural Homogenisation

Funeral Nights skilfully integrates Khasi myths and oral traditions within its narrative framework. Employing a frame-story structure, the novel underscores the importance of storytelling as a critical mechanism for the preservation of indigenous knowledge, thereby reinforcing both historical continuity and cultural resilience. Throughout the six-day funeral, characters recount folktales in a manner that mirrors traditional oral storytelling practices, highlighting their cultural and religious significance. Moreover, the novel critically examines the erosion of Khasi traditions in the face of external influences, positioning folklore as a form of resistance against cultural homogenisation. As Jack Zipes asserts, “fairy tales and folk narratives possess an inherent subversive power, providing alternatives to dominant ideological discourses” (Zipes 47). In *Funeral Nights*, this subversion is evident in the way folklore challenges colonial narratives that have historically marginalised indigenous perspectives.

Scholars like Partha Chatterjee have examined how folk traditions operate within the framework of nationalism and postcolonial resistance. In *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Chatterjee argues that subaltern groups use cultural practices to contest the homogenising tendencies of the nation-state (142). The text analysed in this paper aligns with this argument, as it emphasises local histories and resists the erasures imposed by colonial and nationalist historiographies. *Funeral Nights* exemplifies how folk narratives function as subversive tools, resisting dominant histories, colonial ideologies, and patriarchal structures. Nongkynrih’s novel reclaims Khasi oral traditions as valid epistemologies, challenging the erasure of Indigenous voices. By framing storytelling as an act of defiance, he ensures that Khasi folklore remains not just a relic of the past but an active force in contemporary discourse. As one of the storytellers in the novel says, “We tell our stories not just to remember, but to remind the world that we are still here” (Nongkynrih 302). This assertion encapsulates the enduring power of folk narratives in resisting cultural domination and asserting identity. It effectively highlights the crucial role of folklore in the preservation of

Indigenous identity, emphasising that stories are not merely narratives; rather, they serve as vital connections that link the community to its history and heritage.

Furthermore, Ranajit Guha's work on subaltern studies provides insight into how folk traditions offer alternative modes of historical consciousness. Guha critiques the elitist biases of historical narratives and highlights how oral traditions and folklore preserve subaltern perspectives (Guha 88). In *Funeral Nights*, the Khasi oral tradition operates as an archive of indigenous resistance, narrating histories that challenge the colonial and postcolonial nation-state's historical omissions.

Myth and History: An Evolving and Fluid Process of Memory, Identity, and Resistance

Funeral Nights by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih engages in what Spivak calls the "subaltern" mode of speaking—where voices are gradually erased from history and find agency through storytelling. Folk traditions, as delineated in the text, function as epistemic frameworks that challenge the hegemonic structures. *Funeral Nights* engages with ritualistic storytelling, where the past is not merely remembered but re-experienced. As Walter Benjamin notes, storytelling serves as a medium that enables the past to be articulated in ways that challenge linear historiography (Benjamin 91). It presents history not as an objective, static record but as a fluid, evolving process. It aligns with James Clifford's notion of "ethnographic authority," where Indigenous narratives construct their legitimacy outside the Western Historiographical norms (21).

Folklore and folk culture, as argued by scholars like Jack Zipes and Richard Bauman, function as sites of resistance. Zipes (2006) posits that folk and fairy tales are "historically conditioned forms of narrative that have the potential to challenge dominant ideologies by presenting alternative worldviews" (Zipes 197). Richard Bauman further asserts that folklore is "a performance of cultural identity and a means of negotiating power structures within society" (Bauman 28). The novel's use of Khasi oral storytelling acts as a form of resistance to the dominant colonial and nationalist historiographies,

foregrounding Indigenous epistemologies over Western rationalist discourse. By positioning folk traditions at the centre of these narratives, the author creates a discursive space where Indigenous histories counteract dominant representations.

The writing is structured as an elaborate oral storytelling session, reminiscent of the Khasi tradition where narratives unfold during wakes, engaging the living in a dialogue with the past. The novel's frame narrative allows multiple voices to emerge, each challenging official histories and dominant discourses. One of the most subversive elements in the novel is its use of Khasi myths and legends to critique colonialism. One of the most fundamental Khasi myths embedded in *Funeral Nights* is the myth of the seven families. It depicts the story of how humanity descended to Earth from heaven via a golden vine. Seven families (*Ki Hynniew Trep*) were the first to inhabit the Earth. This myth often appears as a backdrop, explaining the origins and connection of the Khasi people to the divine and the natural world. According to Khasi folklore, humanity originally lived in harmony with the divine, but a fateful event severed their connection to heaven, leaving only a few families behind to inhabit the mortal world. This myth functions as a powerful metaphor for loss, displacement, and the search for belonging. A passage from the novel reflects this longing for a lost past: "Once, the sky was within reach, and we walked between the worlds with ease. But we forgot our path, and the bridge of roots that bound us to the heavens was cut forever" (Nongkynrih 369). It challenges the linear notion of progress imposed by colonial and nationalist discourses, instead proposing an indigenous cosmology where history is cyclical and deeply intertwined with spiritual memory. The Khasi belief in an ancestral homeland in the sky reinforces the idea that history is not just a matter of political events but also cosmic and metaphysical rupture.

Another significant Khasi myth present in *Funeral Nights* is the legend of "U Thlen," a gigantic serpent-like demon that feeds on human greed and requires ritualistic human sacrifice to be appeased. According to Khasi folklore, those who seek wealth and power enter into a dark pact with U Thlen, perpetuating a cycle of violence and moral decay. This myth is particularly relevant to the novel's critique of modernity, materialism, and moral corruption. In *Funeral Nights*,

characters refer to this legend when discussing the moral compromises made by individuals in the pursuit of power: “There are those among us who still feed the Thlen, though they no longer name him. They have traded their souls for gold, just as our ancestors warned us.” (Nongkynrih 23). The invocation of the U Thlen myth serves as a political and ethical critique, suggesting that the same greed and corruption that plagued the mythical past continue to shape contemporary Khasi society. The legend, therefore, functions as a moral compass, warning against the dangers of forgetting indigenous values in the face of external influences such as capitalism and state control. This aligns with the work of theorists like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o—*Decolonising the Mind* (1986)—who argues that indigenous storytelling acts as a form of resistance against cultural and economic imperialism (36). By incorporating the myth of U Thlen, *Funeral Nights* positions Khasi folklore as an ongoing site of political and ethical contestation.

One of the most haunting Khasi myths referenced in *Funeral Nights* is the tragic tale of “Ka Likai,” a woman who unknowingly eats the flesh of her own murdered child, an act orchestrated by her jealous husband. When she discovers the truth, she throws herself off a cliff ending her tragic life. The waterfall where she perished—Nohkalikai Falls—remains one of the most famous landmarks in Meghalaya, thereafter became known as *Kshaid Noh Ka Likai* - the Leap of Ka Likai. It symbolises the weight of grief, betrayal, and the consequences of unchecked violence. This legend is evoked as a metaphor for communal suffering and the way Khasi history has been marked by betrayal, loss, and external domination: “Heart of stone, heart of iron! What dreadful wrong have I done to God? If God is everywhere, where was he in our moment of need? ... Heartless is man, heartless is God! (Nongkynrih 23). This passage suggests that the myth of Ka Likai extends beyond personal tragedy—it becomes a symbol for the larger Khasi experience of historical loss and cultural erosion. The myth’s retelling in *Funeral Nights* reflects what Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) describes as the politics of memory, where myths serve as carriers of historical trauma and communal identity (104). By reinterpreting Ka Likai’s story within the novel’s framework, Nongkynrih positions Khasi mythology as a repository of historical memory, resisting erasure and

ensuring that indigenous stories remain central to the community's self-understanding.

In Khasi belief systems, the dead are never truly gone—they exist in an ongoing relationship with the living. This belief is central to *Funeral Nights*, which is set during a wake where the dead are actively remembered through storytelling. The presence of spirits and ancestral guidance in the novel reflects Khasi animist traditions, where the natural world is inhabited by unseen forces. The role of spirits and ancestors in *Funeral Nights* aligns with what Walter Benjamin describes in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1969) as a “messianic time,” where the past continually interrupts the present, demanding recognition and justice (256). In this sense, the wake in *Funeral Nights* is not just a mourning ritual—it is a political act, ensuring that Khasi history remains alive through storytelling. As one storyteller in the novel proclaims, “Dear brother, we live in our memory, in the memory of the world: stoking that memory with fondness is all that we can do. We can do no more, we can do no less” (Nongkynrih, 370). It echoes what Jan Vansina argues in *Oral Tradition as History*—that oral narratives should not be dismissed as mere folklore but recognised as legitimate historical sources that preserve the perspectives of marginalised communities (112).

Through its engagement with Khasi myths, *Funeral Nights* asserts the power of indigenous storytelling as a means of cultural preservation, ethical critique, and historical resistance. The myths of creation, U Thlen, Ka Likai, and ancestral spirits do not function merely as folklore; they shape the novel's philosophical and political concerns, reinforcing the continuity of Khasi identity in the face of historical erasure. By embedding these myths within the structure of the novel, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih challenges dominant narratives that seek to marginalise Khasi voices. The myths become a way of reclaiming historical agency, positioning Khasi cosmology as a legitimate mode of understanding the world. Ultimately, *Funeral Nights* demonstrates that myths are not relics of the past—they are living, evolving narratives that continue to shape Khasi consciousness, memory, and resistance in the present.

Subverting Colonial and Nationalist Discourses

Postcolonial theorists have long critiqued how colonial discourse constructs indigenous communities as passive subjects of history. In *Funeral Nights*, Nongkynrih's use of funeral storytelling traditions further complicates historical representation. The act of recounting stories during funerary rites becomes a radical form of memory-making, where the deceased is not relegated to the past but continues to exert influence on the present. This aligns with Achille Mbembe's articulation of "necropolitics" where death and memory function as sites of power and resistance. One of the key ways *Funeral Nights* challenges the colonial discourse is by foregrounding Khasi oral traditions as a legitimate mode of historical knowledge. Colonial historiography often treated indigenous oral histories as unreliable or anecdotal, privileging written records as the sole means of historical legitimacy. This refusal to adhere to linear historical models subverts the epistemic violence imposed by colonial archives. By reclaiming funerary storytelling as a mode of history-making, Nongkynrih challenges nationalist historiographies that often erase Indigenous voices. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee have also examined how folk traditions operate within the framework of nationalism and postcolonial resistance. In *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Chatterjee argues that subaltern groups use cultural practices to contest the homogenising tendencies of the nation-state (Chatterjee 142). The text analysed in this paper aligns with this argument, as it emphasises local histories and resists the erasures imposed by colonial and nationalist historiographies. In the novel, stories are told during a funeral wake, mirroring traditional Khasi customs. Through this framework, Nongkynrih critiques the colonial tendency to relegate Indigenous voices to the periphery, "What we have are stories, stories passed from old to young, from the dead to the living. We do not write them down, but that does not make them any less true" (36). This statement directly challenges the Eurocentric notion that history must be recorded in written form to be valid. It aligns with Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument in *Provincializing Europe*, where he critiques the imposition of Western historiographical methods onto non-Western societies (89). By reclaiming oral storytelling as a legitimate historical practice, *Funeral Nights* disrupts colonial epistemologies and affirms Indigenous ways of knowing.

Colonial ethnography frequently portrayed Northeast Indian communities as “primitive,” “tribal,” and outside the flow of modern history. British colonial accounts often depicted Khasi culture as a curiosity, framing its matrilineal traditions and animistic practices through an exoticising lens. Nongkynrih directly confronts this narrative by embedding Khasi cosmology and belief systems within the storytelling framework of *Funeral Nights*. The novel presents a Khasi perspective on spirits and the afterlife, which contrasts with Western rationalist frameworks. The following passage offers a sharp critique of colonial knowledge systems that dismissed Indigenous spirituality as superstition: “To the white men, our spirits are mere shadows, our gods just figments of an untrained mind. But we know better. We have walked with them, heard them in the rustling leaves, and felt them in the silence of the forest” (327). This passage resists the colonial tendency to categorise indigenous beliefs as irrational, instead asserting them as an integral and experiential part of Khasi existence. It aligns with postcolonial theorists like Edward Said (1993), who in *Culture and Imperialism* discusses how colonial knowledge production served in “othering” the non-Western cultures by portraying them as backward (74). By presenting Khasi cosmology not as folklore but as lived reality, Nongkynrih dismantles colonial narratives that sought to delegitimise Indigenous knowledge:

Funeral Nights is an attempt to capture those stories, not of a morbid or macabre character, as one might imagine, and not even so much about death, though death did feature prominently. These are stories about life—past, present and future, rural and urban, high and low . . . anecdotes in poetry and prose, tragic tales and funny tales, myths, and true stories so strange that they sound like tall tales. All of them, without exception, are Khasi, native to the soil, nurtured by the sun and rain of home, and reveal not only their specific qualities but also their humanity and universality. (2)

Through oral narratives, myths, and folk knowledge, the novel challenges the uniformity imposed by external historical accounts

and affirms the independence of the Khasi historical perspective. While *Funeral Nights* resists colonial historiography, it also critiques the nationalist discourse of post-independence India, which has historically marginalised the Northeast. Indian nationalist history, focused on anti-colonial struggle and the consolidation of the postcolonial nation-state, often excludes the Northeast from its dominant narratives. The region is frequently portrayed as a peripheral space—politically, culturally, and historically disconnected from the mainland. Nongkynrih’s novel challenges this erasure by centring on Khasi voices and histories that refuse assimilation into dominant nationalist frameworks. One of the most striking passages in this regard critiques the way the Northeast is treated in mainstream Indian discourse: “They say we are part of the nation, but do they know our stories? Do they hear our dead speak? To them, we are a distant hill, an unfamiliar name in a forgotten place” (358). Here, Nongkynrih critiques the mainland’s neglect of the Northeast, highlighting how national integration often comes at the cost of cultural and historical invisibilisation. This aligns with Sanjib Baruah’s argument in “Durable Disorder,” where he describes how the Northeast has been kept in a state of political and historical liminality—simultaneously included within India’s territorial boundaries but excluded from its mainstream national imagination (63).

Another way *Funeral Nights* subverts dominant narratives is through its treatment of death, memory, and temporality. In contrast to nationalist discourses that frame history as a linear progression towards modernity, Khasi funerary storytelling presents a cyclical understanding of time, where the past is always present. The novel’s structure—where stories emerge during a funeral vigil—resists the nationalist idea that history must move forward toward a singular goal (such as development or modernisation). Instead, it suggests that history is constantly being revisited, reinterpreted, and experienced anew: “The dead do not leave us. They whisper in the wind; they walk beside us in the dark. Time is not a river flowing forward—it is the breath of the ancestors, lingering in our bones” (159).

This cyclical temporality directly opposes nationalist and colonial narratives that position indigenous communities as being

“behind” in a linear trajectory of progress. It aligns with Walter Benjamin’s argument in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1969), where he critiques the Enlightenment notion of progress and instead proposes a view of history as layered, fractured, and always present (257). By embedding funerary storytelling within the novel’s structure, *Funeral Nights* resists the teleological impulse of nationalist history and reclaims an Indigenous temporal framework. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s *Funeral Nights* is a powerful example of literary resistance against both colonial and nationalist discourses. Through its use of Khasi oral traditions, it subverts colonial historiography that sought to erase indigenous voices, while also critiquing the nationalist neglect of the Northeast. The novel functions as a counter-memory, reclaiming Khasi epistemologies and offering a vision of history that is not linear, but cyclical, relational, and deeply embedded in the community’s lived experience. By positioning Khasi funeral storytelling as a form of historical resistance, Nongkynrih seeks to preserve Indigenous traditions while concurrently reclaiming narrative authority from the influences of colonial and nationalist frameworks. In doing so, *Funeral Nights* becomes a critical text in postcolonial Indigenous literature—one that reasserts the power of oral storytelling as both an act of remembrance and an act of resistance.

Folk Traditions and the Politics of Memory

As Pierre Nora argues in his exploration of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), memory plays a crucial role in subverting dominant narratives. In *Funeral Nights*, folk traditions function as living repositories of memory, resisting the erasures of colonial and nationalist historiographies. The cyclical structure of these narratives resists the closure of historical time, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge remains dynamic and relevant.

Moreover, this text exemplifies what Edward Said describes as “contrapuntal reading”—a method of reading literature that accounts for voices excluded from official histories (75). Through the use of folk traditions, Nongkynrih demands a re-evaluation of historiographical methodologies, urging readers to acknowledge the legitimacy of oral narratives as historical discourse. The wake in

Funeral Nights serves as both a literal and symbolic space where memory and history converge. In Khasi culture, funerals are not just about mourning the dead but also about reaffirming communal bonds through shared storytelling. The structure of the novel mirrors this ritualistic practice, reinforcing the idea that memory is a collective act rather than an individual one.

By structuring the novel around a wake, Nongkynrih underscores the politics of memory—who gets to remember, how stories are passed down, and what histories are preserved or erased. As one of the characters reflects: “The stories we tell here will outlive us. They are not just for the dead, but for those who come after, so they may know who we were” (Nongkynrih 39). It speaks to the continuity of memory, where storytelling becomes a means of cultural survival. The wake becomes a site where Indigenous history is actively reconstructed, resisting the historical amnesia imposed by both colonialism and nationalism. Through its cyclical structure, mythological frameworks, and communal storytelling, the novel demonstrates that memory is not just about preserving the past but about actively shaping the future. In doing so, *Funeral Nights* becomes a vital text in indigenous and postcolonial literature—one that insists on the legitimacy of Khasi epistemologies and the enduring power of oral history.

Gender and Folklore: Subverting Patriarchy

Nongkynrih also uses Khasi folklore to challenge gender norms. The Khasi people follow a matrilineal system. In the novel, folk tales reaffirm female agency. The legend of Ka Li Dohkha, a woman who outsmarts the men who seek to control her, serves as an allegory for the ongoing struggle against patriarchal structures. Jack Zipes discusses how traditional fairy tales were often sanitised to reinforce patriarchal norms (103). But in the novel, Nongkynrih restores the original rebellious spirit of Khasi folk tales. One female storyteller remarks: “Our ancestors knew that women were the ones who kept the world alive. The men, they only try to take what is already ours” (Nongkynrih 134). By embedding such perspectives within folklore, the text not only preserves Khasi traditions but also challenges the patriarchal structures that persist within and beyond the community.

Folk Humour and the Subversion of Power

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Funeral Nights* is a novel rich with humour, particularly the kind rooted in folk traditions, oral storytelling, and cultural satire. Humor in the novel is not merely for entertainment—it serves as a subversive tool that challenges authority, mocks power structures, and provides an alternative way of understanding history and community. Folk humour, as used in *Funeral Nights*, critiques both colonial and nationalist narratives, highlights the contradictions of modernity, and reaffirms Khasi identity in the face of historical erasure. The novel employs humour in a way that aligns with Bakhtin's theory of the 'carnival'—as found in *Rabelais and His World* (1984)—where folk laughter functions as a form of resistance, temporarily inverting social hierarchies and questioning dominant ideologies. In *Funeral Nights*, humour allows characters to navigate grief, interrogate history, and reaffirm their cultural resilience.

Khasi folk humour often emerges in *Funeral Nights* through irony, satire, and playful exaggeration. The novel's characters, particularly the storytellers at the funeral wake, use humour as a means of cultural survival, ensuring that colonial or national histories do not overshadow their narratives. One passage encapsulates this use of humour when an elder recounts how the British misunderstood Khasi customs: "The white men thought we worshipped trees because we left offerings at their roots. So, we let them believe it. Better they think us foolish than try to make us wise" (Nongkynrih 212). Here, humour becomes a weapon of resistance, subtly ridiculing the colonial gaze that sought to interpret Khasi traditions through a Eurocentric framework. This aligns with postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha, who discusses in *The Location of Culture* how mimicry and irony serve as strategies of resistance—where the colonised simultaneously appease and undermine the coloniser's authority (86). It often mocks the pretensions of those in power, whether they be colonial officers, nationalist politicians, or self-important intellectuals. By turning the tables and making the powerful the subject of ridicule, *Funeral Nights* inverts the traditional power dynamic, offering an indigenous perspective that resists subjugation.

One of the novel's most potent uses of humour is its satirical treatment of colonial and nationalist figures. British officials in the novel are often depicted as clueless bureaucrats, struggling to comprehend the Khasi way of life. This satire exposes the absurdity of colonial rule, where laws were imposed without understanding local cultures. In one anecdote, a Khasi elder recalls how the British attempted to implement a tax system in the hills:

They came with their papers and pens, asking us how many cows we had, how many children, how many houses. We told them we had as many as the gods gave us, but they wanted numbers. So, we made up numbers, and they wrote them down. Who were we to argue with men who believed in paper more than people? (248)

This passage humorously critiques the bureaucratic absurdities of colonial administration, where Indigenous ways of life were forced into rigid, Western systems of governance. The laughter here is not just amusement—it is an act of defiance, showing how Khasi people outwitted their rulers through clever deception.

Similarly, the novel's humour extends to critiques of postcolonial nationalism. The Indian state, while claiming to integrate Northeast India, often marginalises its voices. In a sharp moment of satire, a character observes: "Delhi remembers us when the elections come. The rest of the time, we are the faraway cousins no one wants to visit" (315). This aligns with Sanjib Baruah's argument in *Durable Disorder* (2005) that Northeast India is included in the Indian state but excluded from its historical and political consciousness. The humour here reveals a deep truth: Khasi people, like many other marginalised communities, recognise the superficiality of political inclusion.

Since *Funeral Nights* is structured around a wake, much of its humour emerges in the context of mourning and storytelling. This aligns with indigenous traditions where laughter and grief coexist—where storytelling is not just about sorrow but also about celebrating life, mocking fate, and making peace with death. The wake becomes

a ‘carnavalesque’ space where rigid boundaries between life and death, the sacred and the profane, collapse. This follows Bakhtin’s concept of ‘carnival’, where humour disrupts solemnity and gives space for collective catharsis. A recurring joke in the novel involves an elder humorously reflecting on his impending death: “I am not afraid of dying. I am afraid they will serve bad rice at my funeral” (348). This dark humour transforms the fear of death into a communal moment of laughter, emphasising that Khasi funerary traditions are not just about mourning but also about strengthening social bonds. This reflects Paul Ricoeur’s idea that storytelling helps communities make sense of loss by remembering and reframing grief through humour. He highlights how narratives shape our understanding of time, self, and experience, including trauma. Storytelling enables the reconfiguration of experiences, providing new perspectives and transforming the meaning of loss over time (Ricoeur 122).

Many of the stories in *Funeral Nights* feature trickster-like characters—figures who use wit, deception, and humour to challenge authority. These tricksters are not villains but folk heroes, representing the Khasi ethos of outsmarting the powerful rather than directly confronting them. For example, the story of a poor man who outsmarts a corrupt village headman by pretending to be a spirit, scaring him into giving up his wealth. This aligns with the universal trickster archetype, found in many indigenous storytelling traditions, where humour is used as a tool of subversion and empowerment. Trickster humour in *Funeral Nights* also questions social norms, particularly rigid hierarchies within Khasi society itself. Folk humour in *Funeral Nights* is not just a form of entertainment—it is a method of survival, resistance, and cultural affirmation. By using humour to mock colonial officials, expose nationalist hypocrisy, navigate grief, and question social norms, the novel reinforces Khasi storytelling as a dynamic and evolving tradition. Much like the trickster figures in its tales, *Funeral Nights* refuses to take authority too seriously. Instead, it wields humour as a subtle but powerful weapon, ensuring that Khasi identity is not erased but continues to thrive through laughter and storytelling.

Conclusion

Folk traditions in North-East Indian literature serve as a significant platform for subversion, enabling authors to challenge prevailing cultural narratives while amplifying the voices of historically marginalised Indigenous communities. This paper analysed Nongkynrih's *Funeral Nights* illustrating how folklore functions as both a means of cultural preservation and a form of resistance against historical and political oppression. The study meticulously examined the text, highlighting the intricate integration of folk narratives within the framework of resistance and emphasising their role in shaping the consciousness of marginalised communities. It was able to provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of Indigenous populations, offering a critical perspective on their struggles and triumphs. Moreover, by employing theoretical frameworks centered on subversion, this paper elucidated how folk traditions contribute to resilience within contemporary literature while underscoring the relationship between folklore and modern storytelling, showcasing the capacity of traditional narratives to engage with current socio-political issues. Additionally, this study accentuates the importance of contemporary theories of hybridity and subaltern historiography, demonstrating how folk narratives contest established historical accounts and affirm Indigenous experiences within the discourse of national identity. Ultimately, this paper aimed to elucidate the substantial impact of folk traditions in literature that interrogate dominant societal narratives.

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Haryanavi Folk Songs: A Folkloristic Analysis

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Abstract

Haryana, one of the northern states in India, is characterised by its distinct topography, economy, dialect, and folk culture. Its topography has helped people over generations evolve and sustain themselves as a distinct community through uninterrupted interactions. Subsistence farming and cattle breeding, the traditional mainstay of the region's economy, have led scholars to identify the majority of Haryanavi people as a 'peasant' group. Rooted in agrarian and pastoral traditions, the Haryanavi community is fundamentally patrilocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal in its organisation and operation. The cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, of any region is an invaluable source for understanding the socio-cultural practices of the community. Folklore, as a significant aspect of cultural heritage, can be accessed to comprehend the subtle worldview of the community interwoven in the complex networks of folklore communication. Folk narratives, comprising primarily folk songs and folktales, create one such channel, which has evolved spontaneously and encapsulated the lived experiences of people in a figurative manner. Folk songs are perhaps the most crucial part of such oral traditions in any community. The Haryanavi community has also developed an oeuvre of its own folk songs to perpetuate its socio-cultural views and visions. This paper analyses Haryanavi folk songs as a genre of folklore by contextualising them within the grammar of Folkloristics as a discipline.

Key Words: Folkloristics, Folk Song, Haryanavi Culture, Folklore Genre, Gender

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Introduction

The term “folk” has travelled by now a considerable distance to shed the pejorative connotations it accumulated around it when viewed through colonial and imperial lenses during the nineteenth century, it stood for something uncivilised, uncouth, and uneducated. In the postmodern world, ‘folk’ refers to any group of people connected by common occupation, language, or religion. As a collective, ‘folk’ shares certain beliefs and conventions that instil and forge a sense of group identity among its members. The term ‘Folklore’ can be best defined as a comprehensive list of items produced and utilised by a particular ‘folk’ within its specific cultural context. This list includes myths, legends, folk tales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, greetings, leave-taking formulas, folk costumes, folk dances, folk dramas, folk arts, folk beliefs, folk medicines, folk instrumental music, folk songs, folk speech, folk similes, folk metaphors, folk names, folk games, gestures, symbols, prayers, food recipes, quilt and embroidery designs, types of houses, barns and fences, street vendor’s cries, conventional sounds used to summon animals or give commands, and, naturally, festivals, special days, and customs (Dundes 03). Generally, these items, as well as their scientific study, are referred to as ‘Folklore.’ However, to be more precise and systematic, folklorists prefer to reserve the term ‘Folklore’ for the material itself, while ‘Folkloristics’ for the systematic study of this material. This paper employs a few folkloristic methods to classify Haryanavi folk songs on the basis of their generic characteristics, cultural contexts in which they are sung, and the social functions they perform in shaping Haryanavi ethos.

Like any other cultural zone, the region of Haryana, located in northern India, has cultivated and sustained a rich folk culture characterised by its unique customs and conventions for centuries. The long interaction with the land, its environment, and its destiny has subtly shaped the Haryanavi people into a community. Their rituals and festivals, complemented by oral narratives, embody lived experiences that are deeply embedded in their collective consciousness. As oral narratives play an instrumental role in celebrating various rituals and festivals in Haryana, they are essential

for understanding the essence of Haryanavi folk culture. From the extensive corpus of Haryanavi oral narratives, the researcher has focused exclusively on Haryanavi folk songs, presuming that, due to their diversity and ritualistic significance, these folk songs are better suited to offer profound insights into the ways folklore is integrated into Haryanavi society. In this regard, these folk songs serve as valuable texts for academic inquiry and facilitate a deeper understanding of the discursive practices prevalent in Haryana as a cultural zone.

Haryana as a Cultural Zone

It is essential to contextualise Haryanavi folk songs within the historical conditions of their evolution. Cultural territories largely depend on their congruity with geography; moreover, they are shaped by the sociopolitical landscape of the region. Weiss rightly asserts, “[e]thnographic distributional boundaries ‘coincide’ with natural, traffic, economic, territorial, religious, and linguistic boundaries. This external, objectively demonstrable congruence is a symptom of an inner unity of culture” (150). The region of Haryana also constitutes a “cultural province,” deriving its essence from specific geographical and historical circumstances. In popular perception, “Haryana” refers to a cultural region that extends far beyond its current political boundaries. A popular saying in this context states, *Syālik Alwar bich base Haryana, Jit dudh dahi ka khānā* [The land] situated between the Shivalik [range of the Himalayas] and the Alwar region [in Rajasthan] is Haryana, where staple diet is milk and curd). Topographically, the Haryana region is bound by the Shivalik range in the north, the Yamuna river in the east, the Thar desert in the southwest, and the Ghaggar river in the west. According to K. C. Yadav, as these natural boundaries restricted the movement of the inhabitants of this region for many centuries, they developed a sense of community. This gave rise to a distinct Haryanavi culture that is reflected in their language, culinary and sartorial habits, and worldview (23). The most conservative description of Haryana as a linguistic and ethnographic region is provided by G. A. Grierson, “That portion of the tract which consists of the east of the district of Hissar and of the country immediately adjoining is known to natives

as *Hariānā*. . . The bulk of the population of the whole tract consists of persons of the *Jāt* tribe” (66).

Historically, Haryana has played a significant role in shaping India’s destiny as a nation. Surrounded by the Shivalik range in the north and the Thar Desert in the southwest, Haryana served as a natural bottleneck for western invaders on their ambitious expeditions to the enticing Gangetic plains. Numerous battles that determined the fate of India were fought on its soil. Clearly, its reputation as the regular battlefield of India significantly contributed to shaping the Haryanavi folk into sturdy, resilient, and combative individuals. These characteristics were further entrenched by the British, who began recruiting Haryanavi youth into the army on a massive scale during World War I. Moreover, the semi-arid land of this region nurtured a deep-rooted tradition of peasantry and cattle breeding among the Haryanavi people. Thus, the experiences of peasantry and soldiering are deeply embedded into the collective consciousness of Haryanavi culture, and expressed in a crystallised form through various tangible and intangible cultural artefacts. Most of the extant Haryanavi folk songs have evolved from these two lived experiences of the Haryanavi community.

Demographically, Haryana is home to diverse caste and religious groups. Singh et al. identified eighty-two communities residing in Haryana during the Anthropological Survey of India's project called “People of India” in the late 1980s (xiv). Many of the communities currently living in Haryana acknowledge their immigration from other regions at some point in the past. In recent history, the prolonged drought of the *Chālisā* (Vikrami Samvat 1840 alias A. D. 1783) and the Partition (1947) resulted in significant demographic shifts in Haryana. The Haryanavi people, as a folk group, share many socio-cultural practices in the form of customs, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, and a distinct dialect. The majority of Haryanavi people reside in villages and are predominantly vegetarian. The advent of modern technologies and ideas has brought about noticeable changes in the lives and traditions of Haryanavi folk, particularly after the historical structural transformations like the mechanisation of agriculture, the advent of globalisation, and the spread of digital technology. The impact of these transformations on Haryanavi folklore is more

perceptible in the areas along the Grand Trunk Road and those within the National Capital Region.

Haryanavi Folk Songs

The folk songs addressed here in the paper have predominantly been collected from the districts of Hisar, Jind, Bhiwani, and Rohtak between 2012 and 2017. This area broadly corresponds with the core region of Haryana, as noted by Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India*. It is also a fact that this area is only a fraction of the broader region of Haryana as it is presently understood. However, this limitation is mitigated by the fact that owing to their migration after marriage, the women informants I interacted with for the purpose of documenting Haryanavi folk songs hailed from various villages beyond these districts, and introduced folk songs from their natal villages to the sites of my fieldwork. It virtually broadened the catchment area of my fieldwork and rendered the corpus of the folk songs thus documented as broadly representative of Haryanavi folk songs. As an ethnographer, I presume that the traditional folk songs could find a suitable environment to sustain themselves in the interior villages away from the national highways and the metropolitan cities. As my purpose in this paper is not to investigate the transformations folk songs have undergone in recent times, I have avoided discussing the folk songs extant along the Grand Trunk Road and those in the National Capital Region. I also presume that women are the true custodians of Haryanavi folk songs, as men rarely partake in singing folk songs in the current times. Till the 1960s, it was common for men also to sing folk songs, such as *Malhor*, especially during harvest season. Haryanavi songs and ballads like *Rāgani*, *Kissā*, *Sākā*, etc., sung primarily by troupes, fall short of the characteristic definition of a typical folk song. For instance, *Rāgani*, unlike a typical folk song, is not an anonymous composition; either it usually bears the stamp of its composer in the concluding stanza, or audiences identify it as a composition of some particular poet. Likewise, mythological and legendary ballads are not sung by common people but by professional troupes. Besides, unlike folk songs, these songs are not part of any specific ritual or rite of passage. Keeping in view such folkloristic insights, only the folk songs sung by women in Haryana nowadays are the Haryanavi folk songs proper.

According to Richard Weiss, “[m]an creates the spiritual bond between natural conditions and objective cultural items, so that the cultural landscape, stamped with his essence, can be seen, using the terminology of the philosophy of culture, as ‘objectified intelligence’” (150). The Haryanavi folk songs can also be regarded as one such example of ‘objectified intelligence’. Haryanavi society is fundamentally patrilocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal in its organisational structure. A woman is expected to leave her natal village upon marriage and live with her husband’s clan in another village. Socially, property rights are passed down from the senior male to the next in line. Men invariably hold the upper hand in any clash of interest with women. Therefore, most of the Haryanavi folk songs as pieces of ‘objectified intelligence’ convey the sentiments of the people towards a typical way of life, arising out of the organisational needs of the society. In this context, Prem Chowdhry’s interpretation of the interplay between culture and lived experience is particularly relevant to Haryanavi women and their folk songs: “Culture helps us to understand the lived practices which characterise a society, its different classes or groups at different historical periods and the ideologies which enable them to experience (i.e., appropriate in consciousness), define and interpret (i.e., make sense of, represent in language, thought and imagery, adopt as moral preferences, etc.), its given conditions of existence” (03). As a significant segment of Haryanavi folklore, Haryanavi folk songs are instrumental in understanding not only the mainstream practices and rituals of Haryana but also the women’s subculture, a fertile ground for subversive tendencies arising out of the patriarchy’s oppressive gender ideology. They subtly reflect the subdued feelings and desires of a woman living under the dominance of a patriarchal peasant lifestyle. Viewed through a gender lens, one can put Haryanavi women’s folk songs into two groups: Ritual songs, which celebrate patriarchy by eulogising the male progenitors and their descendants, and the Secular songs, which subvert patriarchy in many overt and covert ways. To employ James C. Scott’s terminology, the former category represents the “public transcript”—“the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate”—of Haryanavi culture, while the latter constitutes its “hidden transcript”—“a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant” (02, xii).

Contexts and Characteristics

A folklorist examines the contexts and the manner in which folk traditions are practised in everyday life as well as on specific occasions by a community. As far as Haryanavi folk songs are concerned, they occur in the context of a peasant family at the helm of affairs. While the ritual songs complement the celebrations surrounding the rites of passage in that family, the profane songs revolve around its routine life and kinship. Haryanavi folk songs are usually a communal activity in that they are sung by a group of women, whether seated or standing. During their rendition, a song is begun by a woman, while the rest of them follow her line by line. No musical instrument worth its name is usually used by women in Haryana while singing their songs. While singing dance songs, they come together in a close circle around the dancer and clap synchronously to keep the beat.

In the Haryana region, every occasion in community life is celebrated by observing certain rituals. These rituals are complemented by the singing of various folk songs, out of which certain pieces have emerged as the essence of these rituals. These folk songs serve as signature songs of particular occasions and, taken together, provide an impressive view of the range and variety of Haryanavi folk songs. For instance, the following refrain of a birth song sets in the celebratory tone associated with the birth of a boy in a Haryanavi family: *Dilli sehr ten sāibā pot mangā dyo.....* The refrain that sets the mood for a marriage ceremony is: *Sui sār ki be tīgā pat kā, potā tikiye be Harchand Rāo kā*. Similarly, the poignant cries—*Hāi hāi e sone ki chidiyā* or *Hāi hāi kelā tod liyā*—signal the passing away of a community member. The refrain of a seasonal song—*Sāmman āyā he mā meri men sunyā ji; hānji koe āyi e naveli tij padi e panjāli hariyal bāg mhn ji*—heralds the season of rains during the month of Sawan. The refrain, *Parasen to beithyā apanā bābal bujhyā kaho to kātyak nhā lyān o Rām*, serves as a clarion call for both the young and the old to embrace piety and renunciation in the month of Kartik, demanding especially from women the utmost devotion and sacrifice for their family's well-being. The refrain from another seasonal song—*Kāchi imali gadarāyi Sāmman mhn budhi e lugāi mastāyi Fāgan mhn*—fills the mind, body, and heart of the

listener with joy and abandon during the month of Falgun, the season of spring during which the festivals of Holi and Fag are celebrated with gaiety and gusto. The sequence of work songs unfolds with refrains such as *Dohrā dohrā re birā merā ugan kā khet bholā ugan kā khet, ānwtā to jānwtā bāi ne tāwdā je* that reflect the arduous labour a Haryanavi woman has to invest in dispensing her chores. Refrains such as *Pānch patāse pānān kā bidlā le debi pe jāiyyo ji, Kit ten āye Arjan Pānde kit ten re āye Hanumān Hanumān piyāre ye dou kit re samāye*, etc., quickly instil a mood of devotion in the listener's mind. The audience feels like dancing to the melodies of refrains like *Merā dāman simā de o ho nanadi ke bire tanne nyu tanne nyu tanne nyu dhonge pe rākhun o ho nanadi ke bire*.

Upon close examination, one can identify the following characteristic features of Haryanavi folk songs: They are communal, anonymous, and ever- evolving, similar to typical folk songs. Nobody claims copyright on them, as they have been composed by anonymous community members. Unlike literary compositions, they do not carry any individual's stamp or signature. Additionally, these folk songs have evolved over time to suit the occasion of their rendition. Every rendition is unique and hence incomparable to any previous one. No one can claim that a particular rendition is the original while the rest are its derivatives. Linguistically, these folk songs serve as a repository of the Haryanavi way of life, encompassing its geography, demography, history, economy, dialect and social structure, all reflected through the myths, motifs, and images they contain. As musical compositions, these songs are minimalistic in their use of musical notes. It allows as many observers to participate in their singing as possible. Most folk songs are composed using three or four adjacent musical notes from the middle and lower octaves; the length of musical lines in different songs varies between eight and twenty-eight measures. Many of the folk songs serve as lyrical expressions wherein the "I" does not signify an individual but rather a persona that embodies the collective experiences shared by the community. Sometimes, experiences referred to in ritual songs possess immediacy that heavily leans upon sentimentality and emotional indulgence. Such compositions revel in hyperbole and try to concretise emotions through vivid imagery. In contrast, profane songs such as *Jakaḍi* are

characterised by their coarseness, straightforwardness, and lack of refinement.

Classification

To develop a grammar of any folklore, the essential step is its classification into genres, including oral narratives like folktales and folk songs, rituals and festivals, and material culture. According to Dundes, “[u]nderstanding genre helps us appreciate the function that particular types of folklore serve” (11). The grammar of folk song as a genre encompasses two fundamental elements: the word and the melody. This paper primarily focuses on the words that convey the content and the theme. In view of these insights, Haryanavi folk songs can be classified into various categories depending on their content and the occasions when they are sung. The most basic classification of folk songs is governed by the rituals and occasions during which they are sung. The three most significant occasions in human life are birth, marriage, and death, and the rituals associated with these occasions are complemented by folk songs. In the corpus of folk songs, these ritual songs occupy the most significant space. Rest of the folk songs are classified as seasonal songs, work songs, religious hymns, and dance songs. Sadhuran Sharada divides Haryanavi folk songs into five broad categories: Seasonal Songs, Ceremonial Songs, Work Songs, Spiritual Songs, and Miscellaneous Songs (iii). Shankarlal Yadav has been the most prominent Haryanavi folklorist so far, and his categorisation of Haryanavi folk songs is more elaborate. He begins by dividing Haryanavi folk songs into two significant categories: Short folk songs and Long folk songs. He posits that Short folk songs are predominantly sung by women, whereas the Long folk songs are sung by men. He includes ballads like *Nihalde*, *Rājā Risālu*, *Googā*, *Gopichand*, *Bhagat Pooranmal*, *Rāo Kishan Gopāl*, *Jaswant*, *Harfool*, *Alhā*, etc., in the category of Long folk songs. Furthermore, he classifies Short folk songs into the following major categories: Ritual and Ceremonial Songs, Seasonal Songs, Agricultural Songs, Political Songs, and Miscellaneous Songs (72–75).

The researcher’s understanding of Haryanavi folk songs leads him to classify them into four broad genres: Ritual songs, Seasonal

songs, Spiritual Hymns, and Secular/Profane Songs. Ritual songs predominantly encompass compositions related to the birth, wedding, and the last rites of a person. The birth songs comprise melodies reflective of various phases of childbearing, addressing a woman's aspiration for a child, especially a male heir, gestation, emotional fluctuations, anticipations, labour pains, celebrations, and the distribution of gifts, particularly to affinal relatives. The wedding ceremony, in particular, is notably elaborate, encompassing a variety of distinct stages that extend over a considerable duration. These stages include the search for the bride or bridegroom, along with ceremonies such as *sagāi*, *tikā*, *lagan*, *bān*, *bhāt*, *ghudchadhi*, *dhukāv*, *phere*, *vidāyi*, *kānganā*, and additional rites. Haryanavi women celebrate the occasions of birth and wedding with ritualistic singing and dancing. In the event of a death, ritualistic mourning is observed for a period of mostly twelve days. Specific mourning rhymes and hymns are rendered during that period for lamenting the departed soul. Songs sung upon the birth of a son are locally called *biaai*, *bemata*, *syavar* (sobhar), *dai*, *palana*, *chhathi*, *peela*, *jachcha*, etc., while those sung during wedding ceremony are termed *sagāi*, *lagan*, *bhāt*, *haldi*, *tel*, *matanā*, *bān*, *banadā*, *banadi*, *ghodi*, *fere*, *chhann*, *vidāi*, *kanganā*, *juā*, etc.; melodies rendered at the time of death are identified as *sāmpā* or *syāpā*. For the purpose of this paper, all the Haryanavi Folk songs have been translated into English by the author.

Seasonal songs are defined as musical compositions sung during the months of Sawan, Kartik, and Fagun. This category also encompasses songs and hymns that are sung throughout the year as part of the cyclical worship of deities including Mahadevji, Sheetala Mata, Bhairon, Sedhal Mata, Hanuman, Panch Peer, Googa, and Bhumia. The songs associated with Sawan capture the essence of the rainy season and the joy associated with swinging the swings in the company of loved ones. The songs sung during the month of Kartik predominantly consist of hymns that praise the deities and emphasise the importance of penance and almsgiving in an individual's life. The songs of Fagun mainly exhibit humorous and erotic themes, as well as a sense of gaiety and festivity. Spiritual hymns are primarily sung by old women during *satsang/ kirtana* (spiritual gatherings) or at the occasion of some old person's death. The realm of spiritual hymns is vast and varied, encompassing not only specific compositions such as

Parbhati, Harjas, Krishna Leela, and Ramayan pada but also *Sagun* and *Nirgun* bhajans.

Secular or Profane songs consist of *Jakaḍi* and Dancing songs, the two most vivid and powerful genres of Haryanavi folk songs. These compositions address profane and commonplace life matters, including the daily bickering between the persona and her affinal kin, discords between husband and wife, backbreaking chores, critical situations in routine life, farewells, and significant historical incidents that have the power to influence the moral and ethical foundations of the community. The Profane songs encompass themes related to peasantry and the daily existence of a peasant and his spouse. In these songs, the persona, who is typically a young bride—either of a peasant or that of a soldier—expresses her innermost feelings and critically analyses her relationships with her kin from a woman’s perspective. She articulates her desires and ambitions, alongside the frustrations arising out of her unfavourable affinal relations. Furthermore, she recounts the arduous life she endures on a daily basis as a peasant woman. Lila Abu-Lughod’s observation that folk songs serve as “a vehicle for personal expression and confidential communication” (26) seems to be more pertinent in the context of *Jakaḍi*. Such songs are nearly extinct now, primarily due to transformations in agricultural practices and also because of the changes in the routine life of a woman in Haryana.

Functions

Traditionally, folk songs are perceived as ritualistic, aimed at complementing the celebrations of rites of passage in a community, or as a means of amusement, intended to alleviate the burdens associated with long working hours. Amusement undeniably constitutes one of the functions of folk songs; however, these songs perform numerous additional functions. Folklorists have identified several functions of folklore, many of which pertain specifically to folk songs. To comprehensively understand the functions performed by Haryanavi folk songs, one must first comprehend the typical pattern Haryanavi women adopt to sing them especially during celebrations of rites of passage like birth and wedding. In a Haryanavi family, almost all ceremonial events are observed in accordance with

Hindu rituals performed by the pandit (priest), with menfolk seated around him. During these moments, Haryanavi women congregate in some corner of the courtyard and begin to sing the songs appropriate to the occasion. They invariably begin their singing session with ritual songs while their menfolk are engaged in performing various stages of the ritual at the direction of the priest. Following the conclusion of the ritual and the dispersal of the menfolk, women switch over to the profane songs called *Jakaḍi*. This marks the second phase of their singing session. While the ritual songs are sung usually by old women, the profane songs are sung by young women. The final segment involves a round of dancing by women. By the end of the singing session, the sacred ambience created by the rituals and the ceremonial songs in the beginning gets virtually diluted, and women depart for their respective homes in a spirit of joy and exuberance, engaged in lively conversation and subdued laughter.

The cocktail of folk songs sung by women in Haryana on appropriate occasions provides a fascinating insight into women's culture. The singing of ritual songs at such occasions is obviously understandable; but why Haryanavi women include profane songs during such singing sessions is intriguing. Viewed from a feminist perspective, the insistence by women to include profane songs, especially *Jakaḍi*, in their singing sessions hints at the agency women want to have even in a rigidly patriarchal setup. This fact broadens the scope of folk songs as agents of continuity and change in Haryanavi culture. The various functions Haryanavi folk songs perform in society ensure their role as active agents. Firstly, Haryanavi folk songs serve an educational purpose for the younger generation of women. They instil in them a sense of awe and reverence for the community's beliefs and rituals. These songs also make them aware of the norms of proper behaviour and etiquette. Most of the ritual songs eulogise the menfolk as all-powerful and resourceful, deserving the undiluted submission of women. These songs depict their women as submitting themselves willingly and wholeheartedly to the whims of the menfolk. This is the most important function of ritual songs, and naturally, their singing is appreciated by menfolk. Besides, ritualistic folk songs play a vital role in fostering a sense of solidarity within the community. Wedding songs that employ fanciful exaggerations and compensatory

mechanisms effectively fulfil this purpose. For instance, in one wedding song, the groom's brothers are proclaimed to be the natural leaders of the entire clan: *Ye bhāiyān mhn sirḍār bēte Harchand ke e.* (The sons of Harchand are the leaders of the clan). The older Haryanavi women impart cultural guidance to their younger generation through these songs. In a folk song, elderly women counsel the bride to adhere to specific norms of behaviour to demonstrate her piety and well-breeding: *E baṛ pipaḷ katwāiye maṭnā chardī gaū hatāiye maṭnā pāṇi mh daḷā bagāiye maṭnā e beti gāl ḍivāiye maṭnā.* (O my daughter, never get a tree like banyan and pipal felled; never shoo away grazing cows; never throw a clod into a pond; and never give an opportunity for others to belittle us). Haryanavi folk songs help reinforce the prevailing institutions, beliefs, and attitudes. The existence of a robust patriarchal structure and the subordinate status of women are evident in these folk songs. The mechanism of patriarchy has been so deeply internalised by Haryanavi women that in one particular folk song, the persona, a woman who is barren, implores her husband to get remarried so that he may have a son to perpetuate his lineage: *Bin pāṇi papaiyā ṭarsē dekhye o bin puṭṭar māṭā ṭarsē dekhye o tū dūjā byāh karvāle* (O husband, see how much papaiyyā [a bird] pines for water, likewise a woman for a son; I beseech you to get remarried).

Folk songs serve as a means to alleviate social friction and dissatisfaction while helping individuals, particularly young women, adapt to the unfavourable circumstances of their lives. Numerous comforting and soothing folk songs sung during the bride's farewell are significant in this context. The following farewell song is especially noteworthy for its soothing tone: *Yo ghar chhodyā bābal ṭerā mannē chhodi ṭeri dehḷeriyān, nyū maṭ jāṇē e lādo mhāri ṭannē rākhān āmwaṇ jāṇeriyān.* (Dear father, I'm leaving your home and your threshold forever; my dear daughter, don't get disheartened, you'll always be welcome in this home). Certain folk songs also serve as a mechanism for exerting social pressure and enforcing social control on those individuals who have the potential to jeopardise the existing social system. In this context, the most suspicious member of a patriarchal society is a young woman whose sexuality is regarded as a potential threat to the entire society. There are many folk songs in Haryana that admonish a woman who is dissatisfied with her life

and strongly advise her to come to terms with prevailing social and cultural norms. These songs not only ask her to accept the world as it exists and recognise her designated role within it but also to find satisfaction in the given circumstances. This function performed by folk songs remains relevant throughout a Haryanavi woman's adult life. In a profane song, as a groom departs for a distant land, his bride implores him to send her back to her natal home, fearing that her conjugal kin will not let her live peacefully in his absence. Nevertheless, the groom insists vehemently that she stay back in her conjugal home, contending: *Pihar maṭnā jāiye rē gori sab ṭariyān muh kālā hogā; mere bāp kē kuṇbā bhāri ismēn ṭerā gujārā hogā.* (Dear bride, if you return to your natal clan, it will blemish our reputation; my father's clan is large enough to accommodate you).

In addition to serving the interests of patriarchy, certain Haryanavi folk songs function as a medium for women to express their angst and protest against the sexual hegemony practised by menfolk. Such songs accomplish this task by enabling women to articulate their distress arising from the harsh realities of their day-to-day existence in a creative manner. These folk songs, accompanied by the gestures and expressions of women singers, turn out to be a site suitable for "reading meta-messages in ordinary language" (Das 198). In one notable profane song, the persona addresses her brother and laments the discrimination she endures as a girl: *Bīr āpān mā ke jāye re he re āpān lōte ek sarir ke kismaṭ nāyri nyāri re.* (O brother, we were born of the same womb; but our destinies are so different). At the moment of such strong artistic expressions, women singers become meditative, with sadness reflected on their faces. The force with which women sing such songs hints at their grit to snatch agency from the hands of patriarchy and become the carvers of their own destinies. Once women let their imaginations run free, they come up with more subversive folk songs. In their repertoire, there are folk songs that explore a range of ingenious actions and strategies to subvert patriarchy. The imaginative compensations for the denial of satisfactions in real life that women allow themselves to enjoy in these folk songs emerge as daydreams and departures from the dominant cultural ethos. In one such folk song, a Haryanavi woman, tired of her physical and emotional exploitation by her conjugal kin, engages herself in a fantastic situation: *Sās meri kā sir bharkē sē naṇadi kē*

bukhār e, pati mere ki ankhiyān dukkhēn din sovē ni rāt e, tīnuvān nē katthe karke le chālī bāzār e, baṛke seḥr mh rukkā māryā le ḥyo saṣṭā māl e. (My husband's mother has a headache, his sister fever; my husband has eyesore and can't sleep in day or night; I gathered them all and took to the bazaar; entering the bazaar, I harked: come and buy cheap products). Such songs strongly defy the popular image of a woman which has been aptly described by Raheja and Gold in the following words: "The Indian woman has all too frequently been portrayed as a silent shadow, given in marriage by one patrilineal group to another, veiled and mute before affinal kinsmen, and unquestioningly accepting a single discourse that ratifies her own subordination and a negative view of femaleness and sexuality" (3-4).

If one holds the belief that the essence of the community is encapsulated in its folklore, the spirit of Haryanavi women is profoundly manifested through their secular folk songs. Bauman and Briggs state that "the act of performing folklore transforms static texts into dynamic expressions" (73), and thus, folk performances provide insights into how people negotiate their identity over time. The secular folk songs of Haryanavi women are one of the few domains that remain unmediated by patriarchal hegemony. These folk songs provide singers with a distinctive space to articulate their thoughts and feelings beyond the male gaze. As Kumar asserts: "the subversive potential of a subcultural performance is directly proportional to its distance from the public gaze" (58), the absence of menfolk during the singing of secular songs increases their subversive potential. It is noteworthy that while singing these folk songs, young women criticise and ridicule their affinal relations, even in the presence of their most adversarial kin, including their mother-in-law and sister-in-law. The beauty of these singing sessions is that rarely does anyone take the imaginative discourse personally or any criticism to heart. This implicit understanding shared by Haryanavi women, both young and old, suggests the presence of feminine solidarity among them, no matter how fleeting or ephemeral it may be. In a nutshell, viewed from a folkloristic perspective, Haryanavi folk songs illuminate broader concerns of power dynamics revolving around gender.

Conclusion

Folkloristics provides essential frameworks for investigating how diverse forms of folklore contribute to the formation of cultural identity while serving pragmatic functions within the community. The world of folklore is highly intricate and allusive. Various folklore genres constitute a system composed of complex channels of communication both within a culture and among diverse cultures. Comparative study of analogous genres across folk cultures has the potential to promote a profound understanding among various communities. Within the same tradition, they reflect the composite nature of a specific folk culture. In this context, the Haryanavi folk songs not only provide insights into customs, rituals, and the worldview of the Haryanavi community but also act as a conduit for analysing the lived experiences of people. Their ongoing evolution is a testament to their resilient nature, which accommodates the perpetuation of tradition as well as adaptation to contemporary contexts.

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The Folklore of *Challa* in Popular Culture: A Psychoanalytic Exploration

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Abstract

The Punjabi folk song *Challa* emerges as a dynamic cultural symbol, evolving from its rural origins and placed into a global phenomenon that reflects the fluidity of cultural memory and identity in a globalised world. Over time, *Challa* has been reinterpreted and reimagined across diverse contexts, from traditional folk versions to Bollywood adaptations. These adaptations reflect shifting representations of masculinity, migration, and identity, with *Challa* functioning as a metaphor for the diasporic experience and the existential crises faced by individuals in the context of globalisation. From a Lacanian perspective, *Challa* symbolises the human condition of lack and desire. The grief of the father and the drowning of the son mirrors the cultural and existential crises faced by Punjabi families in the context of migration and economic displacement. Through its various adaptations, *Challa* highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, local and global identities, and past and present dimensions of Punjabi folklore. *Challa* emerges as a potent symbol that represents a generation of sons fractured by migration, economic precarity, collectively mourned by Punjab.

Keywords: Alienation, *Challa*, Global Identity, Migration, Psychoanalysis

Introduction

Challa, a quintessential Punjabi folk song, has transcended its regional roots to become a folk mutant—a dynamic cultural artifact that traverses time, space, and identity. As Chawla observes, “Folk mutants . . . have traversed a long distance, both in time and space,

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reincarnated in many avatars, each as valid and potent as the earlier form, each unfolding myriad subjectivities and each a pertinent milestone in constructions of glocal identities” (7). This description aptly captures *Challa*’s evolution: from its origins in rural Punjab to its reinterpretations in Bollywood and beyond, the song has continually adapted to new contexts, reflecting the fluidity and preservation of cultural memory in a globalised world. Whether through the melodies of traditional folk singers like Arif Lohar, Gurdas Maan, or the Bollywood style reimagining of Shah Rukh Khan in *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*, or a hedonistic masculinity encouraged by foreign locales embodied in the protagonist of the movie *Crook* played by Emraan Hashmi, *Challa* has roamed not only across native regions but also Western lands, mirroring the diasporic experiences of its protagonists.

The word *Challa* carries multiple layers of meaning in Punjabi culture. Literally, it refers to a ring—a token of love gifted to a beloved with the promise of marriage or as a keepsake of love. Metaphorically, it represents connection and loss, themes central to the folk song *Challa*. Structurally, *Challa* deviates from conventional Indian poetry, which typically features a *Mukhda* (introductory lines) followed by four-line stanzas (*Antraa*), instead, *Challa* is composed of three-line stanzas followed by two closing lines, creating a unique five-line verse structure in a fixed metre (*The Story of Challa*). The repetitive rhythm and meter facilitate memorisation, allowing the song to be passed down through oral tradition. For the purpose of this paper, all the verses from the various songs have been translated into English by the author.

Historical Origins: The Story of *Jhalla* and *Challa*

The rivers in Punjab have not only helped in livelihood but also shaped the cultural identity carrying symbolic meaning that have evolved throughout the historical context wherein the rivers have facilitated various migrations and invasions throughout history, which have, in turn, enabled the creation of folklore around it. The origins of *Challa* lie in the tragic tale of *Jhalla*, a sailor who ferried passengers and goods across the rivers of Punjab. When *Jhalla* fell gravely ill, his teenage son, *Challa*, volunteered to row across the

river to fetch medicine from a neighbouring village. Though inexperienced, *Challa* set out at dawn, attempting to row straight across the powerful current. Unaware of the river's flow, he failed to account for the downstream force and tragically drowned. *Jhalla*, waiting endlessly for his son's return, succumbed to grief and delusion. He wandered the streets, singing verses of loss and longing, which later became the foundation of the *Challa* folk song (*The Story of Challa*). This story encapsulates the fragility of human connection and the irreversibility of loss, themes that resonate deeply in Punjab's collective consciousness due to the migrations in and out of the region.

Modern Adaptations of *Challa*

Over the decades, *Challa* has been reimagined and remodelled by numerous artists, each infused with distinctive placement of *Challa* in accordance with diverse spatial and temporal landscapes. In the 1970s, Pakistani folk singers like Shaukat Ali, Inayat Ali, and Alam Lohar popularised the song, with Alam's son, Arif Lohar, continuing the legacy (*The Story of Challa*). Earlier, in 1934, a version written by Fazal Shah and sung by Aashiq Hussain Jatt was released on an LP by HMV, marking one of the earliest recorded renditions (*The Story of Challa*). In Punjab, artists like Gurdas Maan, Rabbi Shergill, and Babbu Maan have reimagined *Challa*, inserting it with contemporary themes of migration and identity. The cinematic representation of *Challa* in Bollywood films has been contextually constructed to serve the narrative purposes of each movie, yielding two distinct recapitulations of masculinity: one characterised by a softer, romanticised portrayal, wherein *Challa* is depicted as a sentimental figure searching for lost love, and another marked by a more aggressive, lascivious, and hedonistic representation, in which *Challa* is portrayed as an epicurean figure driven by carnal desires, with little regard for emotional attachment, placed in foreign locales. These two divergent representations of *Challa* can be observed in the Bollywood films *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* (2012), where Shah Rukh Khan embodies a softer, romanticised portrayal of *Challa*, and *Crook* (2010), where Emraan Hashmi depicts a more aggressive, lascivious, and hedonistic iteration of the character.

Lacanian Analysis of *Challa*

From Lacanian perspective, *Challa* can be analysed as a narrative of lack and desire—the father’s endless search for his son mirrors the human condition of seeking wholeness in a world defined by absence. The river, where *Challa* drowns, symbolises the Real, the chaotic, unrepresentable void that disrupts the Symbolic Order (the realm of language and societal norms). *Jhalla*’s delusional wandering after his son’s death reflects a collapse of the Symbolic Order, as he is unable to reconcile his loss within the structures of meaning. Modern adaptations of *Challa*, particularly those addressing migration, extend this Lacanian framework: the son’s departure abroad represents a rupture in the familial and cultural fabric, leaving parents in a state of perpetual lack and longing. The ring (*Challa*), once a symbol of connection, becomes a token of absence, embodying the phallic loss that destabilises patriarchal continuity. The father’s loss is not just personal but a cultural crisis, especially in Punjabi context with migration and diaspora. In the modern renditions, for instance *Challa in Chandigarh*, desires to escape the father’s phallic control. The gap he encounters when faced with expectations of the capitalistic world mirrors Lacan’s idea of the split subject, forever alienated from their true self after entering the Symbolic but fills it with the fantasies provided by capitalism. *Challa* is not just lost in the Symbolic but drowning in the Real’s unmanageable demands for instance, assimilation pressures and identity erasure. It is the illusion of being in control which topples down revealing a lack. *Challa* confronts the Real world’s chaos embodied in the rivers causing death, fears and angst experienced in foreign lands, all of which reflects the traumatic excess of globalisation. In the foreign world, he drowns in the unspeakable trauma of dislocation—neither Punjabi nor global, he becomes a subject of the Real, eternally circling the void of his own desire. *Challa*’s inability to express his inner turmoil points to Lacan’s Real—the traumatic, indescribable void that escapes language. His drowning (literal or metaphorical) in the foreign Real (e.g., migration, alienation) reflects the collapse of Symbolic structures. This existential crisis parallels with *Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun* in which existential crisis of Bullah stems out of rejecting the construction of identity through structures of meaning in the symbolic realm and to further search for the real, both grapple

with the unanswerable lack at the core of subjectivity, questioning identity in a world where meaning is unstable. The desire to return to the pre-Oedipal world (union with the mother, before Symbolic law) is a key Lacanian tension. However, *Challa*'s longing for home could symbolise this pre-Symbolic unity, but his drowning in the Real (foreign world) makes this return impossible—the Real destroys fantasies of wholeness. It reflects the broader socio-cultural crisis of Punjab, marked by agrarian and economic losses, exacerbated by government policies that corporatise farming and further loss of male lives in protests.

Thematic and Visual Analysis

The collaborative rendition of *Challa* by Gurdas Maan and Diljit Dosanjh blends traditional folk motifs with contemporary issues of migration, creating a layered narrative of love, longing, and societal constraints (Maan and Dosanjh). The song opens with a plea, *Javo Ni Koi Morh Liavo, Ni Mere Naal Geya Ajj Lad Ke* (Someone bring him back, he left after fighting with me today), immediately grounding the narrative in the anguish of separation. The invocation of divine intervention—*Allah Kare Je Aa Jave Sohna Dewan Jaan Qadman Vich Dhar Ke* (O Allah, if you bring back my love, I'll give my life at his feet)—elevates the beloved to a divine figure while alluding to the concept of devotion as known in Sufi singing. The metaphor of *Challa* as a bud yet to flower meaning yet to fulfil expectations and desires—*Challa Beri Oye Boor Eh, Ve Watan Mahi Da Door Eh* (*Challa* is the flower (of which fruit is yet to come), the beloved's land is far away)—captures the tension between love's fragility or ephemeral nature and its enduring promise. The well (*khoo*h), a recurring motif in Punjabi folk traditions, becomes a site of clandestine intimacy: *Challa Khoo*h *Te Dhariye, Ve Gallan Mooh Te Kariye* (Meet me at the well, let's speak face-to-face). The depth of the well also parallels the profundity of the conversations. Historically tied to women's labour, the well is reimagined here as a space of romantic rebellion, where societal norms are momentarily suspended. The imagery oscillates between sweetness and sorrow, as seen in lines: *Challa Kaaliyan Mirchan, Ve Mauhra Pee Ke Marsaan, Ve Tere Sir Chadsan* (*Challa* is like black pepper, I feel like dying by drinking thornapple), where love is both a source of

vitality and pain. The earlier version of *Challa* had the line *Puttar Mithde Meve, Allah Sab Nu Deve* (Sons are sweet, may Allah bless everyone with sons), and the later version by Gurdas Maan and Diljit Dosanjh had an added line *Dhian Sab Nu Deve* (May daughters be born to everyone), it reflects a shifting societal attitude which underscores a move away from a son-centric society, where only males were seen as capable of carrying forward family lineage. The separation from *Challa* is mourned in the lines: *Challa mud ke ni aaya, ve malleya des paraya, ve rona umran da paya, ve gall sun challeya, dhola, ve saad ke kita e kola* (*Challa*, never returned, left for a distant land, gave a lifetime of grief, listen *Challa*, this parting has burnt me like a coal), it evokes a sense of perpetual grief, sung in a ballad-style rendition and use of word *dhola*, usually reserved for a male beloved, indicate that *Challa*'s absence is lamented by his lover. The lyrics explore the themes of cultural continuity, through objects passed down to generations; the transient nature of the material world and the bond with loved ones—*Challa gal di ve gaani/ ve tur gye dilan de jaani/ meri dukhan di kahani/ ve aa ke sun ja zubaani* (*Challa*, the chain that adorned my neck, my beloved has departed, come and listen to the story of my sorrows, in my own voice); *Ho challa paya e gehne/ ve Sajjan belli ni rehne/ ve sir te maape ni rehne/ ve dukh jindadi de sehne/ ve gall sun challeya dhola ve kahda paana e rola* (*Challa*, presented jewels, friends and mates will leave, parents will pass, life is forever bound in sorrow, listen *Challa*, why then you lament). *Gaani* (neck chain) that once adorned the neck, touching the heart in a literal sense, just like people who touch our hearts in a metaphorical sense, neither lasts forever. *Gehne* (jewellery) passed down through generations symbolises not only material wealth but also the cultural heritage and emotional bonds tied to them. The lyrics highlight the inevitability of loss and the impermanence of worldly possessions and relationships. It calls to reflect on the futility of clinging to material possessions and relationships that are destined to fade. The narrative of *Challa* expands to encompass universal themes, transcending personal love and loss to touch the common human thread. The collaborative nature of the song, with Maan's earthy folk timbre complementing Dosanjh's modern cadence, mirrors the interplay of tradition and innovation in Punjabi music, making *Challa* a bridge between the past and present.

The music video *Challa in Chandigarh* by Sarthi K and Sachin Ahuja employs a narrative technique, where the chorus serves as an omnipresent narrator, recounting the story of a young protagonist who after passing grade twelve comes to Chandigarh for higher studies: *Challa karke plus 2 pass/ te baapu de paa ke tarle pahunch janda hai Chandigarh* (After passing 12th grade, Challa begged his father and reached Chandigarh) (K and Ahuja). This narrative style creates a sense of detachment, underscoring the chorus's role as an external observer. The story of *Challa* begins with his transition from rural village life to urban city life, as he leaves his hometown to pursue higher education. This movement is symbolic of *Challa*'s desire for upward mobility and his quest for freedom and urbanity: *Chandigarh Padhan main jaun/ degree karke aaun/ banu patwari main baapu* (I will go to Chandigarh to study, earn a degree and become a *Patwari*, father). However, as he becomes increasingly entrenched in city life, *Challa*'s values and priorities begin to shift, reflecting the influence of capitalist ideologies. The character of the girl serves as a sign of the allure of urban capitalism, representing the temptation of upward mobility at the cost of abandoning one's rural roots. *Challa*'s relationships with his friends, who introduce him to drinking and drugs, further reinforce the notion that city life is inherently corrupting: *Nashe de paale chaske/ oh ik kaala maal vi chhakda* (He developed addiction to drugs and relishes black-coloured drug substance). Throughout the narrative, the chorus provides commentary on *Challa*'s moral degeneration, highlighting the tension between his rural upbringing and his adoption of urban values. *Challa* meaning "ring" shaped in a circle reflects the protagonist's circular journey, moving from rural to urban and back again with lessons learned. This circular motion serves as a metaphor for *Challa*'s existential search, as he navigates the complexities of identity, morality, and belonging. In this version, *Challa*'s journey begins with a movement away from the Symbolic Order—the patriarchal structure embodied by his father's authority. His desire to escape the father's phallic control (the Law-of-the-Father) disrupts the generational pact, propelling him into the alienating realm of the Symbolic, where he seeks new structures of meaning. However, instead of finding coherence, he encounters a moral degeneration—a collapse of the promise of stability in the Symbolic. This rupture exposes the fragility of meaning, as the fantasies of urban life and

capitalist aspirations fail to fill the gap left by his departure from the familial order. The Real—Lacan’s domain of the unrepresentable and traumatic—shatters his illusions of wholeness, revealing the emptiness beneath the promises of modernity. *Challa*’s journey, thus, becomes a metaphor for the migrant’s disillusionment, where the search for identity in an urban world only deepens the sense of dislocation and loss.

The song *Challa* from the 2012 film *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*, directed by Yash Chopra, presents a poignant narrative that explores the complexities of identity, love, and existential crisis (Shergill). The protagonist, Samar Anand, played by Shah Rukh Khan, is placed against the alienating backdrop of London. Following a chance encounter with Meera, played by Katrina Kaif, Samar’s life is forever altered as he navigates the intricacies of love, loss, and self-discovery. The song “*Challa*” serves as a poignant reflection of Samar’s existential crisis and fragmented identity seeking to fill the lack. The lyrics of *Challa*—*Challa ki labh da phire?* (Wanderer, what are you searching for?)—is sung in almost a Sufi inflected melody. The repeated questioning of *Yaaron mera ghar kehda?* (Where is my home?) reflects the sense of displacement when faced with existential struggle. The use of antithesis: *Challa hasda phire . . . rounda phire* (Wanderer, you roam happily . . . in sorrow) and *Challe tu sab da . . . tera koi nahi* (You belong to everyone . . . no one is yours), highlights tension between conflicting identity formations, oppositional forces that shape the fragmented self. Samar’s search for home is metaphorically tied to Meera, whose fleeting appearances—*Dikhda ni ohdi khushbuan sunghda* (I can’t see her but smell her fragrance)—position her as a Lacanian *objet petit a*, the unattainable object of desire that propels his endless wandering. The camera’s focus on Katrina Kaif—framed as the elusive home—symbolises the impossibility of union in a world where belonging is reduced to transient encounters. Samar’s performative existence, juggling odd jobs amidst a carnivalesque London (statue mimics, circus performers), reflects the hyperreal absurdity of modernity, where identity is a pastiche of borrowed roles. The protagonist’s navigation of different worlds, both physical and metaphorical, is exemplified by his interactions with children, where he appears to be suspended between a state of childlike

carefreeness, the pre-oedipal stage and concealed adult restlessness, the encounter with the symbolic. The bridge scene, where Samar sings *Na visaal hoya kadi . . . Na judai hoi* (No union, no separation), the bridge, a liminal space between past and present, becomes a metaphor for his suspended state: neither rooted nor free, he is *Ishq da kaidi* (prisoner of love) trapped in the Symbolic order's language, articulating absence through presence. The closing scene, where Meera tosses a coin into his guitar case at dusk, offers a false resolution: Samar momentarily halts his search *Challa ki labh da phire*, only to dissolve into the void of unfulfilled desire. Through this, *Challa* becomes a meta-commentary on Bollywood's commodification of folk trauma, where the ring (*challa*) of cultural memory is both preserved and commodified. The song employs a pastiche of traditional folklore, recontextualising it within a modern framework.

The song *Challa* from the movie *Crook*, featuring Emraan Hashmi and sung by Babbu Mann, presents a narrative that explores the inhibitions of the libidinal desire. The music video opens with the protagonist's migration from India to a foreign land, where he seeks to earn a living as a taxi driver: *Raat-din taxi chalaunda/ Ve mote dollar kamaunda* (He drives a taxi day and night/ Earns a handsome sum in dollars) (Mann and D'Mello). The lyrics and visuals of the song embody a spirit of epicureanism, as the protagonist indulges in drinking and revelry with friends: *Challa akhiyan seke/ Goriyan mema'n dekhe/ Labh ke naina de theke/ Jaam rajj-rajj ke bharda/ Pooriyan aishan karda, haaye* (*Challa* finds pleasure in the sight of white girls, he drinks to his heart's content, embraces a hedonistic life). The music transitions from traditional Punjabi folk sounds to a more contemporary disco beat, underscoring the protagonist's cultural displacement and his desire to assimilate into the foreign culture, he opts to indulge in the hedonistic pleasures of the foreign land. The use of female figures in the song as signs of the protagonist's desire and complex interplay of exoticisation, objectification, and cultural inscriptions undercut through a nuanced and equitable perception. The foreign girls he encounters in the clubs serve as embodiments of the exotic and the unknown, while the female love interest back in India represents a loss of connection with his cultural heritage and traditional values. The final stanza, sung

from the perspective of the female lead, subverts the traditional power dynamics of romantic relationships, as she asserts her independence and autonomy, declaring that she does not need the protagonist: *Challa, tu nahi, na sahi/ Hor vi mukhde ne kayi/ Jinnhaan 'te akh jehi aa gayi/ Tu jaana hai taan hun ja/ Saanu nahi teri parwaah* (*Challa if not you, then someone else will do, there are plenty of other faces out there, so leave if you want, I do not care*). This narrative twist underscores the complexities of desire, identity, and cultural displacement that are central to the themes of the song.

Sidhu Moosewala's cover of *Challa* takes on a more personal significance, as it seems to symbolise the artist's own tragic demise (Moosewala). Moosewala's embodiment of the spirit of *Challa*, marked by struggles and hardships, invokes a poignant image. *Challa* has also been adapted across different genres and cultural contexts as presented in Bob B Randhawa's portrayal of *Challa* in a rap style, a Punjabi hip hop genre reflecting the versatility of *Challa* as a cultural symbol (Randhawa). In a public service announcement produced by the Chandigarh Police on YouTube, *Challa* is portrayed as a reckless driver who meets with an accident, serving as a cautionary tale about the dangers of rash driving (B Singh). These diverse interpretations of *Challa* underpin the diversity, complexity and richness of the character, allowing it to be recontextualised and reinterpreted in various ways.

***Challa* and *Jugni*: Parallel Folk Narratives**

The *Challa* narrative serves as a versatile framework for exploring themes such as identity, morality, and the human condition which also aligns to another cultural symbol of Punjabi folk, *Jugni*. *Jugni* defies singular identity markers such as religion, caste, or region, her only defining characteristic is her gender—a fluid, universal archetype. Similarly, *Challa*, is stripped of specific identity markers and reinterpreted across time and space (S Singh). While *Challa* embodies a fixed tragedy—a son lost to the river, a father trapped in grief—*Jugni* represents fluidity and movement “because she is a woman liberated from the home and hearth and undertakes free travel as she participates in this community space with verve and gusto” (S Singh). As a wandering female figure, *Jugni* transcends the

boundaries of the Symbolic Order that defies patriarchal constraints. Where *Challa*'s narrative is one of irreversible loss, *Jugni*'s journey is open-ended, reflecting resilience and adaptability. This contrast highlights the gendered dimensions of Punjabi folk traditions: while *Challa*'s story is rooted in male-centric themes of lineage and duty, *Jugni*'s narrative offers a subversive counterpoint, celebrating the unbound feminine spirit. The folklore of *Challa* and *Jugni* has been perpetuated through various musical renditions in Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi, reflecting their enduring presence in the popular imagination. These narratives have been reinterpreted and recontextualised across different mediums, including film, to reflect the resilience and agency of their female protagonists. Together, they illustrate how folk narratives can evolve into glocal symbols, resonating with universal themes while remaining deeply rooted in the cultural imagination of Punjab.

Conclusion

Challa as a symbol provides a space for the representation of the plight of young Punjabi males in contemporary time faced with economic challenges that compel them to migrate. The songs portray two kinds of migration: internal migration, where *Challa* moves from a rural setting to an urban setting which shows the moral degeneration associated with city life; and, external migration outside the nation, where he is placed in a foreign culture and thus, the consequent experience of loss, alienation and degeneration. The gloomy tone of the song *Challa* by Gurdas Maan and Diljit Dosanjh resonates with the contemporary experiences of Punjabi families who have lost their sons to the challenges of migration, visa processes, and global politics. Similarly, the themes of alienation and loss are experienced by the parents and Punjab emerges as a poignant image of homeland which mourns the absence of its sons and the resultant economic precariousness. The loss of sons to fathers is not only an emotional trauma but also a symbolic emasculation, representing the disruption of patrilineal lineage and the loss of phallic power. The Bollywood adaptation of *Challa* embodies the image of forlorn, wandering lover seeking to resolve the existential crisis through the desire for stability in the materialisation of his love. The analysis from a Lacanian standpoint on the human condition highlights the inherent tension

between lack and desire. While *Challa* represents loss and longing when he leaves his homeland, *Jugni*, on the other hand, emerges as a symbol of feminine liberation breaking free from patriarchal constraints. Her connection with the real world marks the beginning of her journey as *Jugni*, embodying the tensions between the symbolic and the real, the local and the global. These narratives offer a nuanced understanding of the complexities of identity and culture.

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Folk Cosmology and Rural Psyche: Deconstructing Phanishwar Nath Renu's Select Short Stories

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Abstract

Phanishwar Nath Renu, widely celebrated for his iconic novels such as *Maila Aanchal* and *Parati Parikatha*, remains less explored as a master of short stories. While Renu himself resisted the label of 'regional literature,' his short stories are deeply rooted in the linguistic and socio-cultural fabric of Bihar, offering a vivid portrayal of its ethos. By embedding regional folklore within his narratives, Renu bridges the gap between literature and oral traditions, transforming folk cosmology into a profound literary experience. While his philosophical scope transcends the regional, his narratives remain deeply rooted in the cultural heritage, traditions, and dialects of Bihar, offering a unique lens to interpret its folk belief systems. This paper explores Renu's storytelling as a narrative repository of folk cosmology—a framework that interweaves localised worldviews with social practices, oral traditions, and spiritual ideologies. Through an analysis of key short stories like "Teesri Kasam," "Panchlaite," "Kaak Dhvani," etc., the study examines recurring motifs popular in folklore culture. This paper investigates Renu's short stories while underscoring how belief systems operate as both tools of identity preservation and socio-cultural negotiation. Positioned at the intersection of folklore and literary studies, this study offers a valuable contribution to both the disciplines.

Keywords: Bihari Folklore, Folk Cosmology, Folklore in literature, Myth, Regional Literature, Rural Psyche.

Introduction: Mapping Folklore in Literature

For cultural theorist Stuart Hall, culture is associated with *shared meanings*. Furthermore, "[m]eanings can only be shared through our

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common access to language. So language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings” (Hall 1). Unlike literature, which is preserved in its written form, folklore evolves through collective memory, making it a shared cultural repository. Folklores reflect the lived experiences, habits, and practices of marginalised communities, distinct from mainstream literary forms. This divergence underscores the democratic and participatory essence of folklore as a medium of cultural expression. Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of the “habitus” explains why Folkloristics as a discipline is important in the process of understanding society holistically: “Habitus is a product of the environment or conditions of existence and is mediated by the family in the form of lessons in morality, taboos, worries, rules of behaviour and tastes” (Mander 428). German folklorist Lutz Rohrich believes that folktales are uncontrolled forms of human imagination and the ruling elite and culturally dominant groups have always tried to control and “reduce the imaginative capacities of the people” (McGlathery 119). McGlathery, editor of *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale* (1988), claims that different ruling elites have utilised folklores for different political purposes and thus, the “role of the same texts changes over time and space” (121). Folklore theorist and one of the earliest pioneers of ethno-historiography, Jan Vansina contends that oral traditions are the primary source of historical mappings of a nation. This view aligns with the nationalistic significance of the folklore as propounded by the Brothers Grimm. McGlathery also notes that Folkloristics as a discipline was “initiated by Johann Gottfried Herder, who coined the term *Volkslied* (“folk-song”) in the 1770s, and by the Brothers Grimm, who made the *Volksmärchen* (“folktale”) a symbol of national culture in the first decade of the nineteenth century” (117). Phanishwar Nath Renu, however, while assembling folklore in his literary canon, tries to hold a secular position. He stands like a objective observer and pens whatever he sees as an insider-outsider.ⁱ

American folklorist R M Dorson observes that, “distinctions between traditional and nontraditional or between oral and written literature are often shifting and elusive” (133). Within this framework, Dorson classifies folklore into four categories: The first group is called “oral literature,” “verbal art” or “expressive

literature.” This group contains folk narratives like myths, legends and folktales, folk song, folk poetry, proverbs, riddles and folk speech or folk language. The features of folk speech differ from the standard speech or language as the former has no hard and fast grammatical rules and pronunciation. The second group is called “physical life” or “material culture” of folklore. It takes into account the ways and knacks of earliest human living, for example, how a particular human community built their houses, how they made their clothes or prepared food and decorated their houses. The third group is called “social folk custom,” which resembles “the rites of passage” observed in many communities. It includes rituals and customs associated with births, deaths, marriages, celebrations, festivals, public performances, folk medicines, folk religions, miracles, superstitions, games and recreational activities. The fourth and last group comprises the “performing folk arts” that further contains traditional music, dance and drama, along with folk musical instruments, dance costumes, etc.

The Folk in Phanishwar Nath Renu’s Rural Cosmos

Folk is an essential element of literature, both written and oral. Phanishwar Nath Renu’s works exemplify the idea that folklore serves as a repository of cultural memory and collective identity. He borrows the acute observation for rural life from Johann G Herder who held that folk culture is always at the root of any national literature. Renu’s narratives transcend the “regional” label, reflecting the concept of “polyphony” by integrating diverse voices and lived experiences of the village folk. His stories, in the Bakhtinian sense, carry a diversity of independent conflicting voices, each rooted in its own perspective and idiosyncratic stance. “Polyphony,” as defined in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, is marked by “not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness,” but “rather a plurality of consciousnesses” which “combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Bakhtin 22). A similar dynamism emerges in Renu’s short stories, with their diverse folk voices drenched in rural traditions and folk life.

Renu is capable of creating a complete folk-universe through his stories. ‘Folk cosmology’ might not be a very popular term in academic literature, but it has appeared in works that speak of indigenous worldviews and traditional knowledge systems. The term would best mean the way community-based cultures—the folk—comprehend and interpret the world around them, including natural phenomena, spiritual beliefs, and cosmological structures, often combining mythology, oral traditions, and practical observations, creating an entire sustainable ecosystem. The concept historically has roots in the study of folk religion and cosmology as expressions of localised cultural systems. The study of folk religion traces back to intellectual traditions of those like Johann Gottfried Herder and Giovanni Battista Vico (philosophers associated with the Italian Enlightenment), accentuating the cultural creativity of common people. Such frameworks often blur the distinctions between religion, belief, and superstition, importantly in rural or indigenous contexts. By exploring superstition, belief, and rituals as part of a rural worldview, this paper essentially engages with what could be understood as a folk-cosmological perspective.

In Renu, we find a symbiosis between literature and folklore, where he appropriately embeds the oral tales and songs to fit the context of his stories. His stories are interspersed with songs, local dialects, group rituals, and folktales popular among the village folk. Renu’s stories simultaneously focus on the interplay between geographical and cultural landscapes. In Renu’s focus on Bihar’s Seemanchal, the flood-prone Kosi region, the relationship between the land and its people is highlighted. Although Renu himself distanced his work from being labeled as regional, his short stories are linguistically and socio-culturally rooted in the specific ethos of a specific region (Seemanchal) in Bihar. While Renu’s philosophical scope transcends the regional, his narratives remain deeply rooted in the cultural heritage, traditions, and dialects of Bihar, offering a unique lens to interpret its folk belief-systems.

The research methodology for this paper is analytical and interpretive, focusing on the interplay of folklore and literature in Renu’s selected short stories, curated from the collection *Sampoorna Kahaniyaan* in Hindi. By examining the amalgamation of folk and

literature, the study situates Renu as a cultural mediator, highlighting his role in preserving and transforming regional narratives within a literary framework. For the purpose of this paper, all passages attributed to Renu have been translated into English by the author.

Faith and Fear: Superstition in Renu's Storytelling

Superstition, frequently dismissed as irrational, functions as an adaptive strategy within rural systems, reflecting Geertz's assertion that religion provides a "model of and for reality," giving coherence to the rural worldview (Geertz 93). There are countless prescriptive and prohibitive norms in folk traditions that stem from superstitions. In the story "Sirpanchami ka Sagun," there is a farmer who gets his spud in bad shape, which is regarded as a bad omen. His wife gets it repaired: "On the day of the Sirpanchami, every farmer thinks about good luck (*sagun*) only. On that day, everyone is careful not to fall into an argument, to become prey to an evil eye, or to be sneezed at by someone . . ." (Renu 187). It is believed that on that day, "at the time of plowing, whoever's ox excretes, he will not lack water or manure the entire year. Otherwise, whoever's ox sits down, only God can take care of him!" (Renu 188). Such observations foretell if good luck or bad luck befalls the villagers' household. Villagers seriously observe those details, and also create antidotes to nullify or at least weaken the accidental bad luck that they happen to come across. When Singhay, the farmer protagonist of the story, notices that Kalu has damaged his plough-knife, he believes as if, "not the plough-knife, but his fate had been damaged" (Renu 188).

The farmer's damaged spud, regarded as a bad omen, underscores the community's tendency to attribute personal or agricultural misfortune to symbolic events. Such practices align with Alan Dundes' structuralist approach, where cultural motifs like omens and rituals function as shared cognitive templates to navigate uncertainty (Dundes 196). The statement, "not the plough-knife, but his fate had been damaged," reveals the deeply ingrained connection between material misfortunes and metaphysical explanations. Furthermore, the antidotes to bad luck reflect what Marcel Mauss describes as the exchange of symbolic acts to maintain equilibrium in social and cosmic orders (65). Such rituals reaffirm communal ties

while mitigating anxiety about unforeseen outcomes. The story “Sirpanchami ka Sagun” vividly illustrates the intricate ‘folk cosmology’ surrounding concepts of *sagun* (good omen) and *apsagun* (bad omen) that govern rural life. These beliefs, as William Bascom points out, “validate the cultural ethos and provide a framework for interpreting everyday occurrences” (343). Village customs, often rooted in superstition, represent what Bascom calls the *validation of culture*, where belief systems act as a guide to behavior and ritual, and serve to justify social practices and maintain cultural continuity (Bascom 348). These customs, though sometimes dismissed by outsiders, operate as a vital framework for identity and collective memory.

Crows are birds associated with bad luck in many cultures. The sound of a crow, often considered a bad omen in many North Indian cultures as well, exemplifies what Alan Dundes describes as the symbolic use of folklore motifs to externalise human anxieties (Dundes 12). In Renu’s story “Sirpanchami ka Sagun” for instance, Singhay’s pessimism is aggrandised by a crow’s croak, which he interprets to bring a misfortune—*Tedha faal, tedhi takdeer!* which means that “crooked tools will only bring bad luck” (Renu 188). Similarly, in another story titled as “Kaak Charit,” Kisanlal attributes all the misfortunes of his day-to-day life to the crow—*Kisanlal samajh gaya hai, uske durbhagya ke mool me kaaga aur kauwa hi hai. Uske sare dukh dard ka kaaran* (Kisanlal has now understood that crows sit at the root of his unfortunate life. The cause of all his miseries) (Renu 364). Such a belief system responds to what Bascom identifies as folklore’s function in validating existing fears and experiences (349). Villagers connect nature to the uncanny and try to comprehend the happenings of their lives through nature’s link which in this particular story, is the crow.

However, in Renu, we also find such belief systems being questioned or challenged in the end. Towards the end of “Kaak Charit,” when the crow’s cry precedes good news, Kisanlal finally is able to contend—*Savitri, kauwa humesa ashubh hi nahin bakhta hai* (Savitri, a crow is not always inauspicious) (Renu 366). This shift in folk consciousness, reflects what Victor Turner would refer to as “liminality”, marking a transition from blind superstition to critical

awareness, where belief systems are checked and reevaluated within the communal contexts. This indicates fluidity of cultures which aids a society to cognitively progress.

Symbolism and Fantasy: Renu's Folkloric Imagination

"Folklore is collective fantasy and as fantasy, it depends upon the symbolic system of a given culture" (Dundes 64). It is the symbolism in folklore that makes it more complex than what meets the eyes. The symbols carry layers of meanings and are intentionally loaded. Terms in folklore studies like "identification" and "interpretation" popularised by Dundes help decode the meanings encrypted in folkloric symbols. What the author Renu specialises in, as a bridge between literature and folklore, is the contextualisation of the particular folkloric text in his stories, whenever required. In this way, his stories align with Dundes' emphasis on the interplay between text and context which holds highest importance in creation and interpretation of folklores.

Durkheim was among the earliest sociologists to point out the "religious origin of the notion of economic value" which was further imagined by Mauss and others (Mauss 70). Folk religions, as Marcel Mauss highlights in his theory of exchange, often involve rituals and offerings that foster reciprocal relationships between humans and the divine, strengthening communal bonds. Birju, the little boy in Renu's story "Laal Paan ki Begum," thinks of bribing the wish-fulfilling spirit (*Jin Baba*) who is believed to live on the tamarind tree. Birju believes that if he offers the first brinjal fruiting from the plant he had sown himself, the *Jin* would fulfill his wish and send his father soon to take them to the fair—*usne man hi man imli par rahne wale jimbaba ko ek baingan kaboola, gach ka sabse bada baingan, usne khud jis paudhe ko ropa hai! . . . jaldi se gadi lekar bappa ko bhej do jimbaba!* (In his heart, he offered a brinjal to the *Jimbaba* residing on the tamarind tree—the largest brinjal from the plant he had sown himself! . . . Send the car quickly, *Jimbaba*, and send Father!) (Renu 157).

Birju bribing *Jin* to hasten his father's return demonstrates Marcel Mauss' notion of "symbolic reciprocity in gift exchange,"

where offerings to supernatural entities are seen as transactions to fulfill desires. This cultural behavior also reflects Arnold van Gennep's notion of the *rites of passage*, situating rituals and beliefs as transitional acts that mediate between the natural and supernatural. Suiting this context of the boy invoking the *Jin* for wish fulfillment, one could consider Gennep's distinction of an "indirect rite" from a "direct rite"—

A direct rite, for example a curse or a spell, is designed to produce results immediately, without intervention by any outside agent. On the other hand, an indirect rite—be it vow, prayer, or religious service—is a kind of initial blow which sets into motion some autonomous or personified power, such as a demon, a group of jinn, or a deity, who intervenes on behalf of the performer of the rite. The effect of a direct rite is automatic; that of an indirect rite comes as a repercussion. (8)

Even Mauss thinks that the link between exchange contracts among people, and those between humans and deities, highlights a crucial aspect of the theory of "sacrifice." This relationship is especially evident in societies where economic and contractual rituals are performed. Malinowski, however, extends the value of gifts from pure sacrificial performance to "barter with bargaining" (Mauss 71). In such contexts, individuals often embody spirits, which in Birju's case is the *Jinbaba*, functioning as their representatives, particularly when they are masked or possessed by the spirit whose name they invoke. Thus, these exchanges and contracts extend beyond human interactions to involve sacred beings associated with them (Mauss 13). When Birju tries to bribe the spirit with the first eggplant from his tree, he certainly is bargaining it in exchange for an early return of his father which he believes the *Jin* could magically facilitate.

In "Laal Paan ki Begum," Birju's mother is seen ranting about her daughter Chamiya, who is not home yet—*Chamiya ke sir bhi chudail madra rahi hai . . . aadhe angan dhup rahte jo gayi hai sahuayin ki dukaan chova-gud lane, so abhi tak nahin lauti; diya-baati ki bela ho gayi* (A witch is hovering over Chamiya's head . . .

half the courtyard was still sunlit when she'd left for the shop to buy dry-fruits and jaggery but hasn't returned yet; it's already time for the evening lamps to be lit) (Renu 153). Chamiya's mother thinks that it is because of some *chudail* (a female evil spirit) who has possessed her daughter that she has not returned home until the evening. The mother's indication that Chamiya's delayed return might be caused by some *chudail*, reflects what Clifford Geertz describes as the "webs of significance" people spin to make sense of their realities in their cosmos (5). This unusual delay is linked to the spirit possession here. The ritual of "diya and baati" is common in Indian cultures in the north and the south. Birju's mother further complains of her husband's unpunctuality to take them to the village fair—*Suraj bhagwan dub gye. Diya-baati ki bela ho gayi. Ab tak gaadi . .* (The sun-god has set. It is time for the evening prayers. Yet no sign of the bullock-cart) (Renu 156). Birju's mother is worried that her husband is not back in time which also dampens her excitement of going to the fair.

The rising and setting of the sun governs the day-to-day activities of the people in Renu's rural depictions. Days begin early in the morning with the energy of the sun, and as soon as the sun sets, daily activities slow down. This association of day and night with the worshipping rituals associated with the rising and setting of the sun, reflect the rural psyche, reassuring a cultural belief system. Nights are often associated with the activation of negative energies of nature like *bhoot*, *pishach*, etc. (negative spirits). The reference to *diya-baati ka bela*—a ritual of offering evening prayers for the sanctity and safety in Indian households—underscores Victor Turner's concept of the "communitas," where shared rituals sustain community bonds during transitional times like dusk. The association of night with negative energies such as *bhoot* and *pishach*, and of day with positive tasks, also reinforce Claude Levi-Strauss' structuralist idea of binary oppositions, found deeply ingrained in rural consciousness.

In Renu's most celebrated short story, "Teesari Kasam," which was later adopted in a film of the same title, the protagonist Hiranman's perception of Hirabai as a fairy reflects the interplay between folklore and rural psychology. Hiranman's comparison of Hirabai to fairy, *abbey ye toh pari hai . . . bacchon ki boli-jaisi*

maheen, phenugilasi boli . . . (she is an angel . . . her voice is as tender and glass-like gramophone) (Renu 129), functions as a metaphor deeply rooted in popular imagination, where supernatural entities like fairies symbolise unattainable purity and beauty. As Dundes notes, recurring motifs like the fairy figure in folk narratives often represent cultural archetypes that help define social norms and beliefs. Hiranman's admiration for Hirabai's beauty and the fragrance of champa flowers, *aurat hai ya champa ka phool! Jab se gadi mahmah mahak rahi hai* (Is she a woman or a Plumeria-flower! Since the cart smells fragrant) (Renu 128), exemplifies the same.

This comparison further highlights the popular notions of beauty, rather standardised ones in a local setting. Village people are less groomed than actresses (represented by Hirabai in the story), hence causing the bizarre attribute to her looks by a common villager (represented by Hiranman). This reinforces Alan Dundes' structuralist theory, where "fairy" is not just a metaphor but a symbolic representation embedded in the collective rural consciousness, highlighting the binary oppositions between common villagers and idealised figures of beauty. According to Alan Dundes, tales that perform the same functions can be grouped under a single type. Rather than relying on vague elements of plot, a classification system based on clear structural features can be established. Citing Propp's analysis of 100 fairy tales, Dundes notes that each story adheres to a common structural pattern, leading Propp to assert that structurally, all fairy tales belong to the same type (*The Meaning of Folklore* 95).

Animism, Rituals, and Social Order in Renu's Fiction

In "Panchlait," the villagers' reverence for the *panchlaite* (a pressurised kerosene lamp)—an object initially viewed with suspicion—can be analysed through Mauss' concept of the "gift and its social functions," where the ritual purification of the machine before use can be seen as an attempt to establish reciprocal relations between the villagers and the newly acquired item, treating it as a symbolic "gift" that must be properly acknowledged before it can be fully integrated into their lives (Mauss 11). After the village *Panchs* get the mysterious *panchlaite* home, they decide to evoke their gods first; the ten rupees they had saved from the purchase was decided on

to be used for buying materials for the worshipping ritual before they lit up the lamp for the first time—*Bina nem-tem ke kalkabjewali cheez ka punyah nahi karna chahiye. Angrejbahadur ke raaj me bhi pul banane se pahle bali di jati thi* (one must perform rituals before installing something unnamed that makes unfamiliar noises. Even during the reign of Angrez Bahadur, sacrifices were made before a bridge was constructed) (Renu 182). The villagers treat the lamp as an alien entity, fear it, and find difficulty in trusting it. They would first purify it by praying as well as offering some incense and sweets to it, in order to make it a familiar entity. The village folk are yet to learn how the machine functions, and are skeptical about its behaviour—*Rastey mein sann-sann bolta tha panchlite!* (ascribing some onomatopoeic sound to the machine) (Renu 183). This act of ritualising the *panchlaite* also echoes Gennep's idea of liminality or threshold, where the transition from the unknown to the known is marked by sanctifying ritual acts that affirm an entity's entry into the web of social cohesion—

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (Turner 95)

The villagers' need to perform a ritual of purifying the lamp before they could use it also signifies their need to stabilise the social and spiritual environment after introducing an external object, again underscoring Turner's idea of the "communitas," where shared rituals re-establish collective unity and solidarity (96). Liminal phenomena contrasts two societal models—a hierarchical structure with "politico-legal-economic positions" marked by "more or less," and, a transient egalitarian phase where individuals form an "undifferentiated comitatus" under ritual authority (Turner 96). In Renu's village, the authoritative position of the *Sarpanch* (village head) affirms the second kind of society, which is unorganised and unstructured, always in transition, and most importantly is guided by

the rituals carried by the elderly authoritative persons like the *Sarpanch*.

When no one in the village is able to light the petromax, and disappointment spreads among the villagers, one of the villager comments, *kal-kabjewali cheez ka nakhra bahut hota hai* (electronic machines are very moody) (Renu 183). This exaggerated description of the lamp as a “*kal-kabjewali cheez*” endowed with mysterious powers and human-like attributes such as having tantrums, points to what could be referred to as “folkloric imagination,” the process by which ordinary objects are imbued with supernatural qualities, reflecting how the village folk interpret and interact with unfamiliar items. The lamp, though an inanimate object, is anthropomorphised, symbolising the villagers’ tendency to ascribe human traits to the unknown, which helps them make sense of and integrate it into their belief systems. This perspective aligns with the “animistic” qualities of folklore, where the boundaries between the living and non-living are blurred through cultural interpretations. This also corresponds to Alan Dundes’ thought on cognitive structure in folklore, where the mind uses symbolic systems to process and make sense of the unknown.

Finally, the village-romeo, Godhan’s re-admittance into the community after proving his expertise with the lamp speaks to the fluidity of social roles in village society, as explored in Gramsci’s theory of “counter-hegemony,” where local norms and practices allow for the renegotiation of status and identity, particularly when dignity is at stake. “Through intellectual activity in the broadest sense, primitive notions of folklore and common sense as acquiescence to the existing order could be transcended, and this was the necessary condition for radical political transformation” (Schwarzmantel 92). By appealing to subversive and gradual changes within the village community, Renu highlights the power of the liminal folk groups to be capable of transforming themselves towards national progress.

Cleansing and purifying rituals hold significant cultural importance in various regions across India, including North Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where the River Ganges is

deeply revered for its purifying virtues. In Renu's short story, "Ek Adim Ratri Ki Mahak," the sacred river symbolises the cleansing of sins and attainment of purity. This reflects the widespread belief that consistent immersion in the Ganges absolves accumulated sins from several lifetimes. The protagonist Karma therefore declares, "chaar mahine tak teeson din Ganga me nahaya hai Karma. Char 'janam tak' paap ka koi asar to nahin hona chahiye!" [Karma, having bathed in the holy Ganges for one twenty days in a row, is now immune to the effects of sin for another four lives!] (Renu 374). This suggests the widespread belief that consistent immersion in the Ganges absolves accumulated sins from several lifetimes. Such symbolic acts of purification resonate with the anthropological perspective of Victor Turner, who—in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*—emphasises the liminal nature of rituals, just like that of cultural groups. The act of bathing in the Ganges can be interpreted as a transitory phase, wherein the individual moves from a state of spiritual impurity to one of renewed sanctity, reinforcing communal and religious identities. Additionally, Clifford Geertz's concept of religion as a 'system of symbols' provides a lens to understand how the Ganges functions as a potent symbol of divine power and purity. In Renu's narrative, the Manihari Baba reiterates this reverence by exclaiming, *ghat-ghat ka pani peekar dekha - sab feeeka. Ek gangajal meetha . . .* (I have tasted the waters from every shore – all bland. Only the water of the Ganges is sweet . . .) (Renu 374). This assertion not only underscores the sacredness of the Ganges but also reflects its perceived superiority over other rivers, reinforcing its central role in cultural cosmology. Alan Dundes highlights that such rituals often serve as vehicles for transmitting collective beliefs. The invocation of "Gangajal" as uniquely "sweet" aligns with oral traditions that celebrate the Ganges not merely as a physical river but as a repository of cultural memory and shared spirituality. In Bihar and beyond, this sacrality is perpetuated through both oral narratives and literary representations like Renu's.

Besides the rivers, galaxies too strongly affect life in rural cosmology—*Idhar hathiya-nacchattar achha jhara tha. Kheton mein ab bhi pani laga hua hai . . .* (Here, the *Hathiya Nakshatra* had brought good rain. The fields still have water in them . . .) (Renu 376). As explained in a column by *Aaj Tak*, "it rains continuously in the

last week of Ashwin month. It is called Hathiya Nakshatra. The farmers of Hathiya Nakshatra are eagerly waiting because the water of this Nakshatra is considered good for the crops” (1). In such belief systems, the position of celestial bodies, such as planets and constellations, is thought to influence human lives and natural phenomena, such as rainfall. In the pre-scientific era, communities sought to comprehend nature by observing the movements of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Even today, these folk practices persist, showcasing a reliance on what can be termed as primitive wisdom. This belief ties into what Geertz would define as a ‘web of significance’ woven by a community to make sense of their environment. Similarly, Bakhtin’s concept of the “chronotope” can also be employed to interpret how time and space in Renu’s narrative are interwoven with the rhythms of rural life, creating a symbolic connection between the cosmos and agricultural cycles. Furthermore, Gennep’s “rites of passage” can provide a lens to view such cosmological beliefs as integral to transitions within the agrarian calendar, functioning as communal rituals that sustain socio-economic practices. Gennep defines *rites de passage* as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” (Turner 94), encompassing the beliefs around the agrarian calendar. The notion of the *Hathiya Nakshatra* demonstrates how “folk cosmology” and agricultural practices converge, preserving cultural identity and continuity amidst modernity.

Conclusion

Phanishwar Nath Renu’s short stories offer a rich tapestry of “folk cosmology”, where superstitions, rituals, and supernatural beliefs are intricately woven into the fabric of rural life. While Renu portrays these beliefs with empathy and authenticity, he also encourages a critical re-evaluation of their validity, which is evident in his narrative endings. For instance, in “Kaak Charit”, the villagers gradually move away from blind superstition, and in “Panchlait,” caste barriers are challenged to prioritise an individual’s worth over their social identity. Renu’s nuanced approach reflects a deep understanding of the rural psyche, where folklore serves as both a tool of identity preservation and a medium for socio-cultural negotiation. Renu’s engagement with folklore is thus both

celebratory and critical. He applauds the cultural richness of rural traditions while subtly questioning their relevance in a rapidly modernising world. His stories serve as a testament to the enduring power of folklore in shaping the rural psyche, offering valuable insights into the interplay between tradition and modernity in contemporary India. While this paper has explored several themes around folk culture, a more detailed examination of Renu's portrayal of women characters in his short stories remains a valuable avenue for future research. By situating Renu's work within broader scholarly dialogues on folklore and cultural studies, this paper highlighted the enduring relevance of Renu's stories in understanding the complexities of rural life in India.

Endnote

- i. Renu writes from the heart of Bihar—its soil, its language, its idiosyncrasies. He knows these people as only an *insider* can. Yet as a storyteller, he becomes the *outsider*—quiet, watching from the margins, a mere observer. His characters speak for themselves, and he simply lets them be. He hardly seems to force a dialogue, or make an authorial intervention in his stories, but registers them raw and real, unfolding naturally.

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Where is Lakhishree? In Search of the Smart and Strong Women of Bodo Folklore

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Abstract

This paper attempts to bring to light a long-lost process of “writing up” female characters from folklore. Following the ideas and methods of Barbara Babcock, this paper analyses the character of Lakhishree, a stock character of Bodo Folklore from North-East India and proves how a “revisionary enterprise” could be undertaken to alter our “economy of cultural representation.” This process can also show us the presence of a female epistemological tradition which has been pushed to the margins for so long. The paper uses the method of *femme*, a radical idea suggested by Meyer and Schapiro to draw out the character of Lakhishree in the form of a collage by attempting a close reading of Bodo folktales. The *femme* gives us two good pictures of the marginal woman from these folktales—a woman who is strong, smart, collaborative, polylogical, and often plays the role assigned to male heroes in folktales—that of the rescuer. This leads us to two conclusions. First, it shows us why and how women as “knowers” and keepers of knowledge need to be rewritten and reinterpreted (and not rescued) so that we can arrive at a female epistemological tradition. Second, it shows us how a “process centered female aesthetic” can be useful in retelling similar tales from folklore of different cultures so that we can find and celebrate other characters like Lakhishree.

Keywords: *Femme*, Gender, Knowledge, Participatory, Tradition, Writing

Who is Lakhishree?

Everyone should be looking for a person called Lakhishree. There is a good reason behind the search, and some stories. Nearly four

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decades have passed since the Journal of American Folklore Society came out with a special issue on “Folklore and Feminism” as its hundredth volume. In that issue, Barbara Babcock introduced several groundbreaking interventions and methodologies that feminist researchers in folklore could adopt to interpret, analyse and redirect the study of folklore through a paradigm of gender equality. Some of these ideas have been adopted in this paper, however, what necessitated this paper are two concerns identified by Babcock that are seemingly no longer true for both Gender Studies and Folklore Research around the globe. First, Babcock says that one of the problems in talking about folklore and feminist theory is “defining not only feminist theories, but folklore itself” (Babcock 390). This is no longer needed, for both Gender Studies and Folklore Studies have moved on since then. But, have they come together in a practically proactive manner to rewrite female stories in the Indian context? The answer to this question could be contentious. Babcock goes further to say that the feminist scholar of folklore finds herself in a “paradoxically fertile yet barren situation,” since a massive amount of folklore does deal with gender, sex and power – yet, these issues seem to be conspicuously missing from folklore studies (391). This concern has seemingly been addressed in the last four decades—but not as sufficiently as one would have wished for when it comes to folklore studies in India.

Perhaps this paper is necessitated by yet more of Babcock’s intentions from 1987 that have clearly not been as successful in Indian folkloristics as one would have hoped they would have been. Babcock had hoped that the volume on ‘Folklore and Feminism’ would be the beginning of an “important collective revisionary enterprise” (391). She hoped that the future would destabilise dominant discourses by gendering them, and that at some point there would begin a process of “writing women up and into folklore scholarship” (391). She had also hoped that the examples of the three women in folklore that she had used in her paper would show how all three had “engendered significant dislocations in the economy of cultural representations as all manifestations of female power do” (391). Sadly, none of these hopes have come to pass, especially in the Indian context. ‘Collective revisionary enterprise’ has not happened. ‘Revisionary enterprise’ of female folkloristic tradition in India is yet

to be attempted, let alone it being a 'collective.' There is a possibility that it may have been able to destabilise dominant discourses (somewhat), but clearly there have been no attempts at writing women 'up', in any capacity—either that of the storyteller, or the story, or even of major characters in popular folklore. No wonder, the economy of cultural representations in India has been as barren as it was in the early days of both Gender Studies and Folklore Studies.

This is why there is a need to search for Lakhishree. Lakhishree is a stock character in Bodo folklore. The Bodo people reside in all districts of Assam, in some districts of West Bengal; but are the prime inhabitants of the Bodoland Territorial Region of North-Eastern India. Bodo is one of the official languages of the state of Assam, and in the recent past Bodo cultural artifacts in the form of literature, dance, cinema, music and theatre (amongst others) have had a very successful upsurge. To get into the present and past context of Bodo culture and cultural artifacts is beyond the scope of this paper. Bodo folklore, like several folk traditions of North-East India, is rooted in nature and has helped shape the culture of the Bodo people. This folk tradition is most visible in Bodo music and attire, which has secured national and global fame in recent times. As for folktales, one finds the usual mix of moral tales, animal tales, tales of human-nature and human-more than human bonhomie, agricultural themes, spiritual themes, tales of heroism, and more importantly a few tales that clearly point towards empowered women who display exceptional knowledge, intelligence, and strength when faced with adversity. All references to the folktales in this paper have been taken from the text *Bodo Kachari Solo* which was published in Assamese and Bodo language in the year 1972 (Mohini Mohan Brahma). All translations in this paper were done by the author.

This brings us back to Lakhishree. As mentioned earlier, Lakhishree is a stock character in Bodo folklore. She appears in several tales in this collection, yet she is not entitled to an exclusive tale of her own. The image and character of Lakhishree has to be pieced together in the form of a collage by accomplishing a close reading of the tales that Lakhishree appears in. Most of the tales that she appears in are dedicated to male heroes or rely on male agency to exist as coherent narratives. One is unable to find a conclusive picture

of Lakhishree in any of the tales, since the conclusion of each narrative is dedicated to the male character, or to a moral lesson(s). As such, Lakhishree comes across as a fragmented character. However, one can piece together some information from each of these tales which point towards a character who is skilled in indigenous knowledge, has the acumen to do the right thing at the right time, has the competence to resolve conflicts, has the foresight to seek help from willing (often non-human) allies, and more often than not, comes to the rescue of the male hero. Lakhishree is not the “usual” stock heroine of folk and fairy tales who needs to be rescued—she can do that all by herself.

This paper, then, is (also) a conscious and intentional attempt to “write up” the character of Lakhishree, and in doing so, serve as a model for formulating a ‘collective revisionary enterprise’ that can write up similar characters from the folklore of different cultures. It attempts to deconstruct “predominantly male cultural paradigms” and reconstruct “a female perspective and experience in an effort to change the tradition that has silenced and marginalised us” (Gayle and Kahn 1-2). It is hoped that this exercise of writing up an active yet denied character will help “defy patrilinear law”, reflect how to focus one’s gaze and a new subject, listen to a new voice, and alter predominant epistemological stances to include new possibilities (Gayle and Kahn 1). The imaginary search for Lakhishree can expand to “create new expectations and encompass new experiences, and a revolution in knowledge results, necessitating shifts in authority and revisions in epistemology” (Stoeltje 143). This paper shall unearth and focus on what Lakhishree does in these tales, the actions she takes, and the knowledge she displays, since, as Catherine Clement would say it, “Reflection on feminist action, therefore, calls into question and into play the transformational powers of language, its capacity to motivate change in both ideology and economy” (Clement 131).

The *Femme* of Lakhishree

The search for Lakhishree must begin at a site which has hitherto been dismissed as trivial and has been marginalised under the facade of ‘women’s talk’. Babcock herself draws attention to these

“illegitimate genres” and “unofficial forms” as she calls for modifications in androcentric concepts and criteria, and focuses more on mediums in which women express themselves. (Babcock 395). The reason this should be undertaken, as Babcock conceptualises it, is because the act of ‘writing up’ a female character, or rewriting her, or reinterpreting her would be meaningless “unless it is accompanied by a revision of our interpretive practices of the structure of dominant discourse in the direction of openness and plurality” (395). At any rate, there is now a growing consensus that feminist analytical categories should be “unstable” as suggested by Sandra Harding (“Introduction” 649). Babcock lends further support to this possibility and suggests that since the ways and means of hitherto undertaken research in folklore may no longer be suitable, one may as well strip them of their authority, and end up “doing something seriously playful regarding, and thereby re-dress(ing) ourselves” (Babcock 395). This creates space for one to move away from the traditional dependence on tales of male heroism (which are in abundance in all folklore traditions) and move closer to “nonlegitimate forms, even though they are as ordered and as rule-governed as the male forms” in the guise of ‘gossip’ or ‘clothline’ (Farrer xiv).

Hence, if Lakhishree is talking to a bird, or an animal and getting the news of her husband in trouble in a land far away—it is supposed to be an analytical signpost. Similarly, if she is seen giving an animal a strand of her hair with clear instructions as to the charm that shall revive her husband—that too is an analytical signpost. The fact that these two examples appear in two different stories give support to the method of creating a *collage* of Lakhishree. Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer have provided a suitable tool to analyse such instances of female agency. In the aptly titled essay “Waste not Want not: An inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled” (1978), they coin the term *femmage*. A *femmage* is a compound term that subsumes the various meaning of the word “collage (in its standard and associated definitions and usages with words, paintings, photographs, glue, gum, sticking, scrapbook), assemblage (in its standard meaning of collection, combination of art forms, attitudes, ideas, *Découpage* (cutting of pictures and redecorating with cutouts), and photo montage (making of a composite picture by combining

different photographs together)” (Schapiro and Meyer 66). Though Schapiro and Meyer primarily apply their new term in association with female art creators, the concept of *femmage* can also be applied to female characters in folktales.

Babcock thinks of this model of *femmage* as being multivocal, polylogical, collaborative, piercing discourse, a unity of multiplicities, and a continuity of discontinuities. Lakhishree of Bodo folklore is to be found in all these categories, and perhaps more. Two arguments will be presented in the following paragraphs that corroborate this hypothesis. First, consider the story of *Gombira Bir* (Gombira, the Great). This, of course, is the story of the heroics of a male character. It begins in the usual way; of a son being born to ageing parents, but destined to go on a journey, undertake adventurous tasks, get into combat with demons, marry the fair maiden(s), and finally live happily ever after, having achieved greatness. But not everything is as crystal clear as it appears. There are ruptures in the story—in both the true and theoretical sense of the word. After a closer look, a reader can conclude that this is probably not the story of Gombira the Great after all. It is the story of the ten women he marries in the course of his journey, and more so, of the first woman he marries—Lakhishree. If at all this is the tale of Gombira the Great, it is a tale of great and unchecked promiscuity. But writing up a character does not necessarily mean writing down another. When Gombira visits Fulmuthi, the third woman after marrying Lakhishree (fourth overall), he gets into a terrible fight with an undying demon. Unable to defeat him, Gombira writes to Lakhishree, seeking help. Lakhishree takes a strand from her hair and the help of the Bird-King to subdue the demon. When Gombira visits Makhushree, the fifth woman overall, he loses his life at the hands of a trap at the gates of Makhushree’s house. The Bird-King sends word to Lakhishree. And now, Lakhishree takes the help of another knowledgeable king, who takes a *liegang* leaf and revives Gombira the Great. Gombira then proceeds to fight Makhushree (who fights back) and subdues and marries her.

One would think that would do it. But no, that is not to be. Gombira the Great proceeds to meet the seventh woman, Uwashree. He kills Uwashree’s livestock and gets into a terrible fight with the

woman – a fight terrible enough for Uwashree to kill him. The Bird-King again sends word to Lakhishree, who seeks the help of the Tia-King again – who revives Gombira the Great. The Great hero then proceeds to get into another fight with Uwashree, this time subduing her and then an evil sorcerer (interestingly, the gender of the evil sorcerer is not specified in the tale) turns Uwashree into a goat. The Bird-King informs Lakhishree again. Lakhishree comes to the rescue and with the help of her gold ring and some charms, manages to subdue the power of the sorcerer and rescues Uwashree. Gombira the Great, manages to marry two more women, in the meanwhile. Interestingly, it happens twice that another demon and a group of young men attempt to ‘steal’ the several wives of Gombira the Great and the husband and the wives fight together to save themselves. And yes, Gombira the Great manages to marry one more woman before coming back home to Lakhishree.

Second, relates to the *Tale of the Stork-King*. This is a tale, unlike what the title suggests, of the heroic struggles of an orphan boy, Maura, who fights his fate and marries the daughter of the Stork-King, after going through the rigmarole of the usual adventures. His primary adversary is his father-in-law—the Stork-King. Maura and the Stork-King have already fought two rounds of the battle—both of which the Stork-King lost, before Lakhishree makes her entry. From there on, there is another rupture, just like the previous tale—though Maura is not as promiscuous as Gombira the ‘not so’ Great. Even before the first fight between Maura and the Stork-King, Lakhishree advises her father not to antagonise Maura. She attempts to resolve a conflict even before there is one. But of course, without a fight, there can be no display of heroism. Lakhishree is pawned into marriage to Maura after the Stork-King loses the second fight. The Stork-King, however, cannot forget his humiliation and comes after his son-in-law. Maura is now advised by Lakhishree, who has knowledge of her father’s tricks and Maura is smart enough to listen to his wife, and escapes the onslaught. Soon after the first attack post marriage, the second attack comes in the form of the mother of the Stork-King, who drugs her grandson-son-law and kidnaps Lakhishree. A thing to note here is the trope of the ‘evil old woman’ or the ‘ugly old evil witch’, a common trope that has vilified female characters in the system and tradition of biased representation, who appears only for a moment in

the tale. This provides the scope to focus more on positive characters rather than continue to produce academic ‘material’ on evil female characters, as has happened hitherto.

In captivity now, Lakhishree is about to be married to another man, but Lakhishree displays her intelligence and manages to re-marry Maura, who is disguised as a leper. Soon through, Maura is tricked to madness and Lakhishree has to use her skills to turn Maura back to sanity. She then goes away to dance, and sensing her absence, the Stork-King uses another charm to turn Maura into a monkey. Lakhishree returns and using her skills turns her husband back to a man. The grandmother proceeds to bury Maura alive in a pit, a scene witnessed by a dog who promptly informs Lakhishree. Lakhishree has to rescue her husband again, only to find out that Maura has died in the meantime. Instead of being distraught, Lakhishree seeks the help of birds and animals to revive her husband. Troubles are not over for Maura though. The Stork-King now proceeds to burn Maura alive. Distraught yet brave, a crying Lakhishree seeks help from the Tia-King, who uses a *laigang* leaf and revives Maura. Eventually, the Stork-King realises that as long as Maura has the protection and shadow of Lakhishree over him, this cycle of violence, death and revival would continue. He decides to bury the hatchet once and for all and the story ends with bonhomie and togetherness.

Several other stories in the collection can be read in a similar light without much effort to understand where the rupture lies, but for the sake of this paper, the discussion will be limited to the two tales cited above. There are several things to note in the previous paragraphs. Strength, smartness, presence of mind, and perseverance of the fragmented female character need not be discussed—they are obviously vested in the character. Nevertheless, the women in these tales display characteristics that have been denied in conventional retelling or analysis of such tales. Conventional tales would have had the heroine pray for years and undergo penance of the highest order, displaying perseverance yet subjugation, in order to revive the husbands. Lakhishree has intelligence—she uses knowledge to do what she does. She does not hesitate to call for help, when calling for help would be the smartest thing to do. She communicates across species to get to her goals, which would have been the fastest thing

to do. Instead of displaying the lone, denied woman, she teams up with other women to defend what is theirs. Her knowledge of indigenous plants and practices is exceptional. She is not content and confined with having and remembering that knowledge alone, she utilises that knowledge when the time comes. She has a little bit of magic in her, and unlike the association of magic and sorcery with female characters in the guise of the 'evil witch' trope, she uses the same magic for good.

These points are exemplary, and pointing them out is but scratching the surface. In the model that Babcock suggests, the *femme* of Lakhishree can take a concrete shape in the concept of the collage. Lakhishree is multivocal—she speaks; others listen. She is polylogical—she does not have to depend on 'conventional' rationality; her indigenous rationality is enough. She is collaborative—she expands the horizons of inter-species communication and collaboration. Her discourse can be pieced together, bit by larger bit—only two tales provide enough information to be confidently argumentative. Hers is a story of continuity and discontinuity—the very act of attempting this *femme* which has given a workable collage of an empowered female character should inform that there is more to the story that awaits 'writing up', and analysis. There is a multiplicity to her character—she steps out with different characteristics in different situations. In short, she completes the *femme*.

Of the Many Lakhishrees

What this investigation, *femme*, rereading, rewriting and 'writing up' proves, is perhaps more important than Lakhishree herself. The first concluding remark concerns the concept of who is a 'knower', what must a person undergo in order to be considered as a 'knower', and what position does that person attain in social and cultural systems after that person has been designated as a 'knower'. As the analysis above would suggest, one female character from one folk tradition of India can easily attain this 'status' of being a knower (and a 'doer'—as Lakhishree proves). Interestingly, unlike the stock male characters of folk traditions, she does not have to undergo long journeys, epiphanic experiences, long penance, or the intervention of

knowledgeable saints to qualify as a 'knower'. She appears to be 'inherently' knowledgeable—she does not need to undergo much to seek knowledge, though she has to undergo much to apply that knowledge. As for the question of what position that female 'knower' attains in our social and cultural systems—one can only speculate about what it must have been like in antiquity. For most of our contemporary times, there is a better answer—that female 'knower' has been pushed out of the margins (and academic discourse), and someone has to make a deliberate attempt to write up that 'knower'. Sandra Harding has the following to say about this kind of an epistemological matrix:

Feminists have argued that traditional epistemologies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically exclude the possibility that women could be "knowers" or agents of knowledge; . . . They have proposed alternative theories of knowledge that legitimate women as knowers. ("Introduction" 3)

The search for Lakhishree and the arguments presented above has been an exercise to that end, proving that alternate methods of analysing discourse can legitimise women as knowers in the fields that have hitherto denied them. Writing up Lakhishree is also writing up a 'knower', and such examples are abundant in the Indian oral and written heritage. This seems to confirm the weaving metaphor of the feminist practice of writing that Helen Cixous thought would always "surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system". Such a feminist tradition, Cixous would have us believe:

...does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Cixous 883)

This is one good reason why everyone should be looking for (a) Lakhishree. One must just be proactive enough to undertake similar revisionary enterprises—collectively or otherwise. Only then can we create spaces in the economy of cultural representation.

Second, it is evident that the image of Lakhishree presented in this paper is far from being clear. That was neither the intention of this paper, nor is it possible to attain a mathematically accurate picture of anyone. The best one can hope for is a collage, hence, the emphasis on the *femme* of Lakhishree. This is what Barbara Babcock meant when she proposed the concept of a “process-centered female aesthetic” (Babcock 392). In this concept, the process of undertaking a task is far more important than the finished “product” itself (392). This also requires that the reader of this paper too indulges in a similar task in a different context, and from different folklore (or any narrative for that matter). To conclude, this is a participatory exercise, if not all collective. One simple suggestion would be to attempt a close reading of popular and local tales to find similar or related characters, and examine how these characters and stories suggest an alternate paradigm that hints at empowered (and empowering) female characters and stories that may have been pushed to the margins. One is sure to find many Lakhishrees.

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Thongchi: The Literary Voice of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Litterateur Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi stands as one of the most significant literary voices emerging from Arunachal Pradesh, a state often underrepresented in mainstream Indian literary discourse. Through his prolific body of work in Assamese, Thongchi transcends linguistic boundaries to bring the unique cultural, historical, and social dimensions of Arunachal Pradesh to a broader audience. This paper examines Thongchi's contributions, focusing on his narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and his role in shaping an identity for Arunachal Pradesh within Indian literature. The analysis is structured into two main sections: first, an exploration of Thongchi's thematic engagement with the culture and socio-political challenges of Arunachal Pradesh, and second, a critical appraisal of his literary techniques and their relevance in a multicultural literary framework.

Keywords: Environmental Consciousness, Indian Literature, Socio-Political Challenges, Tribal Identity

Introduction

In the vast and polyphonic landscape of Indian literature, the Northeast has often existed not as a vibrant centre of creative expression, but as a contested and marginal periphery—visible only through mediated lenses, if at all. Indian literary discourse, largely dominated by Anglophone and mainland-centric voices, has seldom engaged deeply with the intricate cultural and linguistic complexities of the region. As a result, much of the literature emerging from the states of Northeast India has remained underrepresented, both in critical academic discussions and in national literary canons. Against this backdrop, the literary oeuvre of Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi emerges

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as both subversive and redemptive. Writing primarily in Assamese—a language not native to his Monpa heritage—Thongchi asserts a literary agency that defies both geographical marginalisation and linguistic essentialism. His narratives traverse the political and cultural terrains of Arunachal Pradesh, mapping the invisible histories, unvoiced emotions, and fragile ecologies that define the region.

A Sahitya Akademi awardee and a retired IAS officer, Thongchi occupies a unique position in Indian letters. His dual identity as a state functionary and literary artist allows him to navigate the fault-lines of power and representation with rare clarity. Rather than simply portraying tribal life through an anthropological gaze or a nostalgic lens, Thongchi's fiction interrogates dominant epistemologies that define tribal communities in reductive or romanticised terms. He complicates the binaries of civilised/primitive, modern/traditional, and centre/periphery, not through polemic but through textured narrative inquiry. His characters, often caught in liminal spaces, embody the ethical contradictions and emotional burdens of a world negotiating rapid cultural transformation. These are not passive victims of development or exotic cultural types; they are morally complex individuals whose lives reflect the silent yet profound negotiations between identity and survival.

Thongchi's fiction, particularly in works such as *Makam*, *Sesh Chithi*, and *Mon Aru Mon*, functions as an alternative historiography—one that foregrounds subaltern perspectives in a narrative tradition long dominated by elite and metropolitan voices. Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of "provincializing Europe" is instructive here. In his foundational text, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Chakrabarty argues for the need to decentre European historical categories and recover indigenous ways of knowing and remembering (Chakrabarty 15). Thongchi's writing aligns with this impulse. His narratives do not merely represent Arunachal Pradesh as a geographical entity but rather as a cultural cosmos governed by its own moral, ecological, and metaphysical logics. In doing so, he contributes to what might be termed the "provincialization" of Indian literature itself—

challenging the hegemony of Delhi-centric or metropolitan literary standards by restoring narrative agency to communities historically rendered voiceless.

A defining feature of Thongchi's work is his deep engagement with tribal identity—not as an exotic trope but as a lived, ethical framework. His protagonists often struggle with inherited values amid the encroachment of modern state mechanisms. In *Sesh Upahar*, for example, the tension between bureaucratic rationalism and tribal cosmology is explored with quiet intensity (*Sesh Upahar* 88–106). Here, identity is not static but relational, shaped by evolving encounters between cultural memory and contemporary exigency. Nilakshi Phukan has rightly observed that Thongchi's fiction “bridges the gap between oral memory and written narration, thereby producing a literature that is both deeply personal and culturally resonant” (121). This dual function of his writing—as both testimonial and aesthetic—renders it especially potent in contesting the epistemic violence inflicted upon tribal communities by both colonial and postcolonial narratives.

Thongchi's treatment of the natural world further complicates his literary vision. Unlike many contemporary Indian writers who treat nature as a passive backdrop or symbolic device, Thongchi foregrounds ecology as a protagonist in its own right. His stories often unfold in intimate dialogue with rivers, forests, and mountains, imbuing the landscape with moral agency. In *Mon Aru Mon*, the desecration of a sacred forest for infrastructural development becomes a metaphor for the spiritual erosion of tribal life (*Mon Aru Mon* 137). Arupjyoti Saikia's observations on the ecological history of Assam lends credence to this view; Saikia notes that indigenous perceptions of nature, embedded in ritual and oral tradition, offer a counterpoint to exploitative developmental paradigms (Saikia 47). Thongchi's narratives, thus, function not only as cultural texts but as environmental documents, mapping the ethical interdependence between humans and their ecological milieu.

The political valence of Thongchi's work becomes especially evident in his historical fiction. In *Makam*, the protagonist Mei Lin's traumatic search for her ancestral roots becomes a vehicle for

critiquing both ethnic nationalism and the erasure of minority histories. Set against the backdrop of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, the novel exposes the legal and emotional violence inflicted on people of Chinese ancestry in Assam (*Makam* 173–204). Ananya Guha’s reading of Thongchi is particularly pertinent here: “Thongchi does not seek to indict or exonerate; instead, he excavates the moral ambiguities that history leaves behind” (84). This refusal to simplify or essentialise historical experience gives his work a rare ethical depth, positioning him alongside postcolonial writers like Amitav Ghosh, whose *The Great Derangement* laments literature’s failure to respond meaningfully to both historical and ecological crises (Ghosh 30).

One of the most compelling aspects of Thongchi’s narrative strategy lies in his linguistic choices. Writing in Assamese with interspersing Monpa and Sherdukpen expressions, he disrupts the conventional boundaries of linguistic nationalism. His texts are polyglot spaces, echoing Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “heteroglossia”—a multiplicity of voices and registers that resist narrative closure (Bakhtin 272). In *Tarpan*, the protagonist’s internal monologue is intercut with fragments of local lore and Buddhist parables, creating a tapestry of temporal and linguistic layers (53–102). These techniques are not mere stylistic flourishes; they are political acts that assert the legitimacy of minority cultures within the broader Indian narrative imagination.

The present study locates its research angle at the confluence of literary representation, cultural politics, and ethical inquiry. It reads Thongchi not simply as a chronicler of tribal life but as a cartographer of marginalised epistemologies—those modes of knowing and being that have been historically silenced or sidelined in dominant literary and political discourses. By foregrounding the intersection of ecological consciousness, subaltern historiography, and linguistic hybridity, this paper argues that Thongchi’s fiction constitutes a vital counter-archive—a repository of cultural memory and moral imagination that demands critical engagement. In doing so, it places him within a lineage of writers who are not content to reflect reality, but seek to reshape it through the ethical force of narrative.

Cultural Cartography and Tribal Identity

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's literary oeuvre constitutes a profoundly ethical and epistemic engagement with tribal life in Arunachal Pradesh, a region historically misrepresented or marginalised in mainstream Indian narratives. In presenting the lived experiences of communities such as the Monpa, Sherdukpen, and other indigenous groups, Thongchi's fiction does not merely document cultural life—it interrogates the very frameworks through which tribal identities are understood, contested, and reshaped. His commitment to portraying these identities is neither ornamental nor nostalgic. Instead, it emerges from a deep-seated ethical obligation to reclaim narrative sovereignty for people whose lives have long been rendered through the distortive lenses of exoticism and administrative indifference.

In *Sesh Upahar* (The Last Gift), this tension is rendered with subtle emotional depth. The protagonist is ensnared in a moral conflict that lays bare the dissonance between ancestral honour and the impositions of modern ethical codes. His struggle is not simply psychological but cultural, revealing the cost of translation between systems of value (*Sesh Upahar* 88). Here, tribal identity becomes a site of ethical negotiation rather than a static label. The characters' dilemma epitomises the cultural trauma experienced by indigenous individuals who must navigate the often-incompatible imperatives of tradition and modernity.

Equally significant is *Makam*, which shifts the axis of identity to a more contested terrain: the lives of Chinese-Assamese people who found themselves displaced and dehumanised during the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Through the character of Mei Lin, Thongchi explores the idea of homeland as both geographical and affective—a place that promises belonging but enforces exclusion through state mechanisms and nationalist ideologies (*Makam* 204). In evoking Mei Lin's alienation, the novel offers a scathing critique of ethnonationalism, unmasking how identity is both constructed and dismantled through political violence.

Nilakshi Phukan's observation that "Thongchi's work is a repository of lived tribal memory rendered in a literary idiom that

bridges orality and modern narration” (Phukan 121) finds profound resonance in *Sesh Chithi* (The Last Letter). This text adopts an epistolary form to bring the interiority of tribal existence into focus, blending oral memory with the structural precision of modern literary narration (*Sesh Chithi* 44–45). Each letter acts as a mnemonic device, reclaiming forgotten or suppressed cultural memories. The juxtaposition of intimate self-expression with communal concerns imbues the text with a moral charge. Through this structure, Thongchi challenges the linearity of colonial historiography, offering instead a palimpsestic narrative that defies closure.

Importantly, Thongchi does not romanticise tribal life. He resists the literary tendency to aestheticise indigeneity as either utopian or primitive. In *Tarpan*, for instance, a Buddhist monk is depicted in crisis, caught between the austerity of his spiritual calling and the cultural obligations of his tribe (102). The character’s disorientation captures the fractures within the self when faced with conflicting loyalties—to *dharma* and to kinship, to renunciation and to remembrance. This spiritual-ethical conflict functions as a metaphor for the broader dilemmas faced by Northeast tribal communities in a postcolonial nation-state. Rather than offering resolution, Thongchi allows for ambiguity—a space where readers must reckon with complexity rather than consume it as spectacle.

His work, thus, participates in a broader postcolonial endeavour to recover and articulate indigenous ‘modes of knowing’. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* is instructive here. Chakrabarty argues for a decolonisation of thought by foregrounding histories that fall outside European epistemological frameworks (15). Thongchi’s narratives, by placing tribal identity not on the margins but at the centre, enact precisely such an epistemic intervention. They offer a counter-discourse to the colonial archive, situating tribal knowledge systems as valid, complex, and narratively potent.

Nature and Environmental Consciousness

Thongchi’s fiction is deeply ecological, suffused with a reverence for nature that transcends environmentalist rhetoric and enters the realm of spiritual and ethical thought. His representation of

the natural world is not merely descriptive or symbolic; it is ontological. Nature, in his narratives, is not a passive backdrop but an active moral agent—a participant in the drama of human existence.

In *Karna*, the protagonist's journey from vengeance to self-realisation is catalysed by his immersion in nature. His encounters with forests, rivers, and mountains are not decorative interludes but moments of profound ethical transformation (*Karna* 77). The landscape speaks to him, corrects him, and finally redeems him. This metaphysical view of nature—wherein the environment is not external but intrinsic to human consciousness—echoes indigenous cosmologies that reject Cartesian dualism.

Arupjyoti Saikia has noted that Thongchi's prose "reverberates with a tactile intimacy with nature" (47). This intimacy is evident in *Mon Aru Mon*, where the destruction of a sacred forest to make way for a hydroelectric project triggers not only ecological but social catastrophe (137). The forest is portrayed not as mere real estate but as a sacred entity enmeshed in the spiritual lives of the tribal community. Its loss is felt as a moral desecration, a rupture in the fabric of life.

Thongchi's environmental ethic is also deeply influenced by Buddhist cosmology. In *Tarpan*, karma is extended to include one's relationship with animals and the natural world. The killing of a bird or the felling of a tree becomes an act laden with spiritual consequence (*Tarpan* 53). Such a worldview refuses the instrumentalisation of nature and instead envisions ecological relationships as moral obligations.

This spiritual ecology stands in stark contrast to technocratic environmentalism, which measures value in terms of utility and profit. In rejecting such paradigms, Thongchi aligns with Amitav Ghosh's critique in *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh laments literature's failure to imagine the scale and moral weight of ecological crisis (Ghosh 30). Thongchi, however, succeeds where others fail. He renders nature not as metaphor but as subject—alive, wounded, responsive. His narratives also embody what might be

called an “eco-subaltern” perspective, where the voices of both marginalised communities and endangered ecosystems are intertwined. In doing so, he challenges anthropocentric models of storytelling, advocating instead for a form of narrative kinship where the fate of the land and the fate of its people are inseparable.

Socio-political Struggles and Historical Silences

Thongchi’s fiction is underpinned by a sophisticated political consciousness, shaped in part by his long career in the Indian Administrative Service. This background enables him to dissect the machinery of governance with insider clarity, revealing how bureaucratic systems perpetuate marginalisation through indifference, inertia, and ideology.

In *Makam*, the trauma of the protagonist’s family, who are arbitrarily declared enemies during the Sino-Indian war and deported despite their deep-rooted ties to Assam, becomes a searing indictment of state violence (*Makam* 173–74). The narrative lays bare the fragility of citizenship and the ease with which national belonging can be revoked through bureaucratic decree. Thongchi exposes the structural violence embedded in laws, classifications, and political paranoia.

In *Sesh Chithi*, the deterioration of a civil servant’s mental and moral faculties illustrates how institutions can erode individual ethics. His descent into despair is contrasted with the wisdom of tribal elders who counsel him on the values of harmony, honesty, and communal responsibility (*Sesh Chithi* 59–60). This contrast serves as a scathing critique of modern rationality and its ethical vacuity.

Thongchi’s work also reflects the subaltern historiographical movement championed by Ranajit Guha, which seeks to recover the perspectives of those erased from official records. His novels function as counter-archives, offering stories that restore dignity to marginalised lives. By narrating histories from below, he disrupts the dominant historical narratives that render tribal communities as passive subjects of change rather than active agents.

Moreover, his fiction can be read as an exercise in what Chakrabarty calls “history as heterotemporality”—a coexistence of multiple temporalities within a single cultural space. His characters often straddle the time of the state and the time of the tribe, embodying a disjuncture that is both painful and politically potent.

In sum, Thongchi’s socio-political critique is not polemical but literary. He crafts stories that are attentive to the nuances of power—its operations, its failures, and its ethical demands. His fiction is an act of political remembrance, an insistence that no community should be left outside the moral imagination of the nation.

Language, Form, and Literary Innovation

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi’s literary innovation is perhaps most evident in his deft manipulation of language and form—an aspect of his work that is as political as it is aesthetic. Writing primarily in Assamese, despite being ethnically Monpa, Thongchi’s linguistic choice serves as a dual strategy. On one hand, it opens his work to a broader readership within Assam and the Northeast; on the other, it subverts hegemonic notions of linguistic purity and cultural fixity by unsettling the presumed congruence between ethnic identity and language. His insertion of Monpa, Sherdukpen, and other indigenous terms—often left untranslated—marks an assertion of linguistic sovereignty within the dominant language, demanding recognition of marginal idioms and cultural epistemologies within mainstream literary discourse.

In *Mon Aru Mon*, this multilingual layering is particularly striking. Traditional chants and invocations are presented in their original form, resisting the conventional editorial impulse to translate or domesticate cultural specificity for non-tribal readers (61). Such moments signal a refusal to dilute cultural authenticity for literary marketability. The untranslated segments function as narrative thresholds—sites where cultural alterity is neither explained nor reduced but acknowledged and respected.

Thongchi’s engagement with form is equally complex. His novels employ a wide array of narrative structures, from epistolary

formats and embedded folktales to circular temporality and nonlinear sequencing. This is not merely an aesthetic choice but a narrative strategy that reflects the rhythm and structure of oral storytelling traditions. In *Sesh Upahar*, the non-linear flow of events mimics the cyclical, repetitive cadence of ritual speech—a method of narration that mirrors the performative and mnemonic qualities of oral lore (104–106).

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding Thongchi's narrative style. Bakhtin argues that the novel as a form is inherently dialogic, composed of multiple voices and perspectives that coexist without hierarchy (272). Thongchi's fiction embodies this principle not only through its polyphonic structure but also through its ethical commitment to narrative plurality. In his works, there is no single authoritative voice; instead, the narrative emerges through the interaction of diverse cultural registers—official speech, ritual language, folk memory, bureaucratic jargon, and personal confession.

Ananya Guha rightly notes, "Thongchi's greatest strength lies in his ability to render the particular as universal, without exoticising or sentimentalising tribal life" (84). This balance is maintained through his narrative positioning. His narrators are rarely omniscient; they are situated within the communities they describe, shaped by the moral fabric and collective ethos of those around them. This embedded narrative voice lends his work an ethical intimacy, allowing the reader to inhabit rather than merely observe the cultural world of the story. Moreover, Thongchi often destabilises conventional narrative expectations by eschewing resolution. His stories frequently end in ambiguity or silence—an acknowledgment of the unresolved tensions that define postcolonial tribal existence. This refusal to offer narrative closure is itself a political gesture, challenging the reader to dwell in discomfort rather than consume the story as a neatly packaged moral lesson. His works also demonstrate a commitment to what might be called "indigenous realism"—a mode of writing that fuses the particularities of tribal life with the formal conventions of the novel, producing a genre that is at once local and cosmopolitan. Thongchi's innovation lies in his ability to indigenise the novel form

without sacrificing its complexity or its critical function. His fiction, thus, resists the binarism of tradition versus modernity, instead articulating a narrative space where both cohabit, negotiate, and reconfigure one another.

In the broader landscape of Indian literature, Thongchi's formal experimentation challenges the assumption that literary modernism is the sole domain of urban, Anglophone writers. His texts are modernist not in imitation of Western paradigms but in their rootedness, their refusal to flatten lived experience, and their embrace of fragmentation, uncertainty, and polyvocality. Through his linguistic choices and structural innovations, Thongchi expands the horizon of what the Indian novel can be—both in content and in form.

Thongchi's Literary Legacy

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's literary oeuvre resists reduction. It occupies the confluence of narrative art, ethical inquiry, political critique, and cultural remembrance. His novels and stories do not merely reflect the realities of Arunachal Pradesh but actively reconfigure the frameworks through which those realities are understood. To read Thongchi is not to passively consume a regional narrative but to be inducted into a different epistemology—one that privileges community over individualism, memory over monument, and ambiguity over closure.

Thongchi's commitment to rendering tribal life with dignity, complexity, and internal coherence situates him as a vital counter-voice within Indian literature. In a nation-state where peripheral regions are often subsumed into singular narratives of progress or security, his fiction decentralises literary attention and insists on the validity of indigenous experiences. His characters and contexts illuminate the margins as active and autonomous contributors to the national imagination, rather than silent recipients of history. In this way, Thongchi's work resonates with Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of the "politics of translation," wherein local epistemologies are not assimilated into dominant discourses but placed alongside them in meaningful, dialogic tension (Chakrabarty 15). In *Makam*, Thongchi bears witness to the historical erasure of Chinese-Assamese

communities who were marked as ‘others’ despite generations of rootedness. Their dislocation is not simply geographic, but existential. The protagonist’s fractured belonging becomes a metonym for the broader marginalisation of Northeast identities in the Indian nation-state. Likewise, in *Sesh Chithi* and *Sesh Upahar*, he stages the moral disintegration of state officials whose internal crises expose the limits of bureaucratic rationality. These stories are not indictments alone; they are introspections—of what happens when ethical knowledge systems rooted in tribal wisdom are severed from governance.

Mon Aru Mon and *Tarpan* take these engagements further, plumbing the metaphysical and ecological consequences of unchecked modernisation. Here, Thongchi is less interested in dramatising resistance than in revealing the spiritual and communal dislocations wrought by development projects that ignore the sacred geographies of indigenous people. The destroyed forest in *Mon Aru Mon* and the karmic cycle disrupted in *Tarpan* are symbolic of a broader civilisational rupture. Through these narratives, Thongchi articulates an indigenous ecological consciousness that is not merely protective of nature but deeply entwined with the spiritual order of existence. What binds these works is not a nostalgic longing for a romanticised past, but a deep sense of accountability. Thongchi’s fiction does not propose a return to some prelapsarian tribal utopia. Instead, it compels readers to acknowledge and engage with the historical violence and epistemic neglect that have silenced entire communities. In this regard, his work aligns with what literary theorists have called “narrative justice”—the idea that literature can redress historical erasures not through polemic, but through empathetic storytelling that reclaims agency for the marginalised.

This narrative justice is achieved through a language and form that refuse conformity. Thongchi’s stylistic innovations—his use of untranslated indigenous terms, his embrace of orality, his non-linear storytelling—are not aesthetic embellishments but epistemic declarations. They remind readers that tribal knowledge cannot be fully captured in the languages and grammars of modernity. In choosing to write in Assamese while retaining linguistic traces of Monpa, Sherdukpen, and other tribal idioms, Thongchi enacts a

layered multilingualism that resists cultural homogenisation. His fiction is therefore not simply about tribes; it is tribally authored in its very structure and form. Such formal radicalism also speaks back to the politics of representation. By embedding multiple temporalities and polyphonic voices in his narratives, Thongchi challenges the literary monoculture of mainstream Indian fiction. He does not aspire to be included within the existing canon; rather, he seeks to redefine what the canon itself should encompass. The centre, in his fiction, is not Delhi or Kolkata—it is the village elder, the sacred forest, the karmic cycle, and the forgotten exile. In this decentralised literary geography, the margins become sites of cultural production and moral vision. His fiction further challenges the prevailing notions of heroism and progress. His protagonists are rarely triumphant in the conventional sense. They are instead caught in dilemmas, forced to navigate moral landscapes shaped by history, belief, and ecological disruption. Their strength lies not in conquest but in endurance, reflection, and the quiet assertion of dignity. In an age of literary spectacle, Thongchi's insistence on the ordinary and the ethical is a powerful form of resistance.

In essence, his literature performs a double task—it archives and it anticipates. It preserves endangered cultural memories and oral traditions, even as it projects a future where these traditions are integral to the making of Indian modernity. Thongchi's works are not artefacts of a dying culture; they are blueprints for a more inclusive, ethical, and polyphonic national literature. His contribution must, therefore, be seen as both regional and transregional. While deeply embedded in the socio-cultural milieu of Arunachal Pradesh, his themes resonate far beyond. Environmental degradation, bureaucratic dehumanisation, the fragility of citizenship, and the politics of language are national and global concerns. Thongchi's genius lies in making these themes legible through the lives of characters who might otherwise remain invisible. He renders the particular universal, not by flattening difference, but by insisting on its ethical and narrative value.

Ultimately, Thongchi's literature urges us to reimagine the role of fiction in society—not merely as entertainment or instruction, but as a form of moral reckoning. It reminds us that to tell a story is also

to stake a claim: on memory, on identity, and on justice. In a nation grappling with competing versions of itself, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi offers a literature that listens—to the land, to the people, and to the silences between them.. It occupies the confluence of narrative art, ethical inquiry, political critique, and cultural remembrance. His novels and stories do not merely reflect the realities of Arunachal Pradesh but actively reconfigure the frameworks through which those realities are understood. To read Thongchi is not to passively consume a regional narrative but to be inducted into a different epistemology—one that privileges community over individualism, memory over monument, and ambiguity over closure.

Conclusion

Thongchi's commitment to rendering tribal life with dignity, complexity, and internal coherence situates him as a vital counter-voice within Indian literature. In a nation-state where peripheral regions are often subsumed into singular narratives of progress or security, his fiction decentralises literary attention and insists on the validity of indigenous experiences. His works—spanning genres, languages, and traditions—offer what Dipesh Chakrabarty describes as “politics of translation,” wherein local epistemologies are not assimilated into dominant discourses but placed alongside them in meaningful tension (Chakrabarty 15). In *Makam*, Thongchi bears witness to the historical erasure of Chinese-Assamese communities. In *Sesh Chithi* and *Sesh Upahar*, he stages the moral crises of individuals caught between tribal wisdom and state bureaucracy. In *Mon Aru Mon* and *Tarpan*, he meditates on the ecological devastation wrought by development and spiritual disconnection. Across these texts, the recurring theme is not nostalgia but accountability—not a longing for a lost past but a reckoning with what has been silenced, excluded, or deformed.

His contribution is especially vital in an age of increasing homogenisation—whether linguistic, cultural, or political. Thongchi's fiction offers an ethical compass, reminding readers that literature must not only entertain or inform but also bear witness. His characters are seldom heroes in the conventional sense; they are instead ethical subjects whose actions ripple across community,

ecology, and history. In this, his fiction aligns with the idea of “narrative justice”—where the act of telling becomes an act of restitution, a means of re-inscribing dignity into lives that official records have failed to recognise. Thongchi’s stylistic innovations—his use of untranslated indigenous terms, his embrace of orality, his defiance of linear narrative—are not merely formal choices. They are acts of cultural assertion. His texts are constructed not simply in Assamese but across a spectrum of languages, silences, and echoes that challenge monolingual nationalism and reaffirm India’s polyphonic literary landscape. In doing so, he does not seek the approval of the literary centre. Rather, he redefines the centre itself, demanding that it accommodate the moral and aesthetic gravity of the margins.

In the final analysis, Thongchi’s literature performs a double task: it archives and it anticipates. It preserves a rich tapestry of tribal life, memory, and landscape even as it gestures towards a future in which these narratives are no longer peripheral but central to the making of Indian modernity. His works remind us that literature, when rooted in moral courage and cultural fidelity, can serve as both a sanctuary and a provocation—a place where forgotten histories are not only remembered but reimaged.

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Genderqueer Identity and Role Reversal of Masculinity and Femininity in the Select Rabha Folktales as Featured in *Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India* by Kaustav Chakraborty

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Abstract

This study seeks to provide a critical analysis of the themes of genderqueer identity and role reversing of femininity and masculinity in select Rabha folktales, as discussed in the work, *Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India* by Kaustav Chakraborty. Genderqueer is a term used to refer to individuals who do not belong to the binary categorisation of gender, such as male or female. They are individuals who violate gender norms, expectations, and stereotypes, moving between genders, who are neither man nor woman, or those who do not want to place themselves within a specific gender, thus blurring the lines between gender identity and sexual orientation. Using a queer theoretical lens, this study explores how the narratives mentioned in the selected folktales question gender norms and sexuality, focusing on the idea of fluidity of gender and the presence of multiple identities provided by different theorists. This paper seeks to explore how the “male female” and “female male” characters in the stories disrupt the idea regarding femininity and masculinity, and analysing these narratives from a queer perspective emphasises the presence of multiple identities within these folktale narratives.

Keywords: Femininity, Fluidity, Genderqueer, Gender Identity, Kaustav Chakraborty, Masculinity.

Introduction

According to Judith Butler, gender is not an inherent trait but rather “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that

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congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 43). Christina Richards, in her book *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, states that, “genderqueer refers to individuals who challenge the socially constructed binary understanding of gender, presenting a non-binary identity that does not strictly conform to male or female roles” (121). According to Riki Wilchins, genderqueer represents “a refusal to be categorized by the traditional gender norms of male and female, embodying a fluidity in gender expression and identity” (38). This paper examines seven folktales - *The Helpless Kartika*, *The Love Story of Seuji*, *The Lazy Gallant*, *Saving the Man*, *Creation of Liquor*, *Mothers and Daughters*, and *The Manly Woman* from *Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India* that disrupt the notion of gender roles and sexual norms. The narratives in these folktales reflect how the characters question the heteronormative gender norms, which provide a space for diverse identities and desires. Folktales are basically stories that have been told from generation to generation. Tribal people have a rich, varied folklore of several kinds. These folktales reflect the belief system, customs and traditions, cultures, etc., of a community. The select Rabha tribal folktales are unique in their structure. Generally, folktales encompass diverse topics such as myths and legends, fairy tales, fables, novellas, etc., but the selected folktales in this study focus on gender issues and concerns. Usually, the concept of genderqueer identity is regarded as a western concept, but analysing the selected Rabha folktales depicts how these ideas existed within the culture and community long before such ideas got established in mainstream society. Analysing the select Rabha folktales from a queer perspective gives a new insight into the genderqueer narratives reflecting a range of sexual identities.

The concept of gender has long been restricted only to the binary notion of male and female. However, in the 1990s, with the beginning of queer theory, the concept of queer and genderqueer began to emerge, and with this, the concept and the idea of sex and gender have taken on a new turn. Genderqueer can be defined as “any type of trans identity that is not always male or female. It is also where people feel they are a mixture of male and female” (Monro 13). The individuals who do not fall into the categorisation of gender, or who

neither belong to man nor woman, or who belong in between these binary categorisations of gender are called genderqueers. Genderqueers are those who do not want to remain within the fixed categorisation, and through them there is a reflection of both genders at the same time, termed as “male female” or “female male.” Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity challenges the fixed gender identities, emphasising that gender is a repeated set of actions rather than an innate quality. Gender is something that one does; “it is a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’” (*Gender Trouble* 33). A queer analysis of select Rabha folktales highlights how the genderqueer identities are reflected through the characters by blending of feminine qualities in men and masculine qualities in women, reflecting a variety of sexual and gender identities. The narratives in the folktales feature gender fluidity and role reversal by subverting the dominant binary of masculinity and femininity by the portrayal of masculine females and feminine males. According to Rosi Braidotti, “The concept of fluid gender identities reflects the multiplicity and becoming inherent in subjectivity” (35).

The folktale, *The Helpless Kartika* is the adaptation of the original myth of Kartika, who is a strong and powerful deity having multiple wives, highlighting his masculinity and power. However, in this adaptation, Kartika is portrayed as a weak and fragile character who defies traditional masculine behaviour. The narrative reveals Kartika, a character who exemplifies genderqueer identity by possessing a feminine quality. Kartika’s behavior is marked by feminine sensibility; he is not willing to conform to the dominant masculine traits. Despite being the son of Shiva, a deity who symbolises strength and command, Kartika possesses a feminine quality, which is seen when he closes his eyes and covers his ears after his mother, Parvati, expresses her desire for him: “Kartika closed his eyes and covered his ears with his hands” (Chakraborty 135). He reflects a non-binary and fluid response as he withdraws both physically and emotionally instead of confronting the situation. Kartika’s actions highlight his internal struggle, resisting acting in a traditional way as expected from men who do not align with the fixed categorisation of gender norms. Kartika’s inability to resist his mother’s demand showcases his departure from masculine traits of strength and dominance. He is seen as being subjugated under his

mother when he submits himself and promises to do everything that makes her happy: “I promise in the name of my father that I will undertake whatever you ask me to do in order to make you happy” (Chakraborty 135). Usually, a fully masculine man is not seen as remaining subjugated to anything beyond his own desires and wishes. His rejection and withdrawal of traditional roles reflect a more nuanced and fluid approach to gender which does not want to align with a fixed identity. However, Kartika too performs ‘maleness’ when he declares that he cannot keep his promise and finds an alternative way to come out of the situation, which he is not willing to do. This reflects a genderqueer individual who does not strictly align with or oppose the binary structure and who can walk both sides of the gender, thus suggesting role reversal of femininity and masculinity by these individuals who blur the line between binary and non-binary. The mother, Parvati’s wish to fulfill carnal desires, is indicative of how she depicts womanhood, which might showcase a desire that is not considered normal in mainstream society. Despite being a mother, Parvati wishes to satiate her carnal desire through her son, even when it is regarded as a sinful act: “I want you to satisfy my carnal yearning” (Chakraborty 135). The expression of the explicit carnal desire of a mother for her son is least expected from a woman, and therefore, this reflects a manly behaviour that defies gender norms of the society. Through Parvati, the idea of having diverse sexual identities and desires is symbolised. And this also challenges the idea of associating femininity with morality.

In the story, *Love Story of Seuji*, Anteswar’s character reflects a departure from masculinity and Seuji’s character from femininity. Seuji does not conform to the societal expectations of women to remain in widowhood for long and she mourned only for a few months. However, she longs for companionship, which indicates her desire for autonomy, and therefore, having an affair with a man, after which she becomes pregnant: “She got involved in a clandestine affair with a man and became pregnant” (Chakraborty 137). The elderly woman, as the guardian of Anteswar wishes for him to get married, symbolizing a diverse desire deviating from the norms of society. Through Seuji, the narrative explores how the person who deviates from societal expectations and norms faces rejection and isolation, thereby facing consequences as reflected in the story when

she was denied marriage by her second man. Seuji is a person who does not want to confine herself to the traditional gender roles that are expected of a woman. On the other hand, Anteswar, who is initially portrayed as a brave figure, reveals a fragility that challenges traditional masculine notions. He does not possess a strong masculine character, as he is unable to fight the elderly women for the love of his life; instead, he resorts to escape, as seen when he climbs the tree out of fear: “Anteswar became scared, so he climbed up a tree” (Chakraborty 137). He is unable to confront his actions, especially the murder of his wife, which illustrates the breakdown of masculine strength and dominance. This emphasises the idea that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed concepts rather than inherent traits, as Butler states, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 25). Through her knowledge of witchcraft and manipulation, the elderly woman who plays a pivotal role as Anteswar’s wife embodies a duality of gender roles. She does not conform to the expectations of an elderly woman and a married wife but was able to take a strong role in the patriarchal society. She depicts a masculine trait through her ability to control and fulfill her desires and by marrying Anteswar by using witchcraft: “On the day of marriage, she, having good knowledge of witchcraft, took the shape of a bride and got married to Anteswar” (Chakraborty 136). The second man in Seuji’s life also fails to embody traditional masculine traits, which further emphasise the theme of genderqueer identity. When confronted with the consequences of marrying Seuji, he is not able to take responsibility for his actions, and out of fear of social backlash, he withdraws and jumps in the river, which shows his lack of bravery and rejection of masculine ideals: “In utter disgrace, the man jumped into the river” (Chakraborty 137). Through the complexity of Seuji’s and Anteswar’s experiences, the fluidity and diversity of gender identities can be seen. According to Kate Bornstein: “The thing is, when you look at gender, it’s really more like a buffet than a set menu. You can pick and choose what you want to identify with, and you can have multiple identities at once” (13).

The theme of genderqueer, with its fluidity and disruption of traditional gender roles, also emerges in the story, *The Lazy Gallant*.

The youngest son in the story is referred to as a lazy gallant who defies conventional masculinity through his denial of laborious work like woodcutting and cattle rearing. Instead, he engages in slumbering, small bird catching, and playing *dotara*: “He would sleep all through the day. In the evening, idly he would roam around playing his *dotara* . . .” (Chakraborty 141), thereby resisting the normative performance of masculinity by engaging in works that are considered non-masculine. According to Connell and Messerschmidt, “Many men consciously resist traditional masculinity, choosing not to conform to the demands of hegemonic ideals, recognizing them as limiting and oppressive” (“Hegemonic Masculinity” 836). The five elder brothers were annoyed with the sluggishness of the younger brother, as they expected him to also work and help them in the field. However, the youngest brother does not conform to their expectations, and therefore, the elder brothers decide to kill him. This emphasises the fact that those who do not conform to the expectations and norms of gender are not considered and are not given equal place in society, as Connell states, “Masculinity is a social construct that enforces rigid behaviors, roles, and norms. Those who do not conform to these prescribed ideals often face social exclusion, ridicule, or are deemed as ‘lesser men’” (*Masculinities* 77). The elder brothers’ plan to kill their youngest brother depicts how the society disregards those who do not belong to the conventional norms of the society by rejecting, isolating, and not giving them an equal place in the society, which shows the expectations of the mainstream society. Society constructs the norms of masculinity and femininity, and those who do not conform to these norms are questioned. The lazy gallant’s dependence on women, especially on his wife and sister-in-law, “The lazy gallant asked his wife to visit his eldest sister-in-law for help” (Chakraborty 141), both for physical and emotional support, suggests his failure to conform to the standard gender norms, which in turn reveals a genderqueer expression. This suggests a fluidity in his gender, thereby questioning the expectations placed on men. By highlighting this, the narrative—as per Butler—demonstrates how “gender norms function not only to produce intelligible identities but also to maintain a certain social order” (*Undoing Gender* 178). In contrast to the lazy gallant, the eldest sister-in-law and the wife portray masculinity in their actions. The elder sister-in-law’s courage to reveal the plans of her husband

and brother-in-law to the lazy gallant and her advice to hide him reveal a genderqueer individual who is able to perform both masculinity and femininity at the same time, blurring the line between binary and non-binary. On the one hand, she is able to take care of everyone by doing the household chores, which is expected of women, and on the other, she also takes responsibility as a decision-maker in the house, which reflects a masculine trait. The wife of the lazy gallant, who was initially a princess fleeing her stepmother, also defies the conventional norm by proposing marriage to the lazy gallant: “She proposed the lazy gallant to marry her” (Chakraborty 141). She reflects a manly female character by providing support to her husband physically and emotionally, especially by going to their house in order to seek help from the sister-in-law. The youngest brother’s wife, who works alongside her husband in agricultural work, reflects a fluidity in gender that collapses binaries through her engagement in activities that cross the boundary of expected female labour. This highlights a gender fluidity where gender roles are not rigid and role reversals of femininity and masculinity can be seen. Halberstam argues that “gender ambiguity offers possibilities for forms of embodiment that are less constrained by social norms,” (18) a concept that is reflected in a wife’s active participation in household activities.

The story, *Saving the Man* reveals a unique reversal of traditional gender stereotypes. The husband and wife in the story are seen to be reversing gender roles. Throughout the story, the wife is depicted as having qualities that are traditionally attributed to men in patriarchal society, like courage, decisive actions, and protective instinct. The wife portrays genderqueer behaviour, which is reflected through her protection of her husband from various situations where the ‘act’ of protection is itself associated with the traditional gender stereotype. The wife, through her actions, subverts the traditional ideal where strength, rationality, and protection are traditionally associated with masculinity. The authority of the wife over the husband, which is depicted by the physical act of slapping and punching her husband to save his life, aligns with the idea of taking charge, which is often viewed as masculine: “Almost immediately the husband seemed to have choked while the wife slapped him hard, and the rice and fish bone came out of his mouth” (Chakraborty 147). Connell’s theory of

hegemonic masculinity states that “masculinity is not a fixed biological essence but a product of social relations” (*Masculinities* 81). The wife embodies what Connell would consider “hegemonic masculinity,” as she does not conform to passive femininity; however, she holds power in the relationship and takes the lead in the husband’s safety. On the other hand, the husband reflects traditional feminine traits and does not confront the various situations; instead, he is characterised by fragility and embarrassment: “The new son-in-law felt humiliated on being smacked by his wife in front of his mother-in-law” (Chakraborty 147). Thus, the wife and the husband are seen reversing gender roles, which resonates with Halberstam’s idea of gender fluidity, where “female masculinity” is not a mimicry of male behavior but a distinct way of being masculine (268). The wife’s masculine traits do not make her “unfeminine,” nor do the husband’s feminine traits make him “unmasculine.”

The *Mothers and Daughters* is a folktale that revolves around two sisters and their daughters who reflect genderqueer identity. The two sisters having the power to captivate the sage with enchantment, thereby getting pregnant, depicts a genderqueer character transcending the mainstream patriarchal setup of the society. The two sisters reflect power and ability, and the sage reflects fragility and subjugation as he was not able to resist the temptation of the two sisters: “The saint, knowing that it was a sacrilege, could not resist the temptation” (Chakraborty 143). Following the boldness of their mothers, the daughters too decide on their own to marry the two brothers. The transformation of the two daughters into earthen pots to enchant the two brothers demonstrates a rejection of biological determinism, where identity is not tied to fixed physical forms. The daughters’ transformation into earthen pots reflects the potential of the bodies to transcend traditional gender binaries, thus, blurring the lines. The traditional role reversal can be seen through the younger brother’s dependency on his wife, as she repeatedly saves him using her magical power and proficiency: “The girl, with her magic, came to know about the elder brother’s evil plan and immediately sent her pet dog, which set the younger brother free . . .” (Chakraborty 144). The younger brother depicts a feminine male quality where he is unable to save himself from the evil doings of his elder brother because in society men are considered to be bold and strong, which

is in sharp contrast to his personality. The portrayal of the younger daughter's ability and proficiency as a protector is in sharp contrast with the husband's fragility, highlighting a genderqueer identity that combines traditionally feminine and masculine attributes, and it also further highlights the reversal of traditional power relations. The two mothers taking revenge for their daughters' loss reflects a genderqueer femininity where they take the responsibility and take care of their child and also have masculine traits of protection. The mothers showcase their power by taking revenge on the elder brother: "With his death the mothers succeeded in avenging the daughters' loss" (Chakraborty 144), which in turn subverts the traditional patriarchal setup of the society where a man is defeated by women. The mothers and daughters showcase how the concept of femininity can also be associated with having power and bravery. The characters of mothers and daughters show that women can also have control and power over men, which does not align with the norms or rules of the society. Thus, the characters in *Mothers and Daughters* exhibit a genderqueer identity that portrays the role reversal, thereby suggesting fluidity of gender and its constructed nature. The dynamic nature of gender is profoundly depicted in this folktale, where the fixed roles in the society are disregarded.

The Manly Woman is a story that reflects a character named Maaykawn who defies the predefined boundaries of oppositional gender construction by being a woman and daring like a man. She depicts genderqueer identity with her macho characteristics, dressing like a man and seemingly lives alone without any relation with other men and women. Her attire and attribution exemplify gender fluidity and 'performativity' of gender. Through her, the genderqueer identity is highlighted as she is engaged in work that is traditionally attributed to males, like that of cutting wood: "Like a man, she could cut wood with an axe" (Chakraborty 145) and engage in jhum cultivation, thereby being called by villagers as "manly woman." Maaykawn lives and acts like a man, which alienates her from getting any affection from male counterparts: "Due to her macho attire and attitude, she was almost past her youth and yet unmarried. The men were afraid to mingle with her" (Chakraborty 145). Maaykawn is socially marginalised, though she resembles strength and courage, and the women mock her as an "ox-like virile women" (Chakraborty

145). This aligns with the idea that the man and woman division is culturally constructed in the society, and these are maintained through norms that assign specific roles to men and women in the society, and the ones who do not align with these norms are considered abnormal. As Pierre Bourdieu argues: “The division between the sexes appears to be ‘in the order of things,’ as people sometimes say to refer to what is normal, natural, to the point of being inevitable” (8). The socially and culturally constructed norms advocate conformity, which is reflected through Maaykawn’s alienation and isolation as she was not conforming to the fixed rules set up by society. Society associates the idea of masculinity with self-sufficiency, power, and domination and femininity with subjugation, sacrifice, and dependency. Maaykawn’s living alone (coinciding masculinity) showcases her willingness to have power and position in the society, which will ultimately protect her from harm. However, Maaykawn’s encounter with the woman who is possibly a witch in the forest reveals how a single, independent woman can be disparaged. This aligns with Michael Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’, where the society uses a subtle form of control to enforce social norms: “The soul is the prison of the body. It is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body” (30).

The Rabha folktale *Creation of Liquor* is a story about seven Rabha headmen that criticises the gender roles and expectations. This folktale depicts the character of headmen despising gender roles and expectations by not adhering to the norms of the society. The Rabha headman refuses to conform to the normative masculinity that is highlighted through the depiction of headmen’s rejection of the pathway to success, however, accepting a carefree lifestyle of pleasure and community. The Rabha headmen disrupt the heteronormative notion by defying gender rules, which can be seen when they deny power, wealth, position, and dominance by first selling elephants, then horses, and at last disregarding money, which holds power and position in the society. They rejected the conventional path to material wealth, unlike the Tibetan, Bengalee, and Marwari men who want to accumulate power and success with economic control by the use of animals and money. Their embrace of leisure, emotional contentment, and communal enjoyment over

wealth and power is reflected through their preference for the sage's final gift, a pot of liquor: "The more they drank, the more they desired and finally they fell asleep. Waking up, they found a profound sense of tranquility in their mind" (Chakraborty 139). According to R W Connell, hegemonic masculinity represents "the configuration of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (*Masculinities* 77). The seven Rabha headmen depict how they do not want to confine themselves to the fixed expectations of masculinity in the society, which in turn depicts fluidity of identity. The Rabha headman challenges the idea that masculinity must be defined by power, position, and dominance.

Conclusion

The selected Rabha folktales analysed in this paper question the rigid heteronormative gender roles by portraying genderqueer characters whose identities fall outside of or between male and female identities. The narratives of the folktales also offer a unique insight into the fluidity of masculinity and femininity and act as a resistance to binary conformity, shedding light on the varieties of gender identities and expressions. The characters discussed in the stories do not adhere to a strict binary gender system, which aligns with the idea that gender is not innate but rather performed. And anyone can perform gender; it is not rigid. The male individual may not align with masculinity but, however, may possess feminine traits, and vice versa. Thus, the queering of these select Rabha folktales provides a spectrum for the exploration of diverse identities, emphasising the fact that gender is not a rigid binary.

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**Reimagining the *Mana*: Uncanny Aesthetics, Caste Histories,
and Folkloric Counter-Narratives in *Bramayugam***

Sukanya V Mohan* and Gigy J Alex**

Abstract

This paper elucidates on the depiction of an aristocratic *mana*, the abode of a traditional Brahmin household, as portrayed in the 2024, Malayalam film *Bramayugam*. The *mana*'s fixed structure follows a strict pure-impure axis demarcating specific areas for people from different genders, castes, and statuses. Using symbolic architecture, monochromatic visuals, and an unsettling soundscape, the film challenges canonical depictions of the *mana*, dismantling the romanticised upper-caste imaginary in the Malayalam-speaking region. By casting a folkloric deity, Chathan, at the forefront, and two subaltern characters as other leads, a power struggle emerges that undoes the widely advertised 'authentic' image of Kerala associated with the *mana*. The film has detached features such as hospitality and frivolity tied to a *mana*. The place is reconstructed as a space that unravels caste and feudal hierarchies through the aesthetics of uncanniness. The textual ingredients used for the restructuring comprise the literary archetypes familiar to the Malayalam mythscape and counter-narratives from folklore, making the film a crucial part of contemporary caste-critical cinema and regional history.

Keywords: Caste, Chathan, Folklore, Malayalam, *Mana*, Cinema, Uncanny.

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Introduction

The image of an aristocratic *mana* has solidified as an irrevocable part of the tradition of Kerala served on a golden plate to its tourists. Through carefully constructing myths, appropriated folklore, and dedicated cultural production, selected age-old mansions in Kerala have derived revenue from this canon. *Mana*, the Malayalam word for a mansion, is usually associated with Brahminical households. *Illam*, is yet another word used to refer to the *mana*, but the casteist exclusivity that is porous for *mana* is entirely sealed for *Illam*. Both these terms have a canonical stance in the Malayalam literary scene and architecture. Hence, with the representation of a *mana* in an unconventional manner in the popular culture with contrasting lore contesting the narratives of the powerful, *Bramayugam*, a 2024 Malayalam-language film, written and directed by Rahul Sadasivan, is a crucial deviation that needs to be examined. It created an uproar amongst the film fanatics of the Malayalam film industry with its first look poster as it cast Mammooty, the superstar of the Malayalam industry, in its lead role, in a horror genre, and promised a black-and-white experience to cinephiles. The folk horror genre began gaining critical traction in Indian cinema post-2018 and is now establishing a distinct presence in Malayalam films through works like *Nine* (2019) and *Kumari* (2022).

Bramayugam opened up to positive reviews and became a critically and commercially successful film; the first black and white film from the industry to collect more than 50 crores at the box office. The film has been reviewed as a complex horror film rather than an 'easier' one built on thrills and jump scares. Set in the seventeenth century, *Bramayugam* follows Thevan, a *paanan* (singer), who unwittingly enters a *mana* ruled by Kodumon Potti and a mysterious cook. At first, he is happy to have escaped the dangers of the forest and to have a place to lay his head down. But later, he understands the *mana* is a magical space controlled by a vengeful Chathan who disguises himself as Potti, and no one can escape it. After constant struggle and the cook's partially disclosed plan, the two rid Chathan of his extraordinary superpowers. The cook then takes over the *mana*, arguing that he is an illegitimate son of Kodumon Potti and tries to enslave Chathan. But, Thevan intervenes, resulting in a fight, which

ends with the *mana* burning down. In the tale's end, the audience sees the cook being killed by the colonising Portuguese, and Thevan with an inhuman aura moving through the forest with a wicked look. The horror mode adopted by Rahul Sadasivan evokes a feeling of the uncanny in the audience. The concept of "uncanny," initially coined by Ernst Jentsch and explored further by Sigmund Freud, denotes the feeling of being fearful of a familiar being, object, or space that behaves in an unfamiliar way. The study of this experience has led to the formation of "uncanny studies," which derives from a range of theoretical perspectives from architecture, postcolonial studies, to sociology and urban studies.

This paper seeks to critically investigate how *Bramayugam* deconstructs the canonical representation of the *mana* through visual and narrative strategies grounded in uncanniness. The initial section discusses and interrogates the contrasting narratives from Brahminical and subaltern standpoints and how the film uses them as tools, uncovering how the caste hierarchies are reimagined through folklore and subaltern historiography. By analysing the character of Chathan as a metaphor for repressed resistance, the study interrogates the cultural and cinematic tropes that uphold Brahminical dominance. The second section deeply examines the unsettling set design, eerie soundscape, and black-and-white medium. Furthermore, the paper positions *Bramayugam* within a broader trend in Malayalam cinema that foregrounds caste critique, thereby, contributing to the discourse on the role of regional films in reimagining casteist structures and history. For the purpose of this paper, all passages attributed to the film *Bramayugam* have been translated into English by the authors.

Chathan: From Subaltern Resistance to Canonical Appropriation

The *mana* becomes a site of an age-old, ruthless struggle for power, shifting from the orderly category of "place" to the blurred contours of "space." This spatial transformation is governed by a *mayikavalayam*, a magical circumference regulating mobility and power. An ever-burning lamp in the granary cellar anchors the *valayam*, restraining both the inhabitants and Chathan's power within the mansion. Installed after the first Pottiⁱ, Chudalan Potti, was

blessed by the pre-Vedic goddess *Varahi*ⁱⁱⁱ, the lamp's magic box (chellam) became a tool of wish-fulfilment. This containment mirrors folkloric limits placed on other beings—*Yakshis* tethered by iron nails or *genies* bound to lamps. The *valayam*, thus, constructs a spatial frame for uncanniness to erupt. Within this space resides Chathan, a shape-shifting magical figure drawn from folklore. Often rendered as a trickster or child deity with animalistic features, Chathan (or Kuttichathan) appears both in subaltern and canonised narratives. While canonical myths, like those in *Aithihyamaala*ⁱⁱⁱ, depict him as a magical servant, *thottam* sung before Kuttichathan Theyyam presents him as a rebel against Brahminical hegemony (Tarabout 454). In Northern Kerala, Brahmins such as those from the Punchamon illam^{iv} conduct Chathan Upasana^v (Parpola 179), yet the deity's rebellious potential survives in ritual and oral traditions.

In the *thottam*, Chathan is born to Parameswaran and Parvati disguised as Valluvars^{vi} in Malanga Naadu. Denied entry to Kailasam, the divine couple entrusts the child to the magical Kaalakattu Brahmin family. But Chathan resists the family's vegetarian norms, lashes out at his stepmother, and is ultimately killed by his stepfather. The priest Kaalakattu beheads him at Kanjirapuzha, but Chathan returns in terrifying multiplicity. Though priests try to destroy him in ritual fire, hundreds of Chathans rise and destroy them. Only the Malaya^{vii} community's Perumalayan can appease him through Theyyam (Karippath 132; Namboothiri 190; Parpola 190). This legend's defiance shifts power from Brahmin to Malaya, with Theyyam as protest art resisting caste violence. Chathan, as a rebellious, undefeatable figure, enables lower castes to negotiate power. The Theyyam stage becomes carnivalesque (V. 4), temporarily reversing social order by elevating the performer's body despite caste (Mathew and Pandya 6; "Unravelling"). This performance embeds Chathan in collective memory, influencing his image in *Bramayugam*. In one scene, Thevan dreams of Chathan, an image resonant with a Theyyam-like headgear (Fig. 1). Fan-made posters similarly reimagine Mammootty's character through this aesthetic (Fig. 2), echoing the *thottam*'s mythic roots and surfacing as spectral memory within the narrative.



Fig. 1. Chathan appearing in Thevan's dream, Rahul Sadasivan (dir.), *Bramayugam*, 2024. India. © Night Shift Productions, YNOT Studios



Fig. 2. *Bramayugam* poster made by the Instagram creator, Aesthetic Kunjamma (@aesthetickunjamma), as directed by the film crew, 2024, Instagram. © Aesthetic Kunjamma

In the canonical text of *Aithihyamaala*, there are two significant references to Chathan in two tales named “Kunjamanpottiyum

Mattapalli Namboothiriyum” and “Parayipetta Panthirukulam.” In both these tales, Chathan is a faithful servant who is used to prove the points of his master through mindless labor and blind following (the film’s plot is loosely based on Puchamon illam or Kunjamon illam mentioned in the former tale). In *Parayipetta Panthirukulam*, Akavoor Chathan is a servant with magical capabilities who hints at his knowledge that is incomprehensible to the Brahmin lord. In the tale, Chathan prays to *Maadanpothu*^{viii}, whom he considers a form of *parabrahma*^{ix}, and shocks the Potti. The politics behind the construction of *Parayipetta Panthirukulam* and its function in the collective conscience of Keralites reveals manipulation, foreseeing a casteist dominance for centuries (Lijisha A.T.). The migrating Brahmins who came to Kerala, represented by Vararuchi in the tale, established their dominance through farming knowledge, introduced their religion, and sustained it using folklore (Jayashree et al). The plot of this folktale shows how each group of the natives who did different occupations became the children of the Brahmin. Hidden behind the often-told tales of magic and absurdity are the dirtier history of appropriating guardian deities and leaving the natives disillusioned, delegitimising their beliefs as black magic (Lijisha A.T.). There exists a duality between these depictions, as in the former, Chathan is elevated to the level of a deity after being a reckless child against the Brahminical values, and in the latter, he is seen as an obedient servant who believes in the mundane and the absurd, and is mysterious.

Bramayugam takes the same archetypes existing in the mythscape^x of Kerala and constructs a folk narrative where the Brahminical hegemony is turned on its head. The Chathan of the film takes over the “sacred space” of *mana* and ruins its glorified face by perpetuating the struggle for power between the entrapped. Thevan’s character is a *paanan*, a court singer, who accepts that he is related to Poomani Paananar. The tenth progeny of the *Panthirukulam* is a court singer called Paananar. The cook mentions Mayyannoor Thachan, who built the Kodumon Mana, akin to Perumthachan, the eleventh progeny of the *Panthirukulam*. At Thevan’s arrival at the *mana*, he recites panegyric verses exemplifying the Brahmin overlords. The beauty of the traditional *mana* is glorified through the song “Poomani Maalika.” Thevan seems to have ignored the dilapidated state of the

mana by reimagining it, enabling his mental image of the *mana* referred to as “Kolloth,” where he used to be a court singer. He believes that the cook and he hold the same position in the *mana*, recognising how they are just puppets in the master’s hands. But, only in the climax will Thevan and the viewers know how the cook boasts of his lineage and asserts power over the space, exploiting it similarly to how the tale of the *panthirukulam* works in the mythscape of Kerala. But, unlike in the myth, in the film, the cook remains unrecognised by his father’s family, not given a name, and considered an “other” – enslaved by the household. The deconstruction of such myths written from the Brahmanical perspective portrays the intricate manipulation employed to include caste as a benevolent system.

Contemporary historiographies underline how deities like Chathan were appropriated, tamed, and converted into ritual tools by Brahmin families. Opposite to the rebellious strain in folklore, a domesticated, servile depiction of Chathan is furnished in upper-caste myths with accentuated magical powers, which have created sufficient circumstances to extoll the overlords’ power and show their divinity and wisdom. The film foregrounds tension between the contrasting depictions by drawing on *thottam* narratives and representing the return of Chathan as a spectral force within the *mana*, which becomes a metaphor for the return of the repressed. In *Bramayugam*, Chathan is devilish and ruthless, yet trapped within the horizons where his power allows him to control both biotic and abiotic. But, he is not able to escape the *valayam* of the *mana* as he is envisaged in the duality of being an enslaver and an enslaved person within the same space. While Potti tortures Chathan and exploits him for his whims and wants, the subaltern deity waits for the right opportunity to escape. The intentional placement of specific motifs, such as cobwebs, termites, and caged animals, symbolises entrapment. *Yakshi* acts as a guard dog for directing people into the *mana* and frightening them into not leaving the place to an extent that they consider the *mana* an abode. Chathan’s entrapment within the *mana* reflects the condition of subaltern knowledge and power. The *mana* becomes a microcosm of the caste system that traps the subaltern, leads to a power struggle, and imminent rupture.

Recasting the *Mana*: Space, Surveillance, and the Uncanny

The *mana* structured by Potti and Chathan resembles the panopticon model of prison, given by Jeremy Bentham, who, with his brother, formulated the idea of a panopticon prison wherein the authorities can house criminals, lunatics, or the sick. Bentham believed that the panopticon would be an ideal place to act as “perpetual prisons in the room of death, or prisons for confinement before trial, or penitentiary-houses, or houses of correction, or work-houses, or manufactories, or mad-houses, or hospitals, or schools” (Bentham 4). The architecture of the panopticon makes the inmates believe they are under constant surveillance. Foucault uses the metaphor of the panopticon model to expound on the social control systems and the power-knowledge relations. The exertion of power in such models shows how carefully fabricated inmates are the stronghold of the powerful. The *mana*, a respectful abode of frivolity, where the knowledgeable reside, is shown in battle with the knowledge systems outside Brahmin understanding, as in the Akavoor Chathan’s legend, the conception of *Maadanpothu* as *parabrahma*. Additionally, *Bramayugam* uses the panopticon model by refashioning the composition of *mana*. The traditional courtyard, other housing, and storage areas of a *mana* are categorised extensively to curtail the free movement of women and other upper-caste members and restrict the lower-caste members from entering it (Nayar 55, 60). In *Bramayugam*, Chathan, the ostracised deity, takes the role of patriarch, allowing access despite the inmates’ caste, creed, or gender, and exerts constant surveillance on them. The *mana* becomes a failed panopticon where the inmates resist and eventually destroy the structure from within. The cook, Thevan, and Chathan become allegorical figures: the illegitimate, the artist, and the deity of resistance—all marginalised figures rewriting the narrative from within.

Bramayugam challenges the *mana*, by depicting it as a space disposed into a chaotic realm where the temporality and the spatiality are incomprehensible. Thevan is constantly nostalgic when he arrives in the *mana*, but eventually, he forgets his identity and cherished memories. He loses track of time as the *mana* has capricious weather, and the space is locked into the same monsoon state for months. The

rain, which acts as a symbol of isolation (Sadasivan n.p.), represents uncertainty of time and space and blurs the boundary of the space, and deprives the space of sunlight as extolled in hymn 3, *Aadithyan Illathe* ('without sun'). The weather becomes a significant factor of uncanniness as it directly affects agriculture and sustenance. The Brahminical households were the center of agriculture in the medieval age (N T 38). The rice is cultivated under their supervision through intensive labor, exploiting the lower classes. The age-old fantasies of *mana* are hinged on surplus rice and agricultural activity, which is depicted in *Bramayugam* in an uncanny light. Without any farming activity or management, the excess grain in the granary (Fig. 3) suggests a magical origin, triggering the uncanny. An infertile land where even a mango tree fails to blossom is a bad omen to Thevan. He is unable to track the time based on seasons, as the rain continues. When Thevan meets the cook, the cook asks: "Which month is this?," pointing to the lack of temporal clarity in the space, to which Thevan replies that the *kannikoythu*^{xi} is over and monsoon has begun. The sense of unease felt in circumstances of losing continuity with the past and the natural environment directly correlates with a range of distinctively modern anxieties.



Fig. 3. Portrays the uncanny surplus in the granary, Rahul Sadasivan (dir.), *Bramayugam*, 2024. India. © Night Shift Productions, YNOT Studios.

An *illam* or a *mana* is built architecturally based on the *Vaasthu Purusha Mandala* that is "a metaphysical square divided into a grid of 81 equal parts, provided the mathematical and diagrammatic basis for the house layout" (Nayar 49). The *illam* symbolises a man's body,

and each part has a distinct function. The kitchen at the northeastern corner is considered the mouth of the symbolic man (Dili et al. 920; Nayar 50). The central courtyard is considered the navel of the man, where all the auspicious ceremonies, such as marriage and prenatal rituals, take place. The area surrounding the house, called the *parambu*, is usually an agrarian place, “neatly landscaped” (Nayar 50). In *Bramayugam*, the space is half-ravaged by vegetation, which grows in the front yard, the courtyard, and through the walls of the broken roof. The pond is ill-maintained, leading to an overflow of water. The wilderness slowly takes over the identity of a *mana* seeded in the balance of the abiotic elements, trimmed to perfection, disrupting the image of an aristocratic household.

The *illam* tends to adhere to a strict regime of the “pure-impure axis” (Nayar 48). Women and other caste-members are strictly forbidden from entering most parts of the *mana*, which is exclusive to the male members of the family. Lower-caste people are restricted from even crossing the western entrance porch. Menstruating women and widows were strictly forced to live in a secluded room in the *mana* in earlier times. Even if these restrictions have been weathered down due to reformation movements, the so-called “impure” women are not allowed to be seen in the *poomukham* (front yard) of the *illam* (Nayar 42; Dili et al. 920). In the film, not only is the pure-impure axis shattered, but the axis is subverted. The *mana* is said to be built by Mayyanoor Thachan (“thachan” is the Malayalam word for a traditional carpenter) and holds many unexplored hallways. It is a space where Chathan lives and the *Yakshi* guards and/or visits. As Thevan is guided through the *mana*, a wide shot of the hallway exemplifies the uncanniness of living in a place known to drive the inmates mad. Having escaped *Yakshi*, Thevan embraces the roof over his head, even if it leaks. The entire construction and the layout match with a traditional *mana* in terms of its skeleton, but by adding symbolical excesses, the uncanny is brought out, which dethrones the space from the pedestal of glory.

The kitchen space houses an excess of eateries, utensils, and spices simultaneously impacting visual and olfactory senses (Shankar). There is a variety of potatoes hung on a pole and other root vegetables in the kitchen (Fig. 4); a bunch of coconuts are piled

up in the north-eastern corner; animals are trapped from the surroundings, which are recorded as excessive for three people who eat just once a day. In the place of a usual “morakam” to store buttermilk (Nayar 43), there is a winery stricken with the Gemino curse^{xiii} (Fig. 5). Furthermore, the lack of maintenance of the kitchen deviates from the pure-impure axis as well. The floor is coloured with betel-nut spits, leftovers, rodents, and dirt, subverting the pure construct of an *illam* kitchen. Betel nut chewing, portrayed widely in the film, has been a part of urban culture in India from fifth to fourth century BC (Cielas 166). In the film, the cook is never seen bereft of this habit, which, according to Osborne et al, is associated with abuse and dependence, which tends to cause greater dependency if it contains tobacco (188). The recurring use can cause euphoria in the user, which helps one cope with the uncertain tension of the *mana*. The cook constantly chews and stains the kitchen floor in derision of the trapped state. This portrayal shows yet another uncanny aspect of traditional Brahmanism tainted with humiliation, which is relevant when Potti spits outside the spittoon, on the cook, because the cook interjected.



Fig. 4. Depicts the Eateries in the Kitchen, Rahul Sadasivan (dir.), *Bramayugam*, 2024. India. © Night Shift Productions, YNOT Studios.

The film’s architectural metaphors are rooted in a critical engagement with the *Vaasthu Purusha Mandala*, where spatial segregation mirrors caste and gender hierarchies. The *mana*, now overtaken by cobwebs, excessive grain, and rainfall, transforms from a ritual space into a haunted one. The “uncanny”, as theorised by

Freud and developed in “uncanny studies” (Jervis and Collins), arises here from the distortion of familiar caste-geographies. These are not just horror tropes but symbolic gestures of feudal decay and ritual redundancy. The disturbances of the spatial sense show both symptomatically and culturally pronounced affiliation with the experience of the uncanny (Jervis and Collins 4). As decadence is the excess of both culture and nature, it invokes the feeling of the uncanny, and the format of film materialises it through spatio-temporal bending (Jervis 18).



Fig. 5. Shows the winery inside the *mana*, Rahul Sadasivan (dir.), *Bramayugam*, 2024. India. © Night Shift Productions, YNOT Studios.

The *mana* is considered a structure of pride, hospitality, frivolity, and dignity established by the myths, legends, and narratives of the contemporary world, which bases its profit on these adjectives (“Naalukettu”). In *Bramayugam*, this image of a *mana* is broken by a constant juxtaposition of splendor and decay, prosperity and penury, the vastness of the *mana* and the portentous stillness. There is a perpetual chain of torture unfolding from Chudalan Potti, following a massacre by Chathan, Chathan punishing Potti and every guest at his door. The hospitality for a stranger initially seems confusing, given that the story unfolds in the seventeenth century amidst crude casteism. But, as the film progresses, the hospitality unveils itself as a trap, and Chathan, disguised as Potti, becomes increasingly ruthless. The devilish grin, the rattling of chains from the attic, hallways that smell of death, and the Chathan’s cackle

match with the haunted houses clichés. Gothic, as a genre that builds on symbolic excesses (Botting 1; Hillard 689), conveys the dilapidated state of the *mana* and gut-wrenching hegemonic system. A subaltern deity appropriated for the benefit of an ideology is used to write against the system and represent the decadence of the system as a whole, culturally and morally.

The precise soundscape and set design deployment break down the “authentic Kerala experience” marketed by the tourism sector (Nayar 47). The soundscape crafted by Jayadevan-Chakkadath employs a range of seemingly peculiar sounds, such as the voices of whales and rattlesnakes. Adding to this, the music director, Christo Xavier, has invented and remodeled instruments like the waterphone, didgeridoo, and brought in unique sounds that insinuate fear (Antony). Accompanied by the lyrics written by Dinn Nath Puththencherry and Ammu Maria Alex, the original score captures the uncanniness of the *mana* set in the seventeenth century, catering to the twenty first century audience. There are six music compositions, including the “Potti theme,” “Poomani Maalika” (Hymn 1), “Thambaye”^{xiii} (Hymn 2), “Aadithyan Illathe” (Hymn 3), “The Beginning,” and “The Age of Madness” (Xavier). The main instrument used in the “Potti Theme” was custom-made by the music director with a plastic bucket attached to a guitar string (Antony). The strings were played using a violin bow, producing an unsettling tone with a unique reverb. A section is described as “the rap of *Pulluvan kudam*” (a folk instrument) in an interview with Cue Studio (Xavier) wherein the sounds from the *kudam* have been manipulated and matched with several other instruments such as the veena and the violin. The lyrics complement the songs and capture the pale mood by including animal and forest imagery with numerous hunting motifs. The soundscape helps to invoke an apprehension of the “presence,” enhances an affective disruption, and unseats Carnatic/classical associations with Brahminical power.

A notable difference discussed widely about the film was using the black-and-white lens to transport the audience to an “age of madness” coloured with casteism and feudalism. Director Rahul Sadasivan has mentioned that taking the entire movie in a monochromatic lens was a huge risk at the onset of production

processes (Sadasivan). But this decision highlighted the contrasts and added a visual language to the film. The decision to shoot entirely in black-and-white, much like Nolan's use of monochrome in *Oppenheimer* to signal objectivity, marks a historical dissonance—a past devoid of colour, both literally and ideologically. The choice heightens the uncanny and suggests that casteism and feudal decay are artifacts of a regressive past. The choice adds to the uncanniness as it brings “an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identities of objects and people . . . creating a parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses” (Gunning, quot. in Jervis and Collins 5). Furthermore, the film was shot in a 2:1 ratio to heighten the sense of being trapped inside the *mana*. The space, thus, transforms into a manifestation of “Bramayugam,” “the age of madness,” a decadent part of *Kaliyugam*, “the age of darkness,” which is currently unfolding as per the Hindu mythology.

The film's art director, Jothish Shankar, constructed the Kodumon mana by building a film setting out of the most gracious, age-old sets of the Malayalam film industry. He used 3000 grow bags to show vegetation colonising the walls, courtyard, and front yard of the mansion (Shankar), which was grown over four months to reach the required length. They used two separate mansions renowned for their architecture and heritage: Varrikkaseri Mana and Olappamanna Mana. Both are situated in Palakkad, Kerala, and are marketed as tourism spots. The latter can be booked as a homestay using their official website. Varrikkaseri mana was shown as a haunted house in *Drona 2010* (2010), starring Mammooty in the lead role. However, this film portrayed the space using the commercial horror genre unlike *Bramayugam*. By reconstructing the *mana* through the logic of the uncanny and rooting the horror in caste-coded trauma, the film invokes a historiographic counter-memory. The illusion of *mana* as cultural heritage is punctured. What remains is not nostalgia, but a palimpsest of struggles, appropriations, and hauntings.

Recent Malayalam cinema has shown an increasing willingness to engage more directly and critically with the structures of caste, moving beyond tokenistic portrayals or victimised subaltern figures. As V. K. Karthika argues, films such as *Puzhu* (2022) and

Malayankunju (2022) foreground caste-based violence in domestic and psychological spaces. These films dismantle the upper-caste patriarch's authority within the home, emphasising how structural and cultural violence sustains caste oppression through normalised intimacy and control. Similarly, Venkatesan and James' analysis of *Papilio Buddha* (2013) critiques the long-standing invisibilisation of Dalit identities in Malayalam cinema. This paradigm shift—from liberal-humanist redemption arcs to self-reflexive caste critique—signals a rupture in Malayalam cinema's historical allegiance to Savarna narratives. Malayalam cinema is undergoing a cultural reshuffling, where folklore is no longer a Brahminical domain but a contested site of memory, resistance, and revision. In Nirmal Sahadev's *Kumari* (2022), Chathan is portrayed as a vengeful and loyal deity protecting the tribal community and his allies by disorienting the Brahmanical household through natural calamities and ailments. The folkloric figure in this film becomes a metaphor of the repressed resistance as well. Within this evolving context, *Bramayugam* joins a growing cinematic movement that reclaims narrative and spatial agency for the subaltern, not as mere victims or side characters, but as central, destabilising forces in the reimagination of Kerala's regional history.

Conclusion

Bramayugam presents conflicting narratives of caste and religious power by drawing from both canonical and subaltern traditions. These narratives reflect the tension between upper-caste authored texts and oral tales from marginalised communities. The film foregrounds the figure of Chathan, a folkloric deity, and adopts elements of folklore not to valorise them but to reconstruct a familiar space—the *mana*—through tools often associated with Brahminical authority. By employing archetypes found in the text *Aithihamala*, the film reorients them through visual and narrative strategies that shift their function and meaning.

The use of the “uncanny” is central to this reorientation. The *mana*, traditionally framed as a space of order, hospitality, and ritual purity, is rendered unsettling through its transformation into a site of spectral excess. This effect is achieved through monochromatic

visuals and a carefully composed soundscape that evokes a sense of historical distortion rather than clarity. Such aesthetic choices displace the symbolic purity of the *mana*, suggesting an inversion of the space's ideological structure. This process of spatial and symbolic inversion is extended further through the representation of the *mana* itself. By setting Kodumon mana in widely recognised locations such as Varrikkasseri mana or Olappamanna mana, and by modifying its interior with unfamiliar objects, vegetation, and arrangements, the film detaches the *mana* from its typical cultural associations. The breakdown of visual order, coupled with the presence of physical decay, interrupts the viewer's recognition of the space as an emblem of tradition.

The casting of Mammooty as Chathan, disguised as a Brahmin magician, complicates the semiotics of caste and performance. Given his established cinematic persona as a patriarchal figure aligned with order and tradition, his portrayal in this role introduces a layer of dissonance. This dissonance challenges the association of upper-caste aesthetics with dignity and control, and instead exposes their constructedness through narrative performance. *Bramayugam*, by drawing on regional myths and employing aesthetic strategies associated with the uncanny, participates in a larger discourse around caste, historiography, and cultural memory. Rather than constructing a new canon, it interrogates the assumptions underlying existing narratives and representations, particularly those surrounding space, authority, and identity. Its intervention lies not in resolution or endorsement, but in presenting a configuration where dominant structures are rendered unstable and open to scrutiny.

Endnotes

- i. Potti is a sub-caste among Brahmins.
- ii. Varahi is debated to be one of the Saptamatrikaas.
- iii. *Aithiyamaala* is a collection of stories from Kerala that covers famous people, historical events and supernatural tales.
- iv. A case was filed against the producers of the film for using the name Kunjamon Potti for the title character who practises black magic which led to the producers changing that name.

- v. Upasana is a ritual performed to appease a deity for long-term. It could be carried out for generations for protecting one's family.
- vi. Valluvar is a sub-caste belonging to the Paraya community of South India.
- vii. Malaya community is a mountainous tribe residing in the parts of Kozhikode, Kannur and Malappuram districts.
<https://kirtads.kerala.gov.in/2017/10/11/malayan/>
- viii. *Maadanpothu* refers to tribal deities seen as 'lower' nature gods; the term combines *Maadan* (a tribal deity) and *Pothu* (a bull).
- ix. *Parambrahma* is a term from Hindu philosophy used to define the eternal being.
- x. Mythscape is a term to denote 'the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly' (Bell).
- xi. Kanni Koythu is the first crop harvest in Chingam (August–September in the Gregorian calendar).
- xii. The *Gemino Curse* from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* causes uncanny object multiplication, as seen with Helga Hufflepuff's cup.
- xiii. Thambaye is the second song in the film that describes the master or the landlord, who is deemed as the one who could vanquish all the difficulties of the world.

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Negotiating Performativity and Commodification: The Artistic Shift from *Pattachitra* to *Kalighat* Paintings

Neha Pandey*

Abstract

Pattachitra, a traditional scroll painting art form that relies on oral storytelling and ritualistic modes, transitioned into single-sheet *Kalighat* paintings in the nineteenth century colonial Bengal. This marked a significant change in painting techniques, iconography, subject matter, and audience engagement. Using Igor Kopytoff's framework of cultural biography of things, the paper traces the trajectory of this evolution from ritualised performance to commodified market goods and eventual museumisation. Situating these art forms in the framework of commodification and singularisation, the paper explores how traditional folk art forms accommodate changing sociocultural dynamics, performance, and cultural resistance. Using Richard Bauman's insights on metacommunication and framing, the paper analyses how the performative aspect of *Pattachitra* was reconfigured in *Kalighat* paintings through bold stylistic exaggeration and satire, instead of the oral-visual storytelling of *Pattachitra*.

Keywords: Commodification, *Kalighat* Paintings, *Pattachitra*, Performativity, Singularisation

Introduction

Folk art is often associated with tradition and continuity and is regarded as a site for upholding cultural uniqueness. Practiced mostly by rural artists, it is regarded as an unchanging time capsule, a residual home for cultural uniqueness to assuage the anxiety produced by the idea of losing cultural heritage in globalised urban centres. However, folk art traditions are in no way temporally and spatially fixed and dynamically adapt to changing socio-cultural

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contexts, often retaining certain core elements. The transition from *Pattachitra*, a ritualised and performative tradition of scroll painting, to *Kalighat* paintings, an urbanised art form, reflects such a transition in the visual lexicon of Bengal. While *Pattachitra* was highly embedded in oral narration and communal performance, *Kalighat* paintings became commercialised single-sheet artworks for an urban audience. This was not just a stylistic change, it was an alteration that fundamentally reconfigured the function of art, how audiences interacted with the form, and how it was manipulated in the hands of the artists. It shows how traditional folk arts negotiated between cultural resistance and economic survival when confronted with urbanisation and commercialisation.

Igor Kopytoff's concept of the "cultural biography" of things examines how objects gain different meanings as they move through social and economic contexts. Kopytoff asserts that much like humans, objects also have a "cultural biography", which showcases how the status of an object changes within society. The objects go through a process of commoditisation and singularisation, where commoditisation is the process of ascribing market value to an object, placing it in a process of transaction and singularisation is when it is removed from the market and considered singular and unique. He problematises these processes and argues that "the same thing can be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another . . . the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by the other" (64). Employing the framework, the paper examines how *Kalighat* paintings were commoditised as they moved away from the oral-visual storytelling mode of *Pattachitra* to a static frame in an urbanised milieu. However, it argues that for the *patua* artists, the art form was not just a commodity but a medium for expressing their alienation in the Westernised metropolis, attributing a singular status beyond market value. The study contends that although the paintings of *Kalighat* lost the seeming performative element of *Pattachitra*, the artists used visuals to reinterpret the performance. Using the concept of "metacommunication and framing" proposed by Richard Bauman, it can be seen that the performance aspects were reconfigured in *Kalighat* paintings as the paintings were framed within the visuality itself. By examining the changes in artistic methods, iconography,

and the intended use of both art forms, a change in folk tradition is identified as it deals with shifting cultural contexts and social realities.

The name *Pattachitra* comes from the Sanskrit “Patta”ⁱ, denoting “cloth,” and “Chitra”, referring to “picture,” describing its intrinsic medium: scroll paintings of narrative. *Pattachitra* was practiced traditionally by *patuas* (or *chitrakars*) and fuses visual imagery with oral recitation—*pater gaan*—when the rhythmic unrolling of scrolls (*pat khelano*), synchronised with song and hand gesture, transforms static images as an active narrative experience. This multimodal practice was not simply an art form but a ritualistic and communal experience deeply embedded in religious, social, and cultural life. The historical trajectory of *Pattachitra* extends across centuries, with early examples preserved in collections such as the Chester Beatty Library, which houses a Seventeenth-century *Pattachitra* depicting the *Bhagavata Purana* (Das 102). The *patuas* or *chitrakbaumas* of Bengal practice *Pattachitra*, a vibrant oral and visual tradition in which they produce intricate scroll paintings that function as both artistic and performing media. These scrolls, called *pattas*, tell stories from mythology, religion, and popular culture in successive panels, each containing multiple visual cues that guide the viewer through the story. *Pattachitra*’s themes, which include stories like *Chandi Pata*, *Durga Pata*, *Manasa Pata*, and *Krishna-Lila Pata*, is based on divine intervention, cosmic struggles, and moral lessons. The performative dimension of *Pattachitra* necessitates its analysis as a dynamic form of folk performance rather than a static artistic tradition.

Richard Bauman, in his work *Verbal Art as Performance*, shifts the analytical focus from folklore as static cultural material to folklore as a communicative practice, emphasising the dual nature of artistic action—the enactment of folklore—and artistic event—the performance situation encompassing performer, art form, audience, and setting (290). Central to Bauman’s theory is “framing,” a process through which “metacommunicative” cues signal to an audience that what follows is a performance rather than a straightforward representation. Drawing on Erving Goffman, he argues that “framing” is achieved through culturally conventionalised markers

that structure audience perception, ensuring that performance is recognised as distinct from everyday communication as he asserts “performance sets up, or represents, an interpretative frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal” (Bauman 292). While verbal performances rely on poetic forms, distinctive speech registers, or formulaic openings, visual performances employ exaggeration, symbolic distortion, and established artistic conventions to cue their performative nature. Crucially, Bauman emphasises that performance is inherently interactional—the performer actively structures the audience’s engagement through framing devices that shape how the message is interpreted.

Bauman’s framework provides a critical lens for understanding how visual storytelling traditions employ framing mechanisms to structure audience engagement. In this context, *Pattachitra* emerges not as a fixed text but as a dynamic performative act in which the painted scroll serves as a visual script, animated through the *patuas* oral narration and physical gestures. Even though these scrolls contain static images, *Pattachitra* is distinctive in that it is animated through the narrativisation of the performer. The painted scroll serves as a visual script, which is animated by the *patua* as he combines it with songs and expressive gestures. The artistic and symbolic meanings are tied to the contexts in which it is created and performed. As such, it functions as a multimodal, participatory experience as opposed to a passive visual object. As a framing technique, unfolding the scroll signifies the change from casual conversation to an immersive storytelling act. The paintings have a hierarchical composition that showcases divine figures through structured iconography that asserts their sacred authority. They also reinforce the divinity through oral narration, where the *patua* reciting mythological tales ensures a controlled, linear engagement with the narrative.

As a folk art, *Pattachitra* is a multimodal performative tradition in which meaning is created through the interaction of visual, oral, and gestural modes of expression rather than being restricted to one semiotic mode. Kress and van Leeuwen explain multimodality as the

combination of various representational modes, including images and spoken or written words, constructing meaning within particular sociocultural contexts (20). In *Pattachitra*, meaning is achieved with the interaction of several modes—visual imagery, oral narration, gesture, and rhythmic performance—transforming the painted scrolls from static paintings into a fluid, adaptive, and interactive storytelling practice. The narrative structure of *Pattachitra* challenges conventional conceptions of storytelling. Unlike single-frame paintings with predetermined meanings, *Pattachitra* offers a flexible narrative structure that adapts to its performative context. This adaptability enabled the form to remain relevant across diverse audiences and historical periods. As Balraj Khanna in the book *Kalighat: Indian Popular Painting, 1800-1930* observes that *Pattachitra* functioned as a multifaceted cultural medium, asserting that: “This was art, religion, education, and entertainment all rolled in one newsreel, a one-man museum of the moving image, poetry and song” (20). Outside of Brahminical literary traditions, the *patuas* reclaimed narrative authority through their art. These artists incorporated religious and mythological tales into the everyday lives of marginalised rural communities by adapting them orally, in contrast to Brahminical bards, who mainly relied on canonical Sanskrit texts. This creative agency positioned *Pattachitra* as an assertion of cultural identity through vernacular visual and oral traditions. Crucially, *Pattachitra* functions not as a static form bound by fixed textual sources but as a fluid site of meaning-making, continuously adapting as it travels across geographical and temporal boundaries. As it travels across regions, new socio-cultural influences are integrated while retaining core elements of its origins. This syncretism is evident in depictions of Manasa Devi, a regional snake goddess of Bengal (see fig. 1). Ananda Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita, in *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, interpret the legend of Manasa Devi as reflecting the historical conflict between Shiva worship and local female deities in Bengal. Over time, Manasa (or Padma) was integrated into Shaiva traditions as a form of Shakti. They note that, for many worshippers, the mother goddess remains more immediate and personal than the distant Shiva, who, in popular legends, is depicted with human-like qualities (323–30). *Pattachitra*’s narratives visually negotiate her presence rather than fully assimilating her into Brahminical frameworks. In contrast to

textual versions that eventually make amends for their differences, the *patas* frequently highlights Chand Saudagar's (the merchant) (Endnote ii) disobedience, leaving the resolution vague. This suggests that *patuas* prioritise localised interpretations over strict textual fidelity.



Fig. 1. Manasa Pata

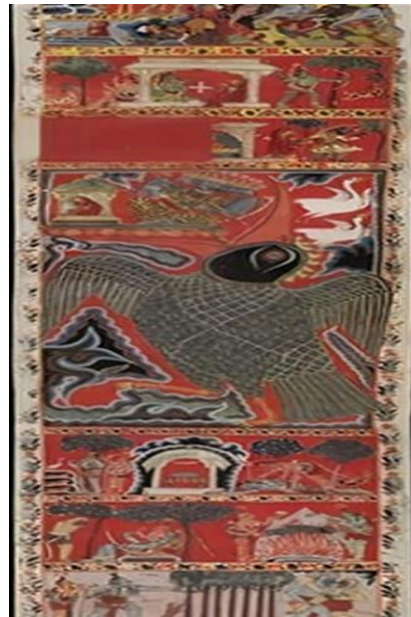


Fig. 2. Ramayana Pata

Amitabh Sengupta, in his book *Scroll Paintings of Bengal: Art in the Village*, attributes this fluidity of performance and representation to the *patuas* storytelling process, which largely relies on oral transmission and collective reinterpretation (20). By drawing upon inherited myths, lived experiences, and contemporary events—ranging from political upheavals to natural calamities—*patuas* ensure their narratives resonate with audiences. Multiple versions of the same narrative coexist, bearing witness to local sensibilities and contexts. Kapila Vatsyayan, in the foreword to Sengupta's book, makes this observation, arguing that although mythology and heroic actions are the core subject matter of *Pattachitra*, the tradition is

never limited to a strict textual foundation. As she claims, “[t]he *patua* is not illustrating a verbal text. He is creating a verbal and visual text, as also a kinetic text, simultaneously. Spontaneity and simultaneity are his artistic impulses which he still follows” (9). Such flexibility can be seen in the reinterpretation of the *Ramayana* by the Bengali *patuas*, illustrating how *Pattachitra* does not re-run canonical texts but reworks them to represent local virtues and oral traditions. *Pattachitra* also differs quite significantly from Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and even Krittibas’ regional adaptation by omitting characters like Manthara and Kaikeyi in selective choices. These selective choices illustrate that the *patuas* were less interested in the written text but their flexibility reordered the epic’s moral and ethical priorities. Furthermore, the omission of violent scenes like Rama’s killing of Vali or Shambuka indicates how *patuas* gave primacy to moral virtue and divine justice over martial exploits. Pika Ghosh in her article, *The Story of a Storyteller’s Scroll* develops this point, illustrating how *patuas* rework the *Ramayana* visually through the selection of telling (170–73). In several scrolls, the narrative starts not with Rama’s exile but with Jatayu’s meeting with Dasaratha. A dominant segment is given to Jatayu’s struggle with Ravana, which is mostly unrepresented in textual versions (see Fig. 2). There are *patas* that start with the grand description of Jatayu devouring Ravana’s chariot during Sita’s abduction, visually highlighting Jatayu’s resistance as a significant moment of the epic. Such reorganisation is not arbitrary but a representation of how oral traditions determine the priorities of the *patua* artists in storytelling.

Within colonial Bengal, the rise of the urban market and the decline of ancient patronage ignited a shift away from *Pattachitra* to *Kalighat* painting, altering not only the aesthetic of the style but also the very function. The economic culture of Bengal was reshaped through British colonial domination, compelling countryside artisans to alter their practices to survive in the growing urban marketplace of Calcutta. *Pattachitra* depended upon oral narration and shared involvement. In contrast, *Kalighat* paintings developed out of the metropolitan market of colonial Calcutta, where portability and instantaneous visual recognition outweighed the sequential performance of narrative. When *patuas* moved into the city, especially around the Kalighat temple, they adjusted their creative

practice to respond to the needs of the new public—city pilgrims, merchants, and the Bengali middle class. Originally meant as souvenirs for pilgrims at the Kalighat temple, early *Kalighat* painting was still observed to hold on to the religious iconography and themes of *Pattachitra*. But pressed by the requirement for quick production, urged by temple pilgrims who ordered and paid in advance of their visit and picked it up on return, stylistic modification was imperative. The long scroll narrative paintings evolved into one-sheet paintings, with complex compositions giving way to large, simplified figures with little background detail for speedy visual recall. Even traditional homemade dyes gave way to watercolours, indicative of both the pressure of production and the needs of a newly emerging urban market.

The move from *Pattachitra* to *Kalighat* paintings demonstrates what Igor Kopytoff identifies as the “cultural biography” of things, asserting that objects adapt different meanings as they move through varying social and economic worlds. Unlike the ritual economy within which *Pattachitra* existed, being invoked by performance, *Kalighat* paintings entered the colonial economy as commodities, being pieces of art objects. The availability of mass-produced paper, the needs of urban pilgrims, and the emerging consumer culture in colonial Calcutta contributed to turning them into easily marketable commodities. These instances represent what Kopytoff identifies as the movement of objects between singularisation and commoditisation, since *Kalighat* paintings oscillated between religious piety and trade. Kopytoff contends that “in small-scale societies, the tendency is to set aside a sphere of objects that are not commoditized, whose exchange is circumscribed, and whose singularity is protected” (73). *Pattachitra* was part of this category, as it refused to be commodified since its worth lay in performance, not material possession. Yet, as *patuas* moved to colonial Calcutta and found a new urban clientele, their art was subject to a commoditisation process, wherein *Kalighat* paintings on single sheets were marketed as commodities instead of participatory art. As *Kalighat* paintings evolved, they moved away from religious iconography to indulge in bitter social satire, exaggerating and distorting figures to comment on colonial modernity and indigenous hypocrisy. This transition reflects the tension between tradition and

modernity, as artists reinterpreted their visual language to fit the altered socio-political landscape of Nineteenth century Bengal. One of the key themes of this transition was the representation of the babus—rich, Westernised Bengali elites—who came to symbolise cultural alienation and moral debasement of the new middle class. Sumanta Banerjee, in the book *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*, observes how migrants from Bengal's countryside, bringing their traditions of folk art with them, synthesised new themes from their city environment to respond to the realities of urban life. While this critique found its expression in folk performances such as *bratas*, *kobi Gan* (poetical contests), *jatras* (folk drama), and satirical songs, it was in *Kalighat* paintings that it was most apparent (Banerjee 134-36). Tapati Guha-Thakurta explores this dynamic further in *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal*, arguing that while *Kalighat* paintings evolved in the colonial urban environment, their aesthetic sensibilities and thematic preoccupations were deeply rooted in the rural traditions (21). The migration of the *patuas* to Calcutta exposed them to new influences. However, instead of abandoning their art tradition, they adapted it to become an instrument of satire and social commentary. The negotiation of rural sensibilities and the alienation of the colonial city influenced the content and visual style of *Kalighat* paintings so that they were at once a product of their time and a resistance to it. Jyotindra Jain also places *Kalighat* paintings in the wider negotiation of colonial modernity and native traditions. At first, the paintings followed traditional religious themes, showing deities and mythological figures in contained narratives. As the style evolved, artists moved beyond religious iconography to depict contemporary social events, actively responding to the rapidly transforming world around them. This was not simply thematic but a visual development. While earlier paintings were contained within their pictorial space, later ones broke the fourth wall, with figures turning outward to face the viewer directly (Jain 13). This innovation entailed a move from a passive narrative to a more confrontational and interactive art experience, emphasising the performative nature of *Kalighat* paintings.

While *Pattachitra* accessed a performative and communal culture of narrative, *Kalighat* paintings expressed a new form of visual modernity that was at the heart of the visual vocabulary of colonial Bengal. They conjoined religious iconography with contemporary life by illustrating gods and goddesses as everyday middle-class protagonists, frequently represented in recognisable domestic settings. They also satirised Westernised values and provided commentary on affairs of the day by recontextualising mythological narratives. By bringing the sacred and profane together, religious figures were made more relatable and became conduits for social commentary, allowing the artists to speak to their audience both sardonically and reverently. A classic instance of this tension is presented in the *Kalighat* painting by Kali Charan Ghosh titled *Woman Trampling on Her Lover* (see Fig. 3). The painting recontextualises the traditional iconography of *Kali* standing over *Shiva*, translating it into a contemporary scenario where a mistress overmasters her lover. By accessing religious imagery, the composition enhances its satire of gender and morality, presenting the courtesan as a transgressive and overwhelming figure. This showcases how *Kalighat* painters reconfigured sacred symbols to enhance their satire, employing tradition not as inheritance but as an active tool of social commentary. In his reading of *Kalighat* paintings, Jyotindra Jain shows how divine iconography was entirely reworked to depict urban social realities and altered devotional sensibilities. He illustrates: “The image of the deity was constructed in the image of the man and whatever model of the latter was available in the society of the time was used as a prototype by the *Kalighat* artists. No wonder then that in such an environment the goddess Saraswati played the violin, Shiva looked like a middle-class family man, and Kartika a Calcutta dandy in these paintings” (Jain 93). A larger cultural shift is discerned here, where gods are assimilated into colonial Bengal’s emerging middle-class consciousness, shifting the focus away from hierarchical, cosmic grandeur towards personal, humanised relations. As opposed to *pattachitra*, where Shiva is *Nataraja* or *Mahadev*, cosmic power symbol, *Kalighat* painters depict him as a pot-bellied, casually attired Bengali gentleman, appearing like a wayside shopkeeper or lower-middle-class patriarch. His ascetic aloofness is replaced by domestic comfort, as he hugs infant Ganesha in his arms, while Parvati, as a

Bengali bride, claps to amuse the child (see Fig. 4). Shiva's *damru* (drum), which signifies creation and destruction, is depicted as a cosmic resonance instrument. In Kalighat, it is a child's rattle, stripped of its metaphysical connotations and recontextualised in a mundane domestic setting. Similarly, while Parvati in conventional iconography is depicted as *Mahishasura Mardini*, she is reimagined as a maternal figure, her martial power replaced by affection and domesticity. In some paintings, Shiva is depicted as a hemp-smoking ascetic, while in others he appears in a sexualised form, indifferent to his sagging loincloth and displaying an uninhibited physicality (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 3. Woman trampling over lover
Kalighat painting



Fig. 4. Shiva and Parvati



Fig. 5. Shiva with Parvati and Ganesha



Fig. 6. Cat with prawn in mouth

The subversion is carried over from Hindu gods to the priestly class, as manifested in the *Kalighat* painting of a cat with a prawn in its mouth (see Fig. 6). On the surface, the painting looks innocent, but its latent satire is revealed through a telling detail. The cat wears a *rasa koli* (devotional bead) on its head, identifying it as a symbol of a Vaishnav priest. Such a subtle but piercing visual metaphor reveals the hypocrisy of those who seem to be devout but secretly enjoy forbidden pleasures, common among the religious elites. Sumanta Banerjee contends that such images were used to “transfer the sanctimonious to the material sphere, in a gesture of protest against the ethereal world built by the Sanskrit-educated Bengali Brahman priests and their followers” (144). By situating both gods and priests in morally compromised, all-too-human situations, *Kalighat* painters satirised religious authority, deconstructed the idealised concept of the sacred, and compelled viewers to acknowledge the contradictions between religious ideals and lived realities in modern Bengali society.

Drawing on Bauman’s concept of “metacommunication and framing” mentioned earlier, it can be argued that *Kalighat* paintings, despite their shift from an oral-visual folk tradition to a strictly visual medium, retained their performative dimension through alternative framing mechanisms. As opposed to *pattachitra*, where performance was enacted through the gradual unfurling of the scroll and oral narration, *Kalighat* paintings relied on visual strategies to engage the audience. However, this shift did not erase performativity but rather restructured it, embedding culturally coded “metacommunicative” cues within the paintings that signalled to viewers how they should interpret these images. The analysis of the *Kalighat* technique highlights how the mode of production itself became a framing device. As *patua* art became commodified, paintings were mass-produced in workshops, where a principal artist created the outlines while assistants—often women—filled in the colours, producing hundreds of *patas* per hour. This shift influenced the visual style, particularly what Banerjee terms “pneumatic inflation”—the use of exaggerated, rounded forms instead of the angular forms of *pattachitra* (134). Although efficiency was a factor, he argues that such a stylistic choice was also an expressive device that enhanced the satirical element of the paintings. Figures such as the dandy, the

prostitute, and the impostor priest were depicted with inflated limbs and bloated faces, visually enacting a critique of their roles in colonial society. Jyotindra Jain's examination of *Kalighat* iconography further illustrates how framing is adapted to new socio-cultural contexts. Moving away from the hierarchical compositions and sacred imagery of *pattachitra*, *Kalighat* paintings domesticated deities, placing them in familiar, often humorous settings. The performative aspect of *Kalighat* paintings, therefore, no longer resided in the act of storytelling but in the viewer's ability to decode the visual cues and recognise the subversive elements within the imagery. In the commercial spaces of colonial Calcutta, where these paintings were displayed and sold, their framing differed from the ritualised storytelling settings of *pattachitra*. Because of the fast-paced, metropolitan setting in which *Kalighat* paintings were viewed, instant visual impact was crucial. Viewers were guaranteed to actively interact with the image, reacting to its culturally rooted framing cues, owing to the humour, sarcasm, and exaggeration.

The transformation of *Pattachitra* into *Kalighat* paintings can be examined as the processes of commoditisation, singularisation, and recontextualisation, highlighting how they acquire shifting cultural meanings as they move through different economic and social frameworks. The transition from *Pattachitra* to *Kalighat* paintings marked the first major shift in the biography of the folk art form. While *Pattachitra* was a ritualised, performative tradition that combined oral storytelling with sequential visual narration, *Kalighat* paintings emerged in colonial Calcutta as a response to urban markets. The narrative sequencing was abandoned in favour of single-sheet compositions, which were commercially viable and easily reproducible. Kopytoff contends that "publicly recognized commodification operates side by side with schemes of valuation and singularisation devised by individuals, social categories, and groups, and these schemes stand in unresolvable conflict with public commoditization as well as with one another" (80). This tension is particularly evident in the trajectory of *Kalighat* paintings, which, while mass-produced for an expanding urban market, were simultaneously singularised as tools of social critique. As Sumanta Banerjee asserts, the cultural expressions of these artists were not merely commercial products but radical manifestations of social

protest, critiquing both colonial influence and feudal customs through an earthy and direct visual language that stood in contrast to the more refined critiques of the educated Bengali elite (10). This dual existence of *Kalighat* paintings—as commodities and as instruments of subaltern critique—illustrates the tension between market forces and cultural expression. On one hand, these paintings were created for sale to temple-goers, traders, and the urban middle class, making them part of a new economy where art was increasingly driven by consumer demand. On the other hand, they remained deeply embedded in the *patua* community’s critical engagement with contemporary society, serving as a visual medium for satire, exposing the contradictions of colonial modernity, religious hypocrisy, and social inequality.

The final transformation of *Kalighat* paintings occurred through the process of museumisation. The subversive themes and the cultural appropriation were objectified as the paintings were reframed as historical artifacts. The performative aspects that get activated as the artwork engages with the audience in its raw form are stripped off as they are placed in a museum and singularised. Anuja Mukherjee, in her article *Kalighat Paintings: A National Artifact, the Folk and Counter Representation in the Making of Modern Art in Bengal*, argues that the “value of art is measured in two social capacities, the first being transfer of ownership to a buyer for his/her own interests and the second being transfer of ownership to museums (either directly or through constantly changing ownership)” (5). *Kalighat* paintings, she contends, were rapidly museumised because they were too radical for domestic display yet too urbanised to be reintegrated into rural folk traditions. Their satirical themes and crude realism made them an uneasy fit for elite households, leading to their reclassification as historical artifacts rather than active critiques of social and political structures. *Kalighat* paintings operated as weapons of the weak, as their satire and pictorial exaggeration subtly undermined colonial and feudal hierarchies without directly engaging in political confrontation. The museumisation of *Kalighat* paintings, while preserving their materiality, distanced them from their performative function, transforming them from living critiques of power into passive historical artifacts.

The marginalisation of both *Pattachitra* and *Kalighat* paintings also underscores the broader struggle of artistic traditions that operate outside dominant literary and institutional frameworks. It shows the privileging of textual traditions over visual and folk cultures. Classical Sanskrit texts have historically been regarded as authoritative repositories of cultural knowledge, while folk art, despite its dynamism and socio-political engagement, has been relegated to the periphery. As Jain states: “In the hallowed space of art history, the folk art of patua scroll painters and the highly innovative and contemporary pictorial expression of the Kalighat artists . . . had no place as these did not have the authority of the sacred text” (9). This exclusion was not merely aesthetic but ideological, reinforcing a hierarchical distinction between high and low art. Folk traditions, without written records, were often seen as temporary, commercial, or less intellectual, which pushed them further to the margins. Their decline worsened with the arrival of photography and academic realism in colonial and postcolonial India. Photography’s precision reduced the demand for hand-painted storytelling, while European-style realism, taught in institutions like the Government College of Art and Craft in Calcutta, was seen as the highest form of art, pushing indigenous traditions aside. As a result, *Kalighat* paintings, once popular in nineteenth-century temple markets, faded from public life. *Pattachitra* survived in rural Bengal and Odisha but lost much of its interactive storytelling role, becoming a static visual form. Today, these traditions mainly exist in museums, private collections, and heritage exhibitions removed from their original ritual and performative settings. This transformation represents a second type of singularisation—turning everyday art into prestigious heritage symbols (Kopytoff 82). However, this also creates a paradox, for while these artworks are preserved, they are now separated from the communities that once created and used them.

Endnotes

- i. Pata refers to the cloth or fabric on which the paintings are made
- ii. From “The story of Mansamangal”

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Re-Negotiating the Contours of Folk: A Critical Study of Dynamic Alternative Indian Pilgrimage

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Abstract

Folklore has been associated with the oral storytelling, communal and a performative tradition and is passed down to generations. With the rise of digital media, folklore has transitioned from physical performances to networked expressions mediated online. This paper aims to highlight the performative nature of folklore and how it is being transformed by it. Performance theory and Digital Folklore Theory forms the methodological framework for this inquiry. The study applies the concept of “liminality and communitas” by Victor Turner and “restored behaviour” by Richard Schechner to analyse performed folklore. Drawing on the Digital Folklore Theory, the concept of Vernacular Web by Robert G Howard and Internet as a folkloric space by Trevor J Blank. Through *yatras* as the primary manifestations of folklore, this paper examines alternative Indian pilgrimages as an ecosystem shaping the traditional contours of folklore through modern interventions of live performances and digital interaction.

Keywords: Communitas, Digital Folklore, Folklore, Liminal Space, Performed Folklore, Vernacular Web

Introduction

Folklore is usually associated with the oral stories and myths that come from diverse communities. These stories showcase their traditions, rituals, customs and shared expression, and were passed on from generation to generation. “Folklore applies only to that item in culture that had vital currency in previous stages of human evolution and either survived the changes of time and became a lively fossil or remained alive among those segments of society least

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exposed to the light of civilization” (Ben-Amos 8). However, in contemporary times, folklore has turned into an evolved phenomenon and has gone beyond the physical enactments adapting to newer modes of creation and dissemination, making its place on the digital front as well. The representation of storytelling and preservation of folklore have transitioned from spoken to social media threads.

This paper analyses the chosen alternative *yatras*, i.e., *Jagriti Yatra* and *India City Walks*TM through their social media accounts and websites, to examine the contours of folklore. The selected *yatras*, namely *Jagriti Yatra* is an entrepreneurial train journey which covers the tier-2, 3 cities of Middle India in fifteen days and another is *India City Walks*TM which is a travel and heritage initiative that explores various cities by guided walks and focuses on storytelling, history, architecture and local heritage of a city. These modern *yatras* act as a site of living folklore as they continuously create stories and traditions through actions, where collective performance reinforces new transformation and identity. It provides a space for new traditions to be formed; a platform for storytelling; formation of new stories; and re-telling and re-interpretation of the old stories as individuals from different cultures come together. However, in the contemporary age digital platforms have become the hub of folklore creation, what the village was to the traditional folklore. As the new traditions and rituals are being performed in the age of the digital platform, there is a dispersion of folklore in the digital age as well, spreading out to a wider audience. It gives an opportunity to the people/users of the platform to reinterpret and recreate folklore in the contemporary context. Thus, the blending of ritual performance and digital dissemination turns oral traditions and folklore into a living ever-evolving folklore.

The objective of the paper is to highlight the performative nature of the folklore that is created by the *yatras* and how it transitions into Digital Folklore. Through an analysis of the songs, slogans and phrases used in *yatras* as performances of the folklore and creation of a community, the paper examines the shift from the physical folklore to Digital Folklore and how the folklore further reshape participation and meaning in the selected *yatras*. The theoretical framework for the study draws on the Performance theory and Digital

Folklore theory, in which the former applies the concept of “Liminality” and “Communitas” by Victor Turner and the concept of “Restored Behaviour” by Richard Schechner. Also, the paper employs the concept of “Vernacular Web” by Robert Glenn Howard. Turner discusses the idea of a liminal phase—a temporary middle space where individuals enter while leaving behind their previous identity and social norms—experiencing transformation with the use of activities, slogans, phrases and songs that function as rituals and tradition during the phase to build up a shared identity and collective participation. These activities further create *communitas* among the people, which stays even after the individuals have returned back from the liminal phase. Rituals can be a part of community or culture, but they also transform and shape the people they are performed by. The concept of “Vernacular Web” by Robert Glenn Howard emphasises the internet as a folkloric site, where individuals and agencies function as nodes of the web in the network and create stories together. On the other hand, Trevor J Blank discusses how oral traditions and storytelling are transformed into names and hashtags, further helping the evolution of folklore by disseminating it to the online users.

In bridging the traditional and digital folklore, this study is a significant intervention into tracing the altered space of *yatra* with the coming of digital platforms. It shows that *yatras* are more than just an ordinary journey but they are also performances which through repeated actions and rituals such as singing of songs, chanting slogans and storytelling create a sense of shared identity and community. Furthermore, there is a formation of the ecosystem of modern folklore as these *yatras* use social media platforms in addition to the performed folklore that is created during the journey. It helps the participants to stay in touch, even after the journey has ended, and continues to recreate and reinterpret the folklore. Oral traditions evolve in the digital space ensuring that folklore remains dynamic and relevant as it will continuously keep in touch with contemporary culture.

***Yatras* as Liminal Spaces**

Traditionally, folklore was considered to be a belief system, set of customs, songs and practices passed down to the next generation in

the form of oral storytelling in a community. Folklore has helped people celebrate their histories and in forming their identity as well as understanding their shared experiences with other people: “This is evident that storytelling serves a role of uniting communities” (Samwel 34). However, it was carried from one generation to the other, and the stories remained static. So, the study explores how alternative *Yatra* acts as a liminal space—a transitional space where an individual undergoes change and helps to build “communitas”—referring to the deep sense of togetherness and equality that emerges in an individual or a group of people after engaging in the ritualistic traditions. These *Yatras* act as a movement which brings individuals together in a cultural experience through collective chanting, providing them with a sense of belonging.

Performed folklore is not just spoken or sung but intricately conducted through elaborate performances. Rather than being passive consumers, individuals participate actively to form a community. Herbert Reid discusses how folklore contributes to the public sphere presenting a vision of a “performing society” that generates public opinion through diverse means. People join these *Yatras* with the purpose of learning about entrepreneurship or the history and culture of the city, but it is through an active engagement with the performed rituals that they come together to create performed folklore. For instance, *Jagriti Yatra*, which is an entrepreneurial fifteen-day train journey, transforms the train journey into a space where cultures can be exchanged as the participants move forward with a shared vision of change and progress. On the other hand, *India City Walks*[™], which is based on storytelling by the guides, narrates the tales of history and heritage to the participants. In both of these *yatras*, folklore is not only discussed but also actively recreated to help shape new traditions.

In the concept of “liminality and communitas” by Victor Turner, liminal spaces refer to the zones that are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (359). Therefore, the entities are detached and do not belong to the previous identity, but they have not transitioned into a new form either. However, the entities are in the transformative phase and are moving towards change because they

are characterised by fluidity and ambiguity. The rituals that are performed put the participants in an “in-between” state of transformation, the state of liminality which allows participants to grow and form bonds with one another. While talking about the *yatra*, Soonrita Sahasrabudhe, expressed (*Jagriti Yatri* 2008): “I don’t feel alone anymore - I am connected to a sea of young India that is positive, enterprising and ethical” (*Jagriti Yatra*). This statement exemplifies the concept of “communitas” as it shows the spontaneous bonding that occurs in liminal spaces.

Drawing on the concept of Victor Turner, alternative *yatras* can be considered as a modern “rite of passage,” a passage in which people undergo an experience of transformation. Here, *Yatra* functions as a liminal space as it becomes a transitional space transcending boundaries where daily lives are usually carried out. *Jagriti Yatra* is called the “journey of awakening” and “journey to inspire” (*Jagriti Yatra*) and the “train” through which the participants travel is taken as the symbol of physical and psychological threshold to undergo the phase of liminality. Deferring their daily activities, the participants enter a liminal space afforded by the *yatras* that enable new, albeit transitional identities to be formed. For example, participants of *Jagriti Yatra* and *India City Walks*[™] postpone their daily lives and jobs for a while to take on the role of a participant in these *yatras*. Walking through various monuments in *India City Walks*[™] produces a sense of liminality as the the past and the present collide via historical storytelling. This experience in producing a state of “in-betweenness” enables the participants to take up new identities while they travel. *Yatra*, hence, becomes a transformative space that alters an individual both, physically and spiritually, producing commensurate effects in both the faculties. The act of walking and sharing stories regarding the particular *walk* are considered to be rituals of the *yatra* itself.

The rituals that are performed during these *yatras* put the participants in a liminal state of transformation and they can experience a sense of “communitas” through the shared symbolic acts. “Communitas,” a shared sense of belonging, emerges during liminal experiences and contributes to collective transformation (Buechner et al. 6). For example, in the process of chanting and

singing hymns, where the general hierarchy is dissolved, everybody shares the same stage and they feel a sense of unity and togetherness which forms a unique community through a shared purpose. As all the participants come together in unison, these performative acts diminish the differences and there is a spontaneous bond that is formed. These synchronised movements create “communitas” which are formed by the shared rituals that go on at the time of *yatra*. These bonds are formed due to the repetition of the shared rituals. *Jagriti Yatra* has “1 train and 525 *yatris*” (*Jagriti Yatra*) as the snapshot of 2025 *yatra* shows how these 525 participants will come together for a shared idea and live together in a train for fifteen days; undergo the same issues as well as share their personal stories and struggles. The train becomes a safe space for all the participants and allows them to be vulnerable. Another example is that of the creation of new rituals as seen in an Instagram post where participants are sitting under the “300-Year-Old Banyan Tree” in Deoria, mirroring the traditional way of folklore in which there was a relevance of Banyan Tree: “This iconic Banyan tree, standing tall in Deoria, symbolizes wisdom, resilience, and a space for connection and introspection that inspires every Yatri year after year. . . .” (@lyfeinframes). Aneri Seth captions a picture on her Instagram handle saying “I had planned 600 diyas to be lit under the ancient 300 year old Banyan tree followed by ‘Bargad Dhyan’ which is a very important element of the Yatra” (@aneri_1711). These rituals help in creating and re-creating liminal spaces and forming new folk traditions while still being in touch with the old traditions. The essential elements are not replaced; however, new rituals have been added to the same.

Richard Schechner theorises “Restored Behaviour” as those “stripes of behaviour,” similar in nature to the film stripes which “can be rearranged and reconstructed” (35). This means that while a behaviour may have occurred in the past, its reoccurrence is not a simple repetition but a re-enactment or a revised performance of past behaviours. This revision is not a spontaneous activity but a repetition of actions, rituals and traditions that have been re-enacted over time and is a “twice-behaved behaviour” (36). So, folklore is not always newly formed but also re-shaped and re-stored in a different context. As the folklore is restored every time, it increases the longevity of the rituals, traditions and the folklore. As Richard Schechner argues that

restored performance focuses on the actions, words and gestures from the past folklore or narratives that are brought back and are re-enacted in a new and a different context (36). This is how the *yatras* use songs and shared experiences to revive and preserve folkloric traditions in contemporary settings. These performed folklore engages participants in an experience that binds them together. In his view, actions are repeated and continued as they follow traditions but there are also variations and adaptations as those actions have to be given new meanings and recycled to the present contexts.

Yatras are ritualised journeys which contain various different pre-existing traditions, customs and performative acts. These are considered as the examples of the restored behaviour. In these *yatras*, participants come together and engage in chanting of songs and slogans which are not only spoken or sung but are performed and repeated in shared participation. In *Jagriti Yatra*, each *yatra* starts with certain rituals of lighting lamps and repeated chanting of the Jagriti Anthem “*Yaaro Chalo, Badalne ki Rut hai!*” by the new set of *yatris* which becomes a ritual performance fostering a sense of collective identity and continuity of the ideology (Really Vaibhav 00:53-00:56). In this way, a new tradition is formed but it is more than just a song or a chant, it is performed in a structured manner with hand and dance movements which makes it a cultural performance as well as performed folklore. In *India City Walks™*, the guides or the walk-leaders are re-enacting the historical narrative that functions as a repeated and ritualised performance which is carried out for all the groups participating on a daily basis. Hence, this ritualised performance will be done for each group. *India City Walks™* use slogans such as “Exploring the city’s soul!,” “a story to tell, a legacy to share” and *India dekho humare sath, chalo aaj kal ke saath* (*India City Walks™*) repeatedly, which sets the idea for the walk and which can also be seen on its website. It becomes a performance as the repetition takes the participants into the liminal phase. As the history is being enacted, the participants also engage with the story and add their perspective to the performing cultural memory. This makes the activity performative rather than static. In each of the *yatras*, the participants indulge in the narratives and rituals by creating and enacting folklore actively rather than receiving it passively. Rather than just a speech, the act of repetition of performative utterances or

responding strengthens participation and the sense of belonging, which further helps in reconstruction of shared identity and society. The videos made by the participants during the *Yatras* rituals turn performance folklore to Digital Folklore. Additionally, the phrases used at the *yatra* are turned into hashtags, thus, allowing performance folklore to be continuously re-enacted in multiple ways. The production of novel modes of folklore along with new rituals act as inspiration for people to take up such *yatras/walks*, therefore, expanding their network. For instance, a post by *India City Walks*TM says: “Reserve your place in a world of living traditions” (@indiacitywalks). This statement invites participants to be a part of the living traditions of the city.

Various traditional rituals are continued in each *yatra/walk*, but every event introduces a new element to the already existing narratives to ensure novelty while maintaining tradition. Each journey takes the shape of a spiral-like occurrence where despite the similar pattern of the *yatra*, the journey is never the same. This exemplifies Schechner’s “Restored Behaviour,” wherein by transcending the physical space of pilgrimage events, these *yatras* create their online presence and impact. This presence is not a simple occurrence and mutates with time given the dynamic nature of the platform. As folklores mutate online, they are bound to become participatory folklores due to the very nature of social media websites.

***Yatras* As Digital Folklore**

Traditional Folklore relied on oral tradition and face-to-face interaction; however, in contemporary times, the process of folklore creation and distribution has changed: “In the context of the Digital Age, “hybridization” exemplifies the process by which “real world” discursive practices significantly influence, and are reciprocally influenced by, virtualized discursive practice” (Blank 107).

Digital Folklore Theory explores how oral storytelling and communal rituals have now transformed into the digital era. The concept of “Vernacular Web” and networked folklore by Robert Glenn Howard and Trevor J Blank argue that digital spaces function as the new ecosystems of folklore, where new folklore is being

collectively re-created and re-shaped. In the traditional setting, folklore was based on proximity and directly communicated. However, in the contemporary and digital era, the focus has now shifted towards interconnectedness and virality, so folklore is no longer dependent on geographical and temporal factors. Instead, it allows for immediate interaction and reinterpretation for a longer period of time as it can be performed and archived simultaneously. Traditional folklore was fixed and static, but Digital Folklore is fluid and dynamic. It is constantly in the state of recreation, remixing and reinterpretation which is done by the digital tools that allow people to edit, share and mix the cultural materials due to which Digital Folklore has become more interactive: "Traditional art forms has also transformed and modelled itself to suit the diverse needs of the modern society. This shift in technology has led to rising consciousness about the people's cultural ideologies and customs" (Samwel 35).

The concept "Vernacular Web" by Robert Glenn Howard, describes how folklore is created and the way cultural traditions are reshaped in the digital space. Here, digital spaces act as a platform where new folklore can be created. Howard discusses the idea of the Internet being interconnected as a "web," where individuals and institutions function as nodes of the web that create rituals together by adding their perspectives and ideas to it. None of which has the primary agency to make the decision on the traditions. Howard argues that folklore exists between institutions and the user-generated content. It refers to the social media interactions, meme sharing, hashtags and *YouTube* videos which are user-driven and are informal and participatory in nature. Online folklore allows for active participation in its creation or recreation. Users can engage, change and reshape traditions. Therefore, it does not solely depend on the stories and rituals introduced by the institutions, but both the sources play their role in shaping the folklore.

Trevor J Blank expands on the concept of "Vernacular web" by focusing on the internet that reshapes and recreates folklore but does not entirely replace it as a folkloric site. Memes, hashtags and online storytelling function as the modern way of reshaping folklore. Blank highlights that even Digital Folklore is performative in nature, as the

user keeps interacting with the shared posts/reels. With the help of the hashtags and captions, the users constantly keep adding their thoughts and views through comments or hashtags. Users engage in the creation of stories and their dissemination via the digital front in this way. These ideas create a framework for how folklore is moving from oral traditions in real-world settings to digital and interactive ones. Individuals engage on the digital front actively, and modify and reshare the folk traditions. As oral storytelling is disseminated by retelling, in the same way it happens through reinterpretation on the digital front. Melnikova discusses how the internet provides a unique communicative environment that fosters innovative cultural and linguistic phenomena, stimulating users' creativity through text, graphics, sound, and animation (4).

Traditionally, *Yatras* were undertaken by being physically present, but alternative *Yatras* have changed the scenario into a more inclusive environment which makes folklore more sustainable and adaptable. Beyond the physical enactments, they have also begun to use social media as digital folk platforms, such as *Instagram*, *YouTube*, blogs and vlogs to function as the modern storytelling platforms. The Internet plays the role of a folkloric site, where there is a never-ending creation of the previous stories and development of new ones. *Yatras* and the folklore created exists beyond the journey through the digital platforms, as the stories or the impact through the posts and videos stay with the online participants/users. The most important difference between the two kinds of folklore is that Digital Folklore does not require the participants to be present physically—anyone can contribute or circulate a piece of folklore. For instance, participants in *Jagriti Yatra* and *India City Walks*[™] initiate conversations through hashtags and captions used on their websites and on their social media handle, thus, allowing previous and the upcoming *yatris*/participants to engage in Digital Folklore creation. In addition, the Instagram reels perform as channels for a networked folklore due to the ease of their distribution and dissemination. So, the production of posts/reels on these platforms are considered to be a digital living folklore as they mutate by being a remix of the old lore, allowing the online users to comment and discuss their own personal stories regarding the story being posted and embody a feeling of personally having been there. For example, *India City*

Walks[™] offers capacity building programs powered by incubation, certificate courses that are designed to build expertise in storytelling and offer culture literacy, fostering entrepreneurship” (*India City Walks*[™]). As a result, the *yatras*’ websites and social media accounts offer and promote storytelling culture and legacy so that people can engage with the folklore and participate.

In the digital era, the non-participants are able to become involved and engage with the ongoing and established folklore as social media has reshaped and recreated folklore. Thus, making folklore a lot more visible and adaptable. The slogans, stories and performances become memes, reels and hashtags that continue to evolve. *India City Walks*[™] use the slogans that are re-used on its website, becoming the motto of the *yatra* for the leaders as well as participants, who aspire to go on this *yatra* and the individuals also take back the feeling of solidarity and togetherness of those who participated in these walks. Even *YouTube* vlogs are uploaded by the participants and the organisers, which showcase their personal reflections, speeches from mentors, allowing future participants and non-participants to be familiar with the concept.

The hashtags which are employed on the social media accounts of the chosen *yatras* regarded as digital proverbs, fall under the formation of Repetition-Variation-Participatory. These hashtags are frequently used and are accessible to all users with a single click. The “Repetition” of the phrases turns into a variation by remixing the words or phrases where various users can use the same hashtag on a variety of posts which do not necessarily have to be similar or even directly related to *yatras*. This helps folk to be adapted to new contexts. The perpetual networked sharing and dissemination on a global scale enables a form of “Participation” of the users to create and produce modern lore and keeps the old folklore alive. Hashtags are used as digital-cultural tools which also form a digital community. For instance, a scroll through the official Instagram handle of *Jagriti Yatra* reveals repetition of certain hashtags such as: “#JagritiYatra, #TransformativeJourney, #Community Empowerment, #UnityinDiversity, #YatraDiaries, #OnceAYatriAlwaysAYatri, #BuildingIndiaThroughEnterprise, #JourneyofChange, #YaaroChalo” (@jagritiyatra), a song sung in the

beginning of *Jagriti Yatra*, can be performed in the ongoing *yatra* events. These hashtags support the idea of diversity among the people of the *yatra* but also the non-participants online. The *Instagram* posts are created into memes for online users to relate to them. For instance, the posts give reference to the titles of Bollywood movies such as “Zindagi... Na Milegi Dobra” (@jagritiyatra). All these hashtags support and spread the idea of change through the *yatra*. The taglines used on the website of *Jagriti Yatra*, such as “Journey of Awakening” spreads out the idea that whoever participates in this *yatra* will be awakened. So, the use of websites and social media is essential in the formation of Digital Folklore. In digital spaces, it can be made into a written *Instagram* caption or can be recorded to be published on a *YouTube* channel, so that it can be preserved and can be recreated in the future.

India City Walks[™] uses the hashtags “#Walkthestory, #CulturalRevival, #StorytellingforChange, #PreserveourPast, #HeritageConservation, #EchoesofthePast, #Storycation, #Gullygyan, #IncredibleIndiaStories” (@indiacitywalks) which are used as the digital proverbs to primarily understand the idea of the *walks*. These hashtags create the feeling of going back to the old traditions of folklore, celebrating the idea of the past but also add to the essence of the contemporary times. Social media and the algorithm of the platforms keep changing in accordance to the trends, so that the creation and dissemination of folklore also keeps changing. There is also a recreation of viral *Instagram* trends that are re-enacted by the participants and are uploaded on social media, to get more attention and followers. All of this is performed to spread the stories, culture and folklore of these *yatras*. Also, the use of certain songs induces a feeling of togetherness and unity that attracts non participating users towards the *yatra* narrative through strategically produced, publicly shared striking music and memorable tunes. Digital Folklore can be preserved through archiving stories and posts and vlogs. By combining these theories and applying on the *yatras*, it is evident that folklore is not static but participatory in nature. It acts as a networked folklore which is interactive, and the institution does not take the centre stage, allowing users to give their feedback and contribute to the stories and rituals. Folklore is being sustained through digital media, and *Yatra* and its

folklore exists beyond the journey through digital platforms: “This real communal lore can be expressed by the group at large in collective actions of the multitude, as Frazer defines it’s including public festivities, rituals, and ceremonies in which every member of the group partakes” (Ben-Amos 6).

Transformation of Folklore: Physical to Digital

This section of the paper deals with the transition of folklore from the physical to digital performance and also the differentiation between the physical presentation of folklore and the digital representation. In the physical spaces, modern folklore is created by chanting slogans, singing of songs and oral storytelling. Modern Folklore is “the whole body of people’s traditional beliefs and customs,” differing from the traditional folklore in its scope, range, and diversity (Frazer vii). This includes live performances, slogan chanting, and various other activities that enhance social cohesion and spiritual expansion. The live performance of the slogans and songs in the *yatras* disseminated through online channels, creates a sense of solidarity and togetherness among the participants. While the response in the audience that accesses this material digitally is not equivalent to that of those present physically, due to the distance created by online modes; nonetheless, those viewing the *yatras* online are able to access these journeys and participate in them, an avenue that traditional *yatras* do not afford. Singing songs during train journeys, in unison, provides participants with a sense of community, power, and hope of unity, community and purpose. This still does not discount the possibility provided by the digital sphere for participation, interaction, reinterpretation, and agency that an individual can now exercise.

Social media not only focuses on preserving but also recreating folklore. It allows for the folklore to go beyond the local region and to a global platform to reach wider audiences. Slogans take the shape of hashtags and digital proverbs. Hashtags act in a similar manner as the oral traditions. Traditional folklore was dependent on the repetition of the same song or slogan, and in a similar manner hashtags also function by resharing a particular hashtag or retelling a story, it acts as digital artefact which are repeated and users can go back to the restored and archived videos and post of the same story:

“The folk realm is not located in a socioeconomic sector or particular nationality but instead represents a participatory process that some posters refer to as the democratic or open web” (Browner 23). The recordings made of the performances and songs are uploaded on *YouTube* and function as an archived folklore. For instance, *Yaaro Chalo* song can be viewed and recreated on *YouTube* and some of its snippets can be seen on the *Instagram* reels as well. In the same way, as *India City Walks*TM uses oral storytelling as its main performance, it is turned into *Instagram* reels and blog-posts. These uploads have a wider audience than the ones who were physically present there. Also, it allows the newer audience to recreate the story as well as re-interpret it in a different manner. Memes and reels are used to reinterpret the slogans and songs, which makes them relevant to the newer audience and people and allows them to influence and to maintain its cultural core.

The performance in a physical space is different from the interactions in a digital sphere as it transforms the meaning of folklore and participation. In a physical performance, the folklore is involved with high energies of the songs and slogans and the participation is one-on-one among all the participants. However, Digital Folklore allows wider participation in the form of reels and posts but does not have the similar impact as of the live performance, even then it puts the online user watching the video or posts in the state of liminality for a shorter span of time. For example, to be able to have a look at the heritage sites along with its historical narrative or the song or chants during the *Jagriti Yatra* will have a different impact in-person and on a digital platform. Digital Folklore is fragmented as the online users can only engage with different and selected pieces of the complete folklore. Even though the reach is wider, the authenticity of the folk can be questioned in the digital space.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the digital platform creates a space for disseminating folklore and turning it into a model of technology and tradition which forms a hybrid ecosystem. It has multiple components where each entity contributes to the system and it continuously keeps evolving in the contemporary context. Hence, the alternative *yatras* functions as

a hybrid folklore ecosystem, where rituals and traditions are performed both physically as well as digitally. *Yatras* provide an inclusive and democratised form of folklore as the digital framework ensures that now folklore transcends the geographical, social and financial factors. It allows users, participants and non-participants to actively indulge in creating modern folklore. The elements also have a relationship with one another in a way that they are dependent on each other and influence each other's perspectives. *YouTube* vlogs, *X* and *Instagram* updates help individuals experience folklore through the digital medium which was not present previously. The rituals that take place during *Yatras* are recreated, never in the same manner but in a spiral-like formation which means that the events, rituals and ideas are constantly changing whenever practiced. Therefore, producing an endless loop of self reflection through *yatras*.

Social media engagement expands the cumulative effect of folklore by producing a mutated version that is diverse, networked, and resists static expression of physical folklore through the vastly hybrid and dynamic digital space. The oral chants and songs disappear after the journey ends but the digital documentation of the same ensures that folklore is a living digital archive and available for future reinterpretations and recreation. So, *yatra* is not just an event but is also an interconnected cultural system that is performed, reshaped and archived. However, due to this the authenticity of folklore can be questioned as a larger platform enables a number of users to create or add to the already existing material. So, the source of the knowledge thus produced remains uncertain. Various historical anecdotes now exist as searchable folklore texts and digital guides that enable a meticulous preservation of folklore. Therefore, folklore is not just preserved but keeps evolving in the digital space.

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Humour and Identity through “Parodic Dubbing”: The Punjabi Adaptation of *Shanghai Knights*

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Abstract

This paper explores the various forms of Punjabi humour through the popular medium of dubbing which has been used to disseminate laughter in the public-cultural sphere. Punjabi humour, which lacks a systematic evolutionary account for it being oral in nature, is scarcely documented. This research examines the oral folk customs and traditions of Punjab like *Boliyan*, *Tappe*, *Sithniyaan*, and *Taane*, along with the Punjabi parodic dubbing of *Shanghai Knights* (2003), which will form a base for divulging some of these humour forms. *Jugat Baazi* (witty banter), *Taahne marna* (sarcastic remarks), *Tezaabi Totay* (acidic bits), *Gapp Baazi* (bragging), *Samtavaadi Haasa* (egalitarian laughter) are a few such forms which derive their essence from folk, as folk culture is not fossilised in time. As new mediums emerge, they carry folk elements within them as part of an active cultural memory. The investigation of the relationship between oral humour and its method of preservation (dubbing) reveals a hybrid mixture of tradition and modernity that embraces the evolving dynamics of cultural expression, highlighting how traditional oral humour adapts and perpetuates within contemporary digital media platforms. The study also highlights how Punjabi humour with its egalitarian ethos and carnivalesque spirit; disrupts hierarchical forms; ridicules authority; replaces the formal with the colloquial; and fosters communal laughter.

Keywords: Dubbing, Humour, Incongruity, Localisation, Orality, Parody.

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Introduction

Dubbing is a creative act of appropriation of cinematic narratives produced across cultures. This phenomenon of convergence and emergence of cultures surpasses the typical linguistic exchange and goes beyond linguistic equivalence. Because dubbing from a source language to a target language incorporates certain cultural and linguistic biases including ethnocentrism, stereotyping, domestication, and standardisation, as the dubbing masters prioritise familiarity over equivalence. This research paper focuses on “parodic dubbing,” a phenomenon explained by Rocio Banos as a “union of two loathed but highly influential forms of cultural appropriation, used innovatively in the current digital era” (Banos 171). This act of interchange appropriates the other, in this case, Hollywood, while retaining the otherness of the other, as the very act of dubbing the other acknowledges its presence. Appropriation is usually associated with negative connotations, ridiculed as a superficial exercise in mimicry. Nonetheless, the Punjabi tradition, deeply rooted in folk, extracts its practices of parody and humour from it. When applied to film dubbing, this tradition of parodic reworking allows marginalised communities to engage with and subvert dominant cultural narratives. Parody, in its ability to blend humour with critique, aligns profoundly with the essence of Punjabi tradition, serving as both a mirror to societal dynamics and a celebration of the region’s rich cultural ethos. *Jugat Baazi* (witty banter), *Taane Marna* (sarcastic remarks), *Tezaabi Totay* (acidic bits), *Gapp Baazi* (bragging), *Samtavaadi Haasa* (egalitarian laughter) are a few such humorous forms which derive their essence from folk as folk is not fossilised in time; as new mediums emerge, they carry folk within themselves as a part of active cultural memory. Dubbing, as a carrier of parodic and humorous traditions of Punjab, serves as a medium through which the culture celebrates, preserves and promotes itself. This research paper will attempt to study a “parodic dubbing” of *Shanghai Knights* (2003) done by Sajjid Jani as *Butt te Bhatti* (ਭੱਟ ਤੇ ਭੱਟੀ) (2003).

Parodic dubbing relies heavily on incongruity. James Beattie, an eighteenth-century philosopher and the propagator of the incongruity theory of humour, linked humour with memory. According to him, our laughter “always proceeds from a sentiment or emotion, excited

in mind, in consequence of certain objects or ideas being presented to it” (Beattie 304). The cause of humorous laughter is a dissonance between two circumstances, “considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them” (320). Sajjad Jani, a prominent *Jugat Baaz* and the dubbing voice of *Shanghai Knights*, explains *Jugat* as a conglomeration of these incongruous elements, *do mukhtalif cheezon ko milana, jo nahi ho sakta vo kehna par kahin na kahin link bhi ho, jaise ek jugat hai: yaar tu injh ein jida samundar ch kaccha rasta hunda* (“The Rise of Sajjad Jani” 30:05). Hence, this concept becomes metaphorical, analogical and a juxtaposition in its formation and style. Jani has imbibed this framework in the “parodic dubbing” of *Butt te Bhatti*, in which laughter arises from the incongruity between these elements: The original American-accented voiceover is replaced with a heavy-sounding Punjabi one; the female character is dubbed by a male artist, resulting in discordance; the serious is made comic (in exaggeration); and there is no regard for hierarchy, an all-pervasive tone of ridicule and mockery prevails.

Oral humour is ephemeral, as its fast-evolving pace hinders it from being documented for preservation purposes. The compilation of oral humour “was awaiting a medium and a moment to broadcast itself with full gusto” (Kumar 195). Technological enlightenment, with due credit to technology and gadgetry, made it possible to transcribe humour in visual and auditory forms. Punjabi, being a provincial language a few decades ago, needed to rely on a global medium to foster and disseminate itself to a mass audience. The dubbing of Hollywood into Punjabi seemed a fitting choice for it as it combined indigenous with the foreign, allowing a wider audience. Hence, dubbing became a medium to preserve and proliferate this humour.

Local artists often take liberties with the script and add their own impromptu elements based on the sensibilities of the local audience, making the dubbing more relatable. Everyday Punjabi slang and colloquial vocabulary is quite evident in these dubs, which varies from dialectical predilection to cultural references, societal, and religion-based nuances. This level of customisation does not only

enhance the local flavour but also makes the content seem less of a foreign product. “Foreignizing translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language” (Venuti 20). The aim of this research paper is to explore the various forms of Punjabi humour, illustrating them through the dubbing of *Shanghai Knights*. For the purpose of this paper, all passages attributed to the film *Butt Te Bhatti* have been translated into English by the author.

***Jugat Baazi* (ਜੁਗਤ ਬਾਜ਼ੀ)**

The word *Jugat* has its roots in Urdu, and it means “a method.” *Jugat baaz* (noun) is a person who makes a witty use of his humorous abilities and engages in comic banter for amusement. *UrduPoint* describes such a person as an “epigrammatist,” someone who presents an insightful idea in a satirical, witty, compact, and concise manner. The *Jugat* culture lacks a structural historical account, yet its roots can be traced in the other oral folk traditions of Punjab like *Boliyan*, *Sithniyaan* and *Tappe*, which are sung during wedding ceremonies, resonating with the spirit of *Jugat Baazi*.

Such “non-formal humour had to undergo fundamental changes as it entered formally into the age of print capitalism” (Kumar 197), while much of it could not be recorded since it falls under the tradition of orality. Age-old themes of gender-based mockery, physical disabilities and appearance, caste and class-based derogation, domestic violence, fat-shaming, and sexually inappropriate remarks are apparent in them:

*Kithe gayian laariyan teriyan dadkeya,
Teriyan udhal gayian lariyaan, ve dadkeya,
Choohre chad chamaraan de gayian, ve dadkeya*
 (“Sithniyaan”)

(where are your wives gone, oh grandparents!
They have eloped, oh grandparents
They have eloped to charamars, oh grandparents!¹
 (“Sithniyaan”)

This is an example of a *Sithni*, an oral folk song sung at the time of marriage. These are usually witty and playfully sarcastic, oriented towards the bride/groom's extended families, often light-heartedly criticising each other yet at the same time, a derogatory subtext of casteism prevails in it.

*Sun ni kudie kaantean walie,
kaante naa chamkaiye,
Khooh tobhe te hundi charcha,
charcha na karviye. (Kaur 638)*
(Listen, girl with earrings,
do not make them shine,
People talk about them at every nook and corner,
don't let them talk about you)

In this couplet, a girl with earrings—ornaments traditionally associated with enhancing beauty—is made wary of the fact that the villagers have begun commenting on her appearance. Therefore, she is advised to prioritise her modesty over her physical charm. Such guidance is often given by the elders to encourage appropriate behaviour in young women.

Such an exchange is hegemonic in its essence and is “implicated in the discourse of power . . . in which people from the lower castes and women in general were the primary target of ridicule” (Kumar 196). Apart from these gatherings, *melas* (festivals) and *baithaks* (social meetings) were a few of the early spaces in which similar humorous exchanges would flourish. During the Mughal and Sikh periods, Maharajas held courts and invited court jesters to entertain them. Bhandsⁱⁱ and Mirasisⁱⁱⁱ during that era were “admired by people for their jokes, ready wit, satire, and repartee” (Jilani et al 4732). One such entertainer named *Karela Bhand* was a famous court jester during the reign of Muhammad Shah Badshah. The rise of *Nukkad Natak*^{iv} (street theatre) and *tamasha*^v (folk theatre) further popularised this style. *Jugat Baazi* can be considered a vital element of such performances that developed over time through folk performing arts of this sort. In the late twentieth century, *Jugat Baazi* made its way into contemporary Punjabi cinema. Comedians like Rangeela, Umer Sharif, Jaswinder Bhalla, Kapil Sharma, and Bhagat Singh incorporated it into their acts. In a long-running Punjabi

comedy TV show *Chankata* (2000-2007) starring Jaswinder Bhalla, *Jugat Baazi* remains an important comic element throughout the series although the focus remains on discussing the politics of the prevalent times.

Jugat humour is equivalent to the game of “Dozens” (common in African American communities) in terms of stylistic reliance on quick wit, verbal dexterity and exaggerated insults, serving both as a form of entertainment that has its roots in orality and a display of social intelligence within a communal context. The game of dozens is named after the colonial practice of grouping the Blacks in lots of “cheap dozen” for sale to slave owners and “in effort to toughen their hearts against the continual verbal assault . . . Blacks practiced insulting each other indirectly” through this game in order to keep cool when abused by the coloniser (Saloy). Apart from “Dozens,” many other cultures have similar practices like *Jugat* embedded in their folk history: “Picong”^{vi} in the Eastern Caribbean, “Flying”^{vii} in Britain, “Balagtasán” in the Philippines, “Contrasto”^{viii} in Italy and the contemporary rap battles in America. While *Jugat* is occasionally unpolished, spontaneous and brash, most of the above-mentioned dialogic forms belong to the cultivated societies and hence, are poetic in style.

In the contemporary scene, *Jugat* has transitioned into a leisurely pursuit, serving primarily as a recreational outlet for communal engagement and entertainment. A popular *YouTube* channel named “Sajjad Jani” centres specifically around this type of humour. The premise of his thirty-minute-long shows revolve around a subject which is to be ridiculed for instance, *Jugats* on physical appearance or traits, behaviour or actions, social interaction, cultural or contextual ironies, and everyday situations. In a *YouTube* shot, Abbas Danish, a *Jugat baaz*, makes fun of his friend being an illegitimate child of his father. The joke goes like, *Enu isde abbu ne waaj maari, eh unnu jaake kehnda ji abbu ji? Oh apne dostan nu kehnda vekho mera hai vi ni meri kinni izzat karda (JugatBaziyaa)*. In another video, he makes a *Jugat* about his friend Faisal: *Faisal bhai ik bambrole de pichhe bhajji jaan, main kehda khair? Kehnda meri salwar vich reh gi (Jani 25:47)*. *Jugats* are seldom, but not always vulgar. In a comic discussion on fishing, a *Jugatbaaz* comments on

his friend's miserly nature, *Eni ku boti banh ke samundar ch sutt ke baitha, vicho machhi nikli, ohne boti dekh ke keha lakh lanat ae tere te* (Jani 32:45).

The videos gain millions of views and thousands of comments which indicate a general liking for this type of humour. A few instances of *Jugat Baazi* based on the appearance of the character are evident in the selected Punjabi dubbing of *Shanghai Knights*, *Butt te Bhatti*. Butt's (pronounced as Bhatt) buffoonery is amplified in the dubbed version when he makes jokes on ancestry, appearance and mannerisms of his adventure companion Bhatti (starred by Jackie Chan). The former makes passing references by calling Bhatti as *Budhi de mooh waleya* (the face that looks like that of an old lady), *Jackie Chan de najayaz bache* (illegitimate child of Jackie Chan), *khote jidda mooh bana ke tur peya, jalebiyan fadan wala chimta hunda e* (He walked away with a face like that of a donkey. It was like the tongs used to make jalebis) (*Butt Te Bhatti* 17:51). Butt justifies his jestering by saying, *O tuhanu pata mainu shugal karan di kini bhedi aadat ae* (Oh, you know I have a terrible habit of joking around).

Jugat Baazi is situational when it's not based on a person's physical appearance but rather is object-oriented. In a court scene, a caged tiger is presented to the English court from China as a gift to the Queen on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday. In the dubbed version, one of the members says, *Oye sher lai kea aye ne* (Oh, they got a lion) and another replies *Sher nai mainu te lagda kutte nu mehandi layi ae* (it's not a lion; to me, it appears as if a dog with henna applied on it) (*Butt Te Bhatti* 21:36). Another example of situational *Jugat baazi* is seen in a scene where Butt is trying to catch the attention of a British guard standing still, attempting to provoke a reaction. Approaching the guard, he quips: *Ah ser ki naayi de peepe chon kadeya?* (a remark aimed at the tall black fur cap worn by the British guards with the red uniform) (*Butt Te Bhatti* 36:51).

***Taahne Maarna* (ਤਾਹਨੇ ਮਾਰਨਾ)**

Characters engaging in a verbal duel of *Jugat Baazi* seldom make passing sarcastic remarks to each other. *Taahne Maarna* can be

considered as a subcategory of *Jugat*. This colloquial term that literally translates to ‘throwing taunts’ has its roots in oral Punjabi folk culture like the prevalent use of idiomatic expressions and proverbs that are woven into the fabric of everyday Punjabi discourse (Kumar 2014). The nuanced understanding of this type of humour lies in understanding the linguistic lineage of oral tradition. These examples illustrate it: *Khane choley, dakaar badama de* (when a person appears to be something he is not or when someone makes big claims about his status but can barely make the ends meet); *Sau siyane ikko matt, moorakh aapo aapni* (All wise men are of the same opinion but the opinion of the foolish vary); *Aap na wassi, lokan nu matti* (advising people to do something when the advisor is undetermined him/herself); *Siron ganji, hath kangian da joda* (when some possess something that he does not actually need). It is evident in these examples that sarcasm and satire prevail with an emphasis on social structures and societal vices and pretensions. There is an undertone of moral wisdom that prompts reflection, gently engaging the reader without the weight of a sermon. In the Punjabi dub of *Shanghai Knights*, playful taunts and witty retorts are a recurring feature of verbal exchange between the characters, Butt and Bhatti. These interactions are imbued with a distinctive element of *desi* humour, reflecting cultural specificity. In one particular scene, Butt, visibly upset with Bhatti, isolates himself at a bar. Bhatti approaches him and says *mareya kise ne tenu?* (did someone beat you?) Butt responds to him: *Oh chad yaar, mainu kinne marna naale jehda tere wargha yaar dost hove ohnu bahron koi maar sakda?* (Forget it, buddy. How could anyone from the outside ever harm me when I have a friend like you) (*Butt Te Bhatti* 1:02:11). An idiomatic example of *Taahne Maarna* is evident in this scene where Butt (Roy) and Bhatti (Wang) are in conversation about Bhatti’s (Wang’s) demised father who spent his whole life protecting an imperial seal (diamond) and expected his son to do the same. Bhatti (Wang) tells his friend: *Mera piyo mainu kehanda hunda si ki putt haiga tu confirm haramda e par eh heera tenu hi sambhna paina. Hun gal peya dhol te vajana paina bhai* (My father used to tell me that you are definitely a worthless person, but this diamond is to be preserved by you only. Now the time has come when I should pay heed to the matter) (*Butt Te Bhatti* 18:58).

Tezabi Totay (ਤੇਜ਼ਾਬੀ ਟੋਟੇ)

It translates literally to “acidic bits” for its sharp humour, biting social commentary, explicit language and compact content. It differs from *Jugat* in its tendency to often include a political edge. The humour is usually practiced in the *Lehanda* region of Punjab. This type of humour flourished in the Post-Zia era (late 1980s) when strict rules on censorship were lifted and comedy and satire became famous instruments of expressing frustration resulting from years of political repression. At the same time, cassette culture became widespread in South Asia and the methods of the proliferation of entertainment became cheap, accessible and easily available to the masses. *Tezabi Totay* draws its roots from the folk culture of Punjab, bearing resemblance with the crafts of *Jugat*, village jesters, street performers, and local comedians. In contemporary times, this form of humour disseminated through *YouTube* resembles that of dubbing: an original video (often that of a politician), is overlaid with a new audio track replacing the original dialogue. This new audio typically employs humour, satire, or parody to reinterpret the video, often providing a critique or commentary on the subject. Such dubbing is commonly used to highlight social or political issues in a way that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. In a recent video titled “Donald Trump Winning Elections,” the host of the Channel, *Azizi* (also known as *Bhatti*), indulges in a back and forth witty and comical exchange with Donald Trump, whose voice is humorously dubbed in Punjabi by *Azizi*. The host asks: *Trump saab tuhade te v koi case chal rahe ne?* (Mr Trump, are there any cases filed against you as well?) and Trump replies *Oye je jattan te case na hove te inj lagda ki bagair savariyan di khali wagon ja rahi ae* (If Jatts don’t have cases against them, it feels like an empty wagon moving without passengers). The conversation mocks and subverts the authority on the surface, yet this mockery results from the age-old feud between the two nations that manifests in mimicking the political personas and linguistic country anymore. Reporter: But where will they go, sir? Modi: I don’t care even if they go to Pakistan). Manipulation with content like this reflects how the political “parodic idiosyncrasies which “reveals that the ideological manipulation occurring in the parodic dubbing affects both acoustic and visual components of the audiovisual source text” (Banos 182). In another video, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s 2021

speech is edited and it was made about the Indian cricket team losing the test series that year. In one of the dubbed dialogues, he (Modi) says: *aj ton eh ohna da desh hi nai* and a reporter says *te janab oh jaan ge kithe?* Then Modi says: *mainu ki bhavein Pakistan chale jaan*. It's not their dubbing that resorts "to dialects, slangs, swear words, and overly colloquial registers which are not considered appropriate in professional dubbing" yet at the same time it is a subversive dialogue that serves as a tool for reserved political commentary on the adversaries (Banos 186). Moreover, it resonates deeply with its target audience who share a common ideological and cultural perspective, thereby functioning not only as a form of subversive commentary but also as a source of entertainment.

Bragging (ਗੱਪ ਬਾਜ਼ੀ)

Sohinder Singh Vanjara in his work "Punjabi lok Dhara Vihav Kosh," defines *Gapp* as a colloquial tool in which a thing is exaggerated up to such an extent that it lacks sense. *Gapp vich gall nu bahut vadha chadha ke dassia janda hai, gapp di birti ati-kathni wali hundi hai. Chote aakaar waliyan gappan chutkuliyan di seema ja chudiaan hai* (in mock bragging, a thing is often exaggerated and is told with a lot of embellishment. Compact sized bragging is equivalent to jokes or trivial matters) (Vanjara 763). Hyperbolic expressions are fundamental to the style of *Jugat*. Verbal humour like *Jugat baazi* relies on witty and spontaneous repartees, primarily for humoristic purposes, which involves exaggeration (*atikathani*) for a vivid and captivating impact on the audience and it grants the performers a sort of creative licence that allows them to be expressive and dramatic. The pragmatic impact of hyperbole relies heavily on the interpreter's part, hence, it becomes mandatory for the spectator/audience to be familiar with the cultural background of the performer. In her essay "Hyperbole as a Stylistic Device," Ruzimbaevna writes that by "exaggerating something in an extreme way, whether it is a character's traits, writer's tone, theme, or idea, hyperbole can capture a reader's attention" (Ruzimbaevna 328). The use of hyperbole in *Jugat Baazi* ranges from exaggeration of tropes like—physical appearance, over-the-top achievements, daily life dramatisations, mock fears, unbelievable comparisons etc. In one of the scenes, Butt (Roy O'Bannon) offers an exaggerated account of

the combat encounter involving himself and Bhatti (Wang). The dubbed dialogue goes as: *lao bai kudiyo mai tuhanu ik gal sunava: mai te mera ik yaar hunda c Bhatti, sadi ik din ho pi ladai, oh chaali-panjah hazar band ate assi dovein. Mai Bhatti nu keha ki nikal tu, mai sambhal langa ihna nu. Oh fer geya nikal, merko si pistol, mai fer kadeya fire. Bandoon kad layian sarean ne..eddi firing hoyi othe par mainu ik goli ni vajji* (Listen girls, let me tell you something. I had a friend named Bhatti. One day, we got into a fight. There were forty to fifty thousand people, and there were just the two of us. I told Bhatti to leave, I'll handle them. So, he left, and I had a pistol with me. Then I pulled it out. Everyone pulled out their guns, there was a lot of firing, but not a single bullet hit me) (*Butt Te Bhatti* 8:55). This scene is similar to an exaggerated account of valour that is often depicted in indigenous movies when hero tries to impress his female counterpart for courtship. In another scene, inspector Doyle mockingly predicts Butt's (Roy's) character and the predicament he is about to fall into. It goes as, *Eh ghari mainu vekh ke hi pata lag geya si ki ehda maaikl bohot laanti kisam da banda hai te eh naal kuteyan wali hon wali ae. Eh ghari mainu dasdi payi aa ki mera maalik bohot Jaleel kisam da aadmi aa, sharab, charas poori jindagi ch ehne koi chnaga kam nai kita, aapniyan char jawan behna ghar chad ke lokan diyan dheeyan-bhena wal dekhda rehanda je. Eh ghari dasdi payi ae ki ehde naal da begairat banda tuhanu poori duniya ch nai labega* (This watch immediately told me that its owner is a very despicable person, and he will be treated like a dog soon. This watch tells me that my owner is a very disgraceful man . . . Alcohol, drugs, throughout his entire life he hasn't done a single good deed, scoundrel. He left his four young sisters at home and kept looking at other people's daughters and sisters. This watch tells me that you won't find a more shameless person anywhere in the world than this one) (*Butt Te Bhatti* 30:46).

Egalitarian laughter (ਸਮਤਾਵਾਦੀ ਹਾਸਾ)

Punjabi humour usually disrupts the established hierarchical boundaries by challenging and reiterating the traditional convictions of power, respect, authority, rank and status. The roots of egalitarian comedy or flat comedy can be traced in Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "Carnavalesque" as it celebrates the "temporary liberation from the

established order, it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and positions” (Bakhtin 10). In “parodic dubbing”, the hierarchy is not only overthrown, but is also made more ridiculous than other characters. Lord Rathbone is a member of the parliament and the antagonist in the narrative. In the dubbed version, he is renamed *Thaththa*, a scurrilous attempt to poke fun at his lisp (the character does not lisp in the original movie) which automatically leads to a decline in the depth and credibility of his character. In a court scene, Lord Rathbone gets up to address the court and says: *Laam naal beh ke meli gal sun lo sun ni te. Oh teen de vich jehra apna heera hunda c na, o toori ho deya* which literally translates to *Aaram nal beh ke meri gal sun lo sun nit e. Oh Cheen (China) de voh jehra aapna heera hunda c na, oh chori ho geya*” (listen to me quietly if you want to. The diamond that we had in china, has been stolen!) (*Butt Te Bhatti* 21:13). In the original version, Lord Rathbone is portrayed as a well-spoken, diplomatic gentleman who addresses the court gracefully in order to win their vote of approval to wage a war on China: “fellow lords, I’m afraid I bring disturbing news from the orient. The opium wars have ravaged the land the emperor’s enemies are organising” (*Shanghai Knights* 23:20). In a jail scene, Roy and Wang are scheming to get out by talking politely to Inspector Doyle, who is rather firm and unwavering in his stance. However, in the Punjabi dub, he calls them *Bhaji* (a term of endearment used between equals) and talks to them in a light-hearted, almost playful tone. There are other instances like the Queen asking for *Mitha paan* (sweetened betel leaf) during her golden-jubilee celebrations and gifting Yamaha and Nokia 3310 to Roy and Wang during their knighting ceremony. The “carnavalesque” nature of Punjabi humour also lies in its ability to create a space where opposites can coexist. Respect and irreverence, power and vulnerability, or tradition and rebellion, are all given equal importance within the comedic narrative. In this way, it becomes a vehicle for expressing what might otherwise be suppressed, enabling a temporary reordering of society’s values and expectations. In the dubbed movie, a few characters like Lord Rathbone, Inspector Doyle, and the Queen of England hold significantly prominent social positions due to their roles in the British parliament and monarchy.

Punjabi humour, in its innate cultural and linguistic formation, has a tendency to transgress the established moral and societal parameters, which sometimes provoke sentiments and bring the whole moral framework of the culture into question. The famous Punjabi comedian Jaswinder Bhalla faced the wrath of governmental and religious formations for his long-running social satire “Chankata.” “He was alleged by certain *ragi jathas* of making mockery of them and raised strong objections” against his album for the year 2003 (Bhalla). Similarly, in 2016, SGPC (Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee) pleaded to the Supreme Court of India to impose a ban on *Sardarji* jokes on which the court “expressed its inability to issue directions . . . observing courts cannot lay down moral guidelines for citizens and doubting their enforceability if they were to do so” (Sardarji Jokes).

When it comes to *Jugat Baazi*, a culture which openly mocks a subject’s appearance, insecurities and status, it is evident for it to receive some backlash from the society. Upon being asked about the nature of his comedy and its moral framework, Sajjad Jani talks about how comedy is often mistaken and considered a trivial and insignificant task. On the contrary, it demands substantial effort and a creative approach. He justifies his profession as a professional *Jugatbaaz* and derives his artistic freedom from the leverage and margin that his subjects give him around which he spins his jokes (“The Rise of Sajjad Jani” 33:37).

This creative freedom, however, is not without challenges. As humour often walks a fine line between entertainment and offense, it can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, especially when it touches on sensitive cultural or social issues. While *Jugat Baazi* thrives on poking fun at the quirks of individuals and society, it also opens the door for conversations about power dynamics, societal expectations, and the often-unspoken pressures individuals face in their personal lives. The ability of comedians like Sajjad Jani to navigate these complex spaces reflects the transformative power of humour, showing how comedy can be a mirror to society—one that not only entertains but also challenges and provokes thought. Thus, while the moral boundaries of comedy remain a contentious issue, its role in shaping public discourse cannot be underestimated.

Endnotes

- i. All the working translations have been done by the author.
- ii. Bhands are just like court jesters who would entertain kings with their comic performances and funny remarks. Bhands were actors, singers, dancers, mimics, etc. They had a very keen eye over social and political issues and would make funny but wise remarks about the world around them.
- iii. The Mirasis are a community found in North India and Pakistan. The community flourished in the nineteenth century under the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab. They were performers and entertainers, usually serving as folk tellers, singers, bards, genealogists and musicians.
- iv. Nukkad Natak is a form of street theatre which addresses a wide range of socio-political and cultural dilemmas prevailing in society. The form was popularised by Safdar Hashmi, who founded an amateur theatre company named *Jana Natya Manch* which is dedicated to street theatre.
- v. Tamasha is a vibrant folk theatre form which combines music, dance, and drama with humour and social satire. It often explores themes from mythology to daily life, showcasing lively performances and colourful traditions.
- vi. Picong or Piquant is a form of comic exchange or banter prevalent among west Indians (Trinidad). The ability to playfully mock one another without taking the remarks personally is often valued in Calypso music tradition. “The Mighty Sparrow vs Lord Melody” is a famous Picong in Trinidadian culture.
- vii. Flyting is an insult duel that takes place in verse. It was popular during the Renaissance period in England. The insults thrown at both parties were extremely provocative, involving accusations of sexual perversions, cowardice and immodesty. “The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie” by William Dunbar is a prominent example of the duel.
- viii. Contrasto is a medieval Italian poetic tradition involving a verbal duel or debate performed by a pair of artists called *Poeti Bernescanti* or simply *Poeti*. Each poet takes a side on the theme chosen by the audience (Husband vs Wife, Science vs Arts, Aristotle vs Plato etc.). The poets would use rhetoric as a means to defend their sides.

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Folk Music as Resistance: Sartrean Authenticity in Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash's Anti-Vietnam War Songs

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Abstract

Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash, two seminal figures in American music, used their art to express profound protest against the Vietnam War, drawing upon Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of authenticity to frame their responses to the socio-political climate of the 1960s and 1970s. Through their songs like Dylan's *Masters of War* and *Blowin' in the Wind*, and Cash's *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* and *Drive On*, both the artists confronted the moral and existential crises provoked by the war. These songs, rooted in folk traditions, not only challenged the war's brutality but also questioned the societal structures that perpetuated it. Sartre's concept of authenticity, emphasising individual responsibility and freedom from societal conventions, resonates through these texts as they reflect the artists' rejection of political authority and their commitment to personal and collective truth. The songs serve as a form of cultural folklore, using the storytelling power of folk music to address the existential tension between personal freedom and social responsibility. In doing so, Dylan and Cash crafted an authentic protest that transcended traditional political commentary, positioning their music as a crucial part of the anti-war movement and a radical expression of their existential disillusionment.

Keywords: America, Existential Crisis, Folk Songs, Protests, Vietnam War.

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Introduction

Music as an artistic formation and cultural exhibition, just like any other literary genre is an innovative way to express deepest sentiments and various concerns related to life and living experiences. Folk songs, a sub-genre of the entire body of music illustrates the aspects of community-based issues of indigenous experiences, evoking socio-political paradigm and diverse existential crises. The American songwriters Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash accentuated the lives of the civilians during the Vietnam War via their songs, imbibing anguish and existential despair and the effects of the war upon the individuals. The American society has been impacted severely by the American-Vietnam war, exerting adverse impact on the cultural and societal legacy of disenchantment and dejection. In such circumstances, the soldiers, who fought in the war encountered dilemma, trauma and alienation, leading them to consume and abuse illegal substances which made everyday existence a struggle in itself. Hence, this paper discusses how the songwriters represented their struggle through songs by implying the phenomena of war and people's hardship subsequently.

The tradition of folk songs is a subtle embodiment of storytelling and a legendary vehicle to transmit the narratives of regional epochs in the form of music. But during the early 1960's this custom of folk songs served more than just an aesthetic purpose, as it instigated a social and political activism through their lyrics, a sort of resistance and interrogation regarding one's stance after the war situation. The Vietnam War (1950-1975) partitioned America and its people generating anarchistic and seditious affairs, of which the artists during that time produced songs of protests and dissent, seeking answers for the devastation that the war had prompted. One of the songs of Johnny Cash, "What is Truth" probed a thought provoking question on the mental agitation faced by children as well due to the conflicting atmosphere of war: "Daddy, what is war?" and when the father responds that it is "when people fight and die," the "little boy of 3 says, Daddy, why?" In the next verse, Cash describes a seventeen-year-old in Sunday school, facing the prospect of going to

the war in another year when “it may be his turn to lay his life down.” “Can you blame the voice of youth for asking: “What is Truth?” Cash asked.” (Foley 2). Such questions raise awareness on the ontological standpoint of human individuals where they grapple with existential crises due to the aftereffects of war.

Bob Dylan and Existential Angst

Bob Dylan, an influential figure in the history of folk music, remained a classic example of a protest musician who deliberately wrote for the purpose of raising socio-political awareness. His lyrics resonate with the anthem of civil rights and their lost hope. The existential element rests primarily on the social and political aspect of freedom and despair. Dylan referred to the “Port Huron Statement” in order to enhance the ongoing struggle for an egalitarian society. His most famous song called, *Blowin’ in the Wind* exhibits the cries of civilians for the injustice faced by them in the wake of wars and racial discrimination. He underscored the refrain, “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind, The answer is blowin’ in the wind,” indicates the uncertainty of existence, without providing any definite answers to these struggles. Lemieux offered a diplomatic perspective on how Dylan cautiously articulated the argument that the latter is less politically engaged in his lyricism and more socially driven, towards the cause of injustice faced by the individuals: “Although Dylan insisted that the song wasn’t an act of protest, lines like “Yes, ‘n’ how many times can a man turn his head, /Pretending he just doesn’t see?” directly questioned those who refused to directly engage in the protest movement.” (Lemieux 6). As his songs capture a counterculture movement, it can be scrutinised from the lens of “authenticity” as highlighted by Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* and can be regarded as antithetical to the conventional way of thinking, making one’s own choice of freedom and credibility.

Based on the idea of Bob Dylan’s song *Blowin’ in the Wind*, Sartre’s idea of “authenticity” can be appealed to infer the existential notions of responsibility, freedom and self-introspection ingrained within the verses. Dylan through his song, posited questions about

human agonies, justice and peace, reflecting the philosophy of Sartre, by inviting listeners to encounter the obscurity and ambiguity of human plight. As Sartre's "authenticity" argues for a radical disposition of thought and action, likewise, Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* compelled the listeners to analyse one's role regarding the social hardships and injustices to a considerable extent. Discerning intrinsically from an existential perception, the lyrics of Dylan encouraged an encounter with the self, similar to the concept of "authenticity", where it propounds to discard passive collusion and rather encourages to have an active participation with the world. This was to raise deeper awareness on one's freedom of choice and being responsible for the cause, irrespective of its ambiguity and vagueness, aligning it with the social injustices being practiced during his time. Basu opines that: "It will also highlight Dylan's position as the 'counter-culture' messiah-forever shifting his marginal position to accommodate social changes, perceptions and assumptions- and always speaking of social crimes and imbalances." (Basu 2).

Dylan's "Masters of War" is another example of protest song which constitutes existential undercurrent, focusing on the moral estrangement and individual's helplessness seemingly before the corrupt world that sustains war. Sartre emphasises the necessity for individuals to confront their freedom and make authentic choices, free from the bad faith of societal norms or external pressures. In this reframing, the "masters of war" can be seen as figures who have abdicated their existential responsibility, choosing to hide behind the façade of authority, thereby denying their freedom and the moral consequences of their actions. The song could be rewritten to highlight how these individuals, in their pursuit of power, reject authentic engagement with their own existence, opting instead for a life dictated by convenience, control, and illusion. By juxtaposing the stark suffering caused by war with the failure of the "masters" to take responsibility, the existential undertone would underscore the theme of bad faith: the avoidance of genuine self-awareness and the rejection of moral autonomy in favour of the status quo. The resulting narrative would challenge the listener to question their own authenticity, as Sartre's philosophy insists that individuals must recognise their role in shaping the world and confront the consequences of their actions. Bob Dylan's *Masters of War* can be

analysed through the lens of existentialism, particularly in how it critiques the socio-political structures that perpetuate war and the inauthenticity of those who wield power. According to Sartre, existentialism lays emphasis on individual freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. The “masters of war” in Dylan’s song symbolise political and military leaders who, rather than confronting the consequences of their choices and recognising their own freedom, adopt external roles of authority that obscure their true responsibilities. These figures live in *bad faith*, a key concept in Sartre’s existentialism, where they deny their freedom and moral responsibility by placing the blame for the destruction they cause onto abstract systems (such as the state or military) rather than acknowledging their active role in perpetuating violence.

Dylan’s lyrics condemn these figures as distant, morally detached individuals who profit from war without bearing the burden of its consequences. They are not authentic; they refuse to take ownership of their choices, instead hiding behind the false narrative of duty or necessity. The socio-political critique within the song is clear: it denounces a system where power is concentrated in the hands of a few who manipulate the masses, pushing others into violent conflicts while remaining shielded from the destruction they cause. These masters fail to recognise their existential freedom, and by choosing to ignore the humanity of others, they negate their own authenticity. In alignment with Sartre’s existentialism, Dylan challenges the listener to reflect on the societal systems that encourage such bad faith. The song calls attention to the way power structures through their manipulation of public sentiment and the alienation of individuals create a climate in which inauthentic, morally unaccountable choices are made on a large scale. Dylan’s critique goes beyond the individuals in power; it also implicates the broader society that allows such figures to thrive. For Sartre, this situation represents the collective failure to recognise and confront individual freedom and responsibility within the social order. In *Masters of War*, the listener is urged to reflect on the role they play in perpetuating these systems of power, challenging them to embrace their own freedom and responsibility, and to act authentically in defiance of the inauthentic choices of the powerful.

Melody of Despair

Johnny Cash's reaction to the Vietnam War and the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s reflected a deepening sense of disillusionment with the establishment and its treatment of the marginalised. While he initially garnered attention for his patriotism, his growing empathy for the soldiers and civilians affected by the war led him to subtly challenge the authority that perpetuated it. Cash's music had become a powerful vehicle for expressing the pain and despair of those disenfranchised by war and inequality, capturing the emotional toll of a society in turmoil. His lyrics often conveyed a radical critique of the status quo, aligning with the voices of protest that sought to expose the injustices of a system that left many behind. Through his raw and unflinching portrayals of suffering, Cash's work moved beyond mere commentary, offering a poignant reflection on the human cost of conflict and the deep yearning for change. In this case, Silverman commented: "He was associated, though not without his reluctance, with the genre of country music, generally a politically conservative genre of popular music." (Silverman 93).

Johnny Cash, in his rendition of the folk song *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* (written and sung originally by Peter La Farge), masterfully propounds the social injustices faced by Native Americans, particularly focusing on the story of Ira Hayes—a Pima Native American and a US Marine who became famous for his role in hoisting the American flag through the Battle of Iwo Jima during the World War II. The song highlights the stark contrast between the heroism associated with Hayes' actions and the tragic circumstances of his life thereafter. Through a poignant storytelling, the song critiques the broader societal and systemic inequities faced by Native Americans, especially their exploitation and marginalisation in American society. The ballad paints a vivid picture of Ira Hayes as a war hero, celebrated briefly for his bravery, yet it underscores the deep irony that despite his sacrifices, he returns to a life marked by poverty, discrimination, and a lack of recognition. The lyrics emphasise the painful disconnect between the nation's patriotic ideals and the reality for Native American veterans like Hayes, who return home only to be forgotten and neglected. By doing so, the song exposes the broader social injustices inherent in the American

treatment of Indigenous people, pointing to the false promises of equality and justice that were not extended to them. Through his rendition of the song *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, Johnny Cash not only immortalises the story of an individual but also raises a broader critique of societal structures that perpetuate racial and cultural inequalities. His choice to tell this story through the folk music tradition, known for its capacity to address social and political issues, enhances the song's impact, giving voice to a community that had long been silenced and marginalised. Through his rendition, Cash elevates the story of Ira Hayes into a powerful commentary on social injustice and the failure of the American government to honour the true contributions of its marginalised citizens.

The Ballad of Ira Hayes can also be aligned with Sartre's concept of authenticity, particularly in how it highlights the dissonance between societal ideals and the lived reality of marginalised individuals. Existentialism emphasises the importance of individuals acknowledging their freedom, responsibility, and the necessity of living authentically acting in a way that is true to one's own existence rather than conforming to societal expectations or external roles. In Cash's portrayal of Ira Hayes, there is a profound existential contrast between the authenticity of Hayes' individual sacrifice and the inauthenticity of the society that exploits and neglects him. In the song, Ira Hayes is initially celebrated as a hero for his role in raising the American flag at Iwo Jima, symbolising his brief acceptance within a narrative constructed by society. However, Cash's lyrics make clear that despite his service and sacrifice, Hayes is forced to return to a life of poverty, alcoholism, and racial prejudice elements that prevent him from achieving an authentic existence. This failure of society to acknowledge Hayes as a whole, complex human being is a direct example of bad faith in Sartrean terms, where society chooses to view him only through the lens of a narrow, constructed identity of heroism, while ignoring the existential reality of his struggles as a Native American. Rather than allowing Hayes the freedom to define his own life, society imposes a superficial narrative upon him, erasing his humanity and the complexity of his existence. Sartre would argue that the systemic injustice and neglect faced by Hayes reflect the inauthentic choices of both society and individuals who fail to take responsibility for their role in perpetuating these

conditions. The way Hayes' heroism is exploited for patriotic purposes, only to be discarded afterward, exemplifies how social structures through their norms and expectations denigrate the freedom and agency of individuals, forcing them into preordained roles and denying their authentic self. In contrast, Hayes' own struggle to survive after the war represents the challenge of confronting the existential realities of his identity in a world that refuses to recognise him as an authentic, fully realised person. Through *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, Cash underscores the anxiety between societal expectations and the quest for personal authenticity, inviting the listener to reflect upon how their own actions contribute to the larger systems that inhibit freedom and perpetuate injustice. Sartre calls for individuals to reject societal impositions and to live in accordance with their true self, a stance that Cash subtly advocates for in his depiction of Ira Hayes' tragic fate. Ultimately, the song acts as a critique of the inauthenticity of a society that, while quick to celebrate individuals like Hayes in moments of collective pride, fails to recognise and uphold their inherent worth and dignity in the long term.

In Johnny Cash's *Drive On*, the theme of alienation is poignantly conveyed through the narrative of a war veteran who reflects on the psychological and emotional toll of combat. The song encapsulates the alienation felt by soldiers both during and after war, highlighting the disconnection between their personal experiences and the society that sends them into battle. The lyrics capture the soldier's internal conflicts, as he tries to grapple with the brutal reality of war, the disillusionment with its glorification, and the estrangement he feels upon returning home. The line "Drive on, soldier / Drive on, it's all that you can do" suggests a sense of detachment, as the soldier is urged to continue, despite the profound isolation and trauma he endures. This alienation is compounded by the broader socio-political context, where veterans are often overlooked or misunderstood by a society that romanticise war without acknowledging its true costs. The soldier's feelings of alienation are both personal, rooted in the loss of his own humanity in the face of violence, and social, reflecting the lack of recognition and empathy from a civilian population that fails to grasp the full extent of his suffering. Cash's depiction of war's dehumanising effects emphasises how soldiers, once sent to fight, are

often left adrift, alienated from both themselves and the society they served, unable to reconcile their wartime experiences with the expectations of the world around them. In *Drive On*, Sartre's concept of authenticity can be applied to the war veteran's struggle to reconcile his own identity with the external expectations imposed by society. Sartre's philosophy asserts that individuals must deal with their inherent freedom and responsibility, and live authentically by defining their own existence rather than conforming to societal roles or pressures. In the song, the soldier is trapped in a state of inauthenticity, as his war experience is largely defined by the roles assigned to him, first as a soldier, then as a returnee expected to simply "drive on" without acknowledging the deep trauma he carries. His alienation reflects a denial of his own freedom to define his life outside the confines of the societal narrative of war and heroism. The song illustrates the soldier's inability to authentically engage with his own suffering because society pressures him to continue moving forward without addressing the emotional and psychological scars of battle. According to Sartre, the soldier's true existential struggle lies in his confrontation with the absurdity of war and his recognition of his freedom to reject the roles forced upon him by society. Only by embracing his full humanity and acknowledging the weight of his experiences can he begin to live authentically, transcending the alienation that defines his existence in the aftermath of war. The song ultimately challenges listeners to question the societal expectations placed on veterans and the importance of recognising their freedom to define their post-war identity. In *Drive On*, Sartre's concept of authenticity is deeply aligned with the war veteran's internal struggle to reclaim his sense of self after being defined by external roles, both during and after the war. Sartre emphasises that authenticity arises when individuals reject societal norms and expectations in favour of making their own choices and embracing the responsibility for those decisions. The soldier in Cash's song is caught between the expectations of a society that views him through the lens of his war service and the personal anguish he endures, a disconnect that prevents him from truly living in an authentic manner. The soldier's inability to process or acknowledge the psychological trauma he has suffered speaks to his existential crisis, where the world around him through phrases like "drive on" demands that he continue forward without ever confronting his own reality. In Sartrean terms, this is a

kind of “bad faith,” where the soldier denies his own experiences and freedom to define himself beyond the narrow, imposed identity of a soldier. The alienation he feels is both existential and social, as he is trapped in an externally imposed role, unable to reclaim his true identity in the face of war’s dehumanising effects. Sartre would argue that to live authentically, the soldier must confront the absurdity of the expectations placed on him and face the truth of his existence. He must acknowledge his suffering and redefine his life not as a soldier following orders, but as a free individual responsible for his own choices and meaning, despite the pressures of a society that demands he must continue without reflection. Only by embracing his freedom to shape his post-war existence can the soldier achieve authenticity, breaking free from the alienation that war has imposed upon him.

A Comparative Study

A comparative study between Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash regarding their protest music, specifically focusing on songs like *Blowin’ in the Wind*, *Masters of War*, *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, and *Drive On*, reveals how both the artists used their music to address social and political issues, but with different approaches in terms of their themes and expression. Bob Dylan, through *Blowin’ in the Wind* and *Masters of War*, uses his lyrics to challenge authority, war, and societal injustice in a broad, philosophical sense. *Blowin’ in the Wind* is a poignant rhetorical question that captures the longing for peace and equality, urging listeners to question the status quo. Meanwhile, *Masters of War* delivers a direct and scathing critique of the political and military leaders who perpetuate war for personal gain, with Dylan’s accusatory tone exposing the moral emptiness of those in power. His protest music is intellectual and poetic, using symbolism and abstraction to force the listener to confront complex issues of human rights, freedom, and moral responsibility.

In contrast, Johnny Cash’s *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* and *Drive On* approach protest music through a more personal, narrative-driven lens. *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* narrates the tragic story of a Native American war hero, highlighting the stark contrast between his heroism in war and the social neglect and discrimination he faced upon returning home. The portrayal of Hayes captures the emotional

and human costs of war, focusing on the lived experiences of marginalised individuals. *Drive On*, similarly, reflects the alienation and trauma felt by veterans, illustrating how they are discarded by society after serving in war. Cash's protest music tends to focus more on the personal and emotional impact of societal issues, using storytelling to make broader socio-political points.

Dylan's protest songs tend to be more abstract and philosophical, often questioning societal structures at large, while Cash's songs are grounded in real human stories, emphasising empathy and personal responsibility. While both artists criticise war, inequality, and injustice, Dylan's lyrics invite intellectual reflection, while Cash's narratives provide a visceral, emotional connection to the struggles of marginalised individuals. A comparative study of these songs highlights the different methods of protest within their music, poetic, symbolic critique and Cash's storytelling rooted in human experience demonstrating that both artists were deeply committed to challenging societal norms and giving voice to the voiceless, albeit through distinct artistic lenses.

Aligning Bob Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind*, *Masters of War*, Johnny Cash's *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, and *Drive On* with Sartre's concept of authenticity provides a profound critique of the socio-political systems that shape the individual's existence. Sartre's existentialism emphasises the necessity of living authentically by acknowledging one's freedom, assuming responsibility, and rejecting the roles imposed by society. In *Blowin' in the Wind*, Dylan calls for introspection and an awakening to the unjust systems that stifle human freedom, urging the listener to confront the societal structures that perpetuate inequality and war. The rhetorical questions in the song reflect a yearning for authenticity, a world where individuals are free to live with dignity, unbound by the inauthentic constraints of oppression and prejudice. Similarly, in *Masters of War*, Dylan condemns those who exploit others for power and profit, accusing them of living in *bad faith*, where they avoid confronting the moral consequences of their actions and deny the freedom of others. By refusing to take responsibility for their role in the suffering they cause, the "masters" embody Sartre's idea of inauthenticity existing

within a false narrative of control and superiority, while failing to acknowledge the humanity of those they harm.

In contrast, Johnny Cash's *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* and *Drive On* highlight the personal, lived experiences of individuals caught within these societal constructs. *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* narrates the story of a Native American war hero who, despite his heroism, comes back to a life of alienation and neglect. Hayes' struggle reflects Sartre's concept of *bad faith*, as society imposes a limited and dehumanising identity upon him, first as a soldier and then as a Native American, disregarding his full humanity and the complexities of his experiences. Cash's song reveals how the rejection of authenticity by both society and the individual results in alienation, as Hayes is unable to assert his freedom and redefine his life outside the expectations placed upon him. Similarly, in *Drive On*, the soldier is trapped in the role of a veteran, pushed to "drive on" despite the trauma and emotional cost of war. This societal demand for him to continue without confronting the existential weight of his experiences exemplifies Sartre's notion of existential alienation, the soldier is denied the space to reflect, grieve, or reclaim his identity, forced into a path defined by others. Both Dylan and Cash expose the alienating forces of war and social structures, revealing how these forces suppress authentic existence by defining individuals in limiting, inauthentic roles. Sartre's existentialism calls for individuals to confront their own freedom and responsibility, to reject the false roles imposed by society, and to live authentically. Through these four songs, Dylan and Cash reveal the ways in which social, political, and military systems infringe on human freedom, urging the listener to question and confront these systems in order to live more authentically and with greater moral responsibility.

Conclusion

Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan's music, through their poignant portrayals of war and socio-political struggle, vividly encapsulate the existential crises faced by individuals caught within the broader upheavals of war and systemic injustice. Both artists explore the tension between personal identity and societal expectations, illustrating how war serves as a crucible that not only tests

individuals' moral and existential boundaries but also exposes the alienating effects of political and social structures. For Dylan, the Vietnam War and the broader conflict of his time serve as a backdrop for his critique of the powerful figures who perpetuate conflict, creating a world in which individuals are stripped of their authenticity and freedom. His music calls for self-reflection, urging listeners to confront the dehumanising forces of authority, injustice, and militarism that impose inauthentic roles on both soldiers and civilians. Through his probing questions and direct challenges to power, Dylan highlights the existential dilemma of living under systems that demand conformity and complicity, forcing individuals to live in *bad faith* rather than embrace their existential freedom and responsibility. Cash, in a similarly critical yet more intimate manner, delves into the lived experiences of those directly impacted by war veterans and marginalised communities, who are often forced into roles defined by external expectations. Through his storytelling, Cash exposes how war's traumatic effects perpetuate alienation, both for those on the frontlines and those left behind. His portrayal of individuals such as soldiers and indigenous war heroes underscores the emotional and existential toll of conflict, as these figures struggle to reconcile their identities with the harsh realities of a society that fails to honour or understand their sacrifices. Cash's lyrics reveal how societal neglect and racial injustice trap individuals in inauthentic, dehumanised roles, preventing them from living freely and authentically.

Both Cash and Dylan use war as a lens to explore the alienation, disillusionment, and moral ambiguity that characterise existential crises, especially in the context of the Vietnam War era. They highlight the consequences of war not only on the battlefield but also on the very foundation of personal identity, illustrating how political and military systems, through their manipulation and dehumanisation, force individuals to suppress their true selves. The existential crisis in their music is one of confronting an absurd and often brutal world, where individuals must either accept the false roles imposed by society or confront the overwhelming challenge of defining themselves authentically amidst chaos. In doing so, both artists compel their listeners to reflect on the nature of freedom, responsibility, and the personal cost of living authentically in a world

that demands conformity. Ultimately, their music serves as a profound critique of war and social systems, offering a call to transcend inauthenticity and reclaim one's existential agency in the face of political and social oppression.

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***Yōkai* and the Ethics of Eating: A Folkloric Perspective on the Japanese Food Practices**

Anjali A. R.*

Abstract

Rooted in Japanese folklore, the term *yōkai* has historically referred to supernatural creatures and strange phenomena, but has since evolved to encompass a more expansive sense that signifies anything eerie and uncanny. Throughout Japanese history, *yōkai* has transformed from its animistic and folkloric origin, which began with the intention to explain the unexplainable things within nature, and transcended to embody the changing culture of Japan through its portrayal in modern means of art, literature, manga, anime, films, and video games. Progressively permeating into the diverse directions of Japanese culture, *yōkai* also made its mark on the food culture of Japan. This paper attempts to capture the powerful and potential intersection of food and folklore in Japanese culture to entertain as well as educate the people involved. From fearful food-related stories of mysterious creatures evoking ethical considerations on the ways of consuming food that include the philosophy of mindful eating to respecting food and avoiding excesses, it has evolved into many artistic presentations in the form of *yōkai*-themed restaurants and various *yōkai* dishes in numerous food festivals. In essence, this paper seeks to unfold a folkloric perspective on Japanese foodways to unearth the deep-rooted significance and multifaceted functions that *yōkai* perform in contemporary Japanese society.

Keywords: Folklore, Food ethics, Foodways, Japan, *Yōkai*

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Introduction

Throughout human history, people have occasionally reported strange happenings that defy rational explanation – the reappearance of individuals who have died; the sightings of strange creatures; voices inexplicably heard when no one is around; strange lights or fires adrift in the gloaming. These sorts of encounters inevitably provoke unease and fear. Japanese folklore holds that these strange phenomena are all the doings of *yōkai*.

— Masanobu

The above excerpt unearths the elusive element in defining *yōkai*, where it exists everywhere but beyond human perception, thus, making it indefinable. As Hirota Ryūhei puts it, “*yōkai* is an elusive category,” which is difficult to define, yet it extends its influence to almost every facet of Japanese society, from folklore to popular culture, exercising an extraordinary agency through its interaction with the human world. From the folkloric perspective, Japanese people have attempted to define this incomprehensible category as “malevolent supernatural beings”, but it transcends beyond this translation (321). Being rooted in Japanese culture, finding an English translation of the term is equally difficult. Michael Dylan Foster in his *The Book of Yōkai* (2015), lists a set of English words that define the divergent ideas and nuances of the term *yōkai* – “spirits, goblins, phantoms, specters, sprites, shape-shifters, demons, fantastic beings, numinous occurrences, the supernatural, and perhaps most commonly today, monsters” (14).

Across the world, from time immemorial, unexplainable happenings and supernatural beings have been part of the cultural imagination. In Japan, these weird occurrences and mysterious creatures came to be collectively known as *yōkai*. Humans always exhibited the tendency to explain the unexplainable things around them, and *yōkai* emerged from their efforts to decode the strange phenomena in the natural world or find answers to the unusual occurrences or feelings within them. On that note, Foster wrote that “*yōkai* begin where language ends”, but he later amended it in the same book as – “the creation of *yōkai* is the creation of language”,

where they emerge from “an aporia, a hole in the language”. The creation of *yōkai* begins when there is a need to express something for which there are no words, i.e., *yōkai* are generated by naming and defining their features and behaviour through language, thus, transforming abstract phenomena into concrete creatures (14; 98–99):

One of the most difficult things to define are the boundaries of what constitutes a *yōkai*, and what isn't a *yōkai*... Over the many eras of Japan's history, different words have been used as catch-all terms for the supernatural forces of this world; *bakemono*, *obake*, *mononoke*, *kaii*, *oni*. Depending on who you're talking to, specific creatures may or may not be classified as *yōkai*. Are ghosts *yōkai*? Are *oni* *yōkai*? Can good spirits be *yōkai* or are they only evil spirits? Are *kami* *yōkai*? Does *yōkai* only apply to Japan, or does it apply to all countries? Every rule has an exception, and every answer has a contradiction. (“Introduction to *Yōkai*”)

Yōkai is a combination of two Chinese characters (kanji) - 妖 (*yō*) and 怪 (*kai*), where both terms refer to something strange, mysterious, or suspicious (Foster, “The Book” 19). The concept of *yōkai* was reflected through many terms throughout Japanese history until *yōkai* became the word of choice in recent years. The term has its evolutionary history, where it exists in different varieties and abundance, and what constitutes a *yōkai* and what does not was a real question to be addressed, and presently, anything eerie and uncanny can be called a *yōkai*. Interestingly, a single *yōkai* has the potential to adopt divergent forms in different historical epochs, as *yōkai* keeps changing with the imagination of those who create them or tell stories about them, and also experiences constant shift in their roles with the technological innovations of a particular period, like the rising internet, gaming, manga, and anime culture.

The very idea of *yōkai* exists everywhere in the world, and in contemporary Japanese society, it permeates every facet of Japanese culture – folklore, literature, art, manga, anime, films, gaming, and

also Japanese food practices. This paper explores the coming together of food and folklore in Japanese culture as a way of both entertaining and educating the people. On the ethical and educational side, through fearful food-related stories of mysterious creatures evoking ethical considerations on the ways of consuming food that include the philosophy of mindful eating to respecting food and avoiding excesses, it educates people on the ethical and traditional food practices of Japan. On the entertainment side, today, it has evolved into many artistic presentations in the form of *yōkai*-themed restaurants and various *yōkai* dishes in numerous food festivals. In essence, this paper seeks to unfold a folkloric perspective on Japanese foodways to delve into the deep-rooted significance and multifaceted functions that *yōkai* perform in contemporary Japanese society.

The Evolutionary History of *Yōkai* in Japan

Most likely in every part of the globe, human beings have shaped mysterious and fearful phenomena into monsters and spirits as a way of making sense and meaning of their experiences. But the particular shapes such monsters and spirits assume are anything but universal. They are sculpted by the distinct cultures and societies in which they emerge, evolving through specific historical moments and with the changing desires and challenges of the people who tell their tales. (Foster, “The Book” 33)

A *yōkai* is created out of the imaginative brains of a society, where even though the idea of *yōkai* is universal, every society has its *yōkai* narratives specific to that culture. While transforming from its mere folkloric origin to one of the most powerful elements in popular culture, it was flexible enough to accommodate the changing desires and challenges of the people who create them and tell their tales. So, the history of *yōkai* cannot be unfolded without considering the people who were involved in the process of its evolution, not only those who developed and discussed them, but also those who documented them in many ways. Originally, *yōkai* existed as an element of lived experiences, legends, belief systems, folklore, and festivals, and is only a part of cultural records like folklore, art,

literature, films, and games, and not official records. Delving into these cultural records helps uncover the history of how people imagined and understood *yōkai*. Cultural records are equally important as the official records, as they reflect the cultural, social, and intellectual circumstances prevalent at that historical moment. Throughout the history of *yōkai*, there were two tendencies in approaching *yōkai* – one, to preserve it as a cultural heritage, and two, to discard it as a dangerous menace (Foster, “The Book” 33–34).

Yokai are Japanese spirits or creatures – beloved, feared, and an integral part of popular culture for hundreds of years. From the Edo period (1603–1868) scroll paintings, woodblock prints, and books – to today’s video games, movies, and manga. (“Yokai – Spirits”)

Even though *yōkai* as a term was not popular before the Edo period, several texts contained writings on monstrous creatures and about the deeds of people and gods who overpowered and conquered them, like the mytho-historical *Kojiki* (A.D. 712) and *Nihonshoki* (A.D. 720). Simultaneously, there existed regional gazetteers called *fudoki*, which, along with historical and geographical accounts, recorded local legends, folk stories, myths, beliefs, and rituals (Foster, “The Book” 35–36). In the Heian, Kamakura, and Muromachi periods, *setsuwa* was the popular literary genre encompassing the experiences of the people, sharing their perspectives and beliefs (Foster, “The Book” 36). From the latter decades of the fourteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century (Muromachi period to the beginning of the Edo era), *otogizōshi* thrived as a genre containing *yōkai* stories together with tales of people from diverse backgrounds, animal stories, religious narratives, and travel anecdotes (Foster, “The Book” 36–37). At the same time, there were several legends surrounding the two historical figures – Abe no Seimei (sorcerer) and Minamoto no Yoritomo (warrior), who later entered the *yōkai* narratives as *yōkai* hunting heroes, where they performed as the brain (finding the *yōkai*) and the brawn (fighting the *yōkai*) respectively (Foster, “The Book” 41–42).

In the Edo period, there were two different approaches to *yōkai* – encyclopedic and entertaining. With the development of numerous *yōkai* of different shapes and sizes, and intending to categorise and organise everything around them, scholars began to list them down and describe those mysterious creatures along with other animals, making *yōkai* part of the encyclopedias. On the entertainment side, they started appearing in dramatic arts like *kabuki* (classical Japanese theatre) and *ninjyō jōruri* (puppet theatre), along with *emaki* (picture scrolls which gave a visual form to *yōkai*), woodblock prints, inexpensive books, and *kibyōshi* (short manga-like works which were mostly satirical). Combining both the encyclopedic and playful approaches to *yōkai*, an artist named Toriyama Sekien illustrated around two hundred *yōkai* in his catalogues, where his catalogue entries were filled with “plays on words, with all manner of sophisticated symbolism and tricky puzzles embedded in the images”, thus presenting a playful encyclopedia (Foster, “Yōkai: Fantastic”). *Yōkai* turned more playful towards the last hundred years of the Edo era with their entry into *sugoroku* (board games), *misemono* (spectacle shows), *yōkai karuta* (card game), and shooting galleries. On the other side, it continued to remain a fear-evoking creature and a matter of serious investigation (Foster, “The Book” 51).

In parallel with the rise of Western scientific knowledge in the Meiji era, Inoue Enryō attempted to debunk the mysterious creatures to shape Japan as a modern nation, by rationally elucidating the supernatural creations as well as differentiating *shinkai* (true mystery) from *kakai* (false mystery). Though he tried to demystify the mysterious, he developed a novel discipline called *yōkaigaku* (monsterology), and his lectures and articles, which provided valuable information on *yōkai*, earned him the title “Professor Yōkai” (Foster, “The Book” 54). In contrast, simultaneously, there were scholars like Lafcadio Hearn and Ema Tsutomu who celebrated them as part of Japanese culture and valued its documentation, ultimately leading to the founding of *minzokugaku* (folklore studies) by Yanagita Kunio in the early twentieth century (Foster, “The Book” 55-59). During the second half of the twentieth century, after World War II, a period marked by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, *yōkai* became nostalgic icons of an innocent pre-war Japan. In the

hands of the manga artist Mizuki Shigeru, who is famous for his manga series *Gegege no Kitarō* (Spooky Kitarō), they were transformed into popular cultural characters (Foster, “The Book” 61–62). Concurrently, Komatsu Kazuhiko, a folklorist and anthropologist, invented a new *yōkaigaku* with the understanding that *yōkai* studies are simply the study of the people who have generated them out of their imaginations, and it is all about decoding the experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of humans through their study (Foster, “The Book” 66–67). A beautiful union of the literary and *yōkai* world happened through the novels of Kyōgoku Natsuhiko, who wrote his debut *The Summer of the Ubume*, in 1994 (Foster, “The Book” 70–71).

In the 1990s, Japan witnessed a “*yōkai* boom” with its proliferation in popular culture. *Yōkai* turned from fiery and playful things to commercially profitable kinds of stuff by making its mark in the most divergent domains of popular culture – manga, fiction, films (specifically in the films of Studio Ghibli, a Japanese animation company), anime, research, and other *yōkai*-related manifestations and materials.

Theorising *Yōkai* in Japanese Cultural Discourse

The creation of *yōkai* is a process where certain unusual events or experiences are transformed into something concrete to ease the fear of the unknown. Komatsu Kazuhiko presented a structure on the varied realms in which *yōkai* exist: event, presence, and object. First, a strange or weird event that we can perceive with one of our five senses occurred, mostly experienced through sight or hearing, but we cannot find any evidence when searching for it; such odd events turn to take the name of a *yōkai*. Second, we tend to personify these supernatural beings around us by giving them human emotions and feeling their presence through those emotions being expressed, where it can be in the form of an ailment or wild weather when the spirits are angry, and a fruitful season when happy. Third, they attain the property of physicality when transformed into an object, where they are remodelled to different shapes and structures depending upon the trends of a particular period, like the picture scrolls of the Heian period. That change from merely remaining in the imagination of an

individual or being in the realm of collective/cultural/communal intellectual property to the creation of varied images unrolls two results – positively, there is an innovative process in the creation of images, and negatively, imagining a *yōkai* becomes limited to a fixed figure once depicted (Foster, “The Book” 29–30).

Culturally, the influence of *yōkai* is observable in four distinctive domains – local, academic, commercial, and vernacular. Local is the oldest mode of *yōkai* culture that acted as the driving force for the further development of other forms of *yōkai*, where it refers to the multitude of manifestations of *yōkai* that exist locally, specific to certain places. The academic domain deals with the process of collecting, analysing, documenting, and exhibiting the data on *yōkai*, and the people involved will be provided valuable knowledge in the fields of art, literature, history, and culture. The commercial sphere involves the process of converting *yōkai* into commodities with the clear intention of making money out of them, and this turn towards recontextualising and repurposing them to be used in books, anime, manga, films, video games, and toys became popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Vernacular includes a subcultural group of *yōkai* lovers who are highly knowledgeable in folklore and history, and actively participate in the production of *yōkai* items by imaginatively and innovatively engaging with *yōkai* culture. They do not aim at a mass production, but they are intended to be sold in their gatherings where they perform, discuss, and sell things based on *yōkai* (Foster, “The Book” 76–85).

Thus, originally springing up from the efforts to confront the fear of the unknown, *yōkai* has progressively transcended its folkloric roots as a narrative tradition, and travelled into the fields of academic discourse, commercial merchandise, and even developed into a vibrant subculture, thereby attaining considerable socio-cultural significance and playing a multidimensional role in contemporary Japanese society.

The Intersection of Foodways and Folklore in Japanese Culture

Before delving into the nuanced understanding of the relationship between foodways and folklore in Japanese culture, it is necessary to

unpack the meanings and implications of these two individual terms – foodways and folklore. Foodways involves a society’s production, distribution, preparation, consumption, and disposal practices, and embodies the concept of how various cultural, social, economic, political, and environmental factors influence those practices within a society. Based on the complex interaction between these practices and factors, the culinary culture of a society is defined. At a deeper level, foodways play a pivotal role in shaping the identity and determining the type of interactions within a community, as food practices are deeply influenced by communal belief systems, geographical locales, historical traditions, and socio-economic contexts (“Exploring the Interconnection”).

Any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language or religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. (Foster, “The Book” 13)

Quoting the American folklorist Alan Dundes, the above excerpt explains the present definition of the word “folk”, where the term has transcended from the earlier idea of folk as a group of uneducated people hailing from rural areas. The term “folklore” was coined by William J Thoms in 1846, referring to “the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, &c., of the olden time” (Merton 1). Thus, folklore is a collection of endless legends, superstitions, myths, oral traditions, customs, and rituals, passed down from one generation to another in a community, and is a source of cultural knowledge as it reflects the traditional values, social beliefs, and cultural practices of the people of a particular community (“Exploring the Interconnection”):

Mankind’s quest for food has been, and still is in many areas of the world, surrounded with uncertainty and fear. Because man has had to struggle for subsistence, many superstitions and beliefs have developed about foods. For man to feel that he had some control of his

destiny – in this instance, his food supply – he developed magical practices to assure success in planting and preparing food. (Shifflett 347)

In ancient times, without the required tools and technology, the act of procuring food for survival was a task involving fear, risks, and uncertainty. Even today, with the advent of farming using the most modern tools and technology to feed the growing population, hunger is a reality. From this fear of feeding, food folklore sprang up and fed the population with tales relating to the dos and don'ts of food-related practices to mitigate the anxieties. The coming together of food and folklore unravels the intricate relationship between our food practices and the tales we tell about it as a way of understanding ourselves and the world around us. Culinary folklore covers diverse domains – food-related myths and legends regarding the origins of certain foods, oral traditions that convey valuable information on production and preparation methods, stories that communicate the symbolic meanings of various foods, superstitious powers attributed to certain food items that restrict them from being consumed on a specific occasion, ritual and customs followed before and after a meal, food-related festivals and ceremonial meals, and also the traditional recipes and cooking techniques that are passed on from one generation to another. Through the exploration of food folklore, people can deepen their understanding and admiration of the varied culinary traditions and rich cultural heritage (“Exploring the Interconnection”).

In Japanese culture, food folklore has diverged into different trajectories with the integration of the concept of *yōkai*. There exist several *yōkai*-related folklores that define the ethics of eating practices and the consequences of following an unethical way of consuming food. It is through the fear that is evoked out of *yōkai* that people are guided into the proper path of food-consuming practices and traditional lifestyles. This study will discuss some of the *yōkai*-based food folklores that are popularly prevalent in Japan, along with a critical analysis of their context, content, form, and function, thereby unveiling and questioning the way folklore reflects, reinforces, as well as resists various existing socio-cultural norms and power structures.

A man goes out drinking one night and brings home a slender, sexy woman. After a night of passion, they fall asleep exhausted. The next morning the man is shocked to find out that he is not in bed with a beautiful woman, but a giant mound of flesh the size of four women. Somehow, over the night, his bedmate caught the yokai disease *nebutori* – the sleeping fatty. (“When Food Attacks”)

The above-mentioned is the classic story of *nebutori* or “The Sleeping Fatty”, and it is a *yōkai* disease that mainly infects women who sleep too soon after their meals. Those women affected will develop an insatiable appetite that stimulates them to overeat and expand enormously, outgrowing their clothes, and becoming too big to leave the room. Basically, *nebutori* is a warning to women to maintain “thin figures, gentle personalities, and to avoid oversleeping”, drawing inspiration from the popular Japanese superstition that sleeping after eating will transform you into a cow, and also satirising the stereotypic mentality of women to go careless after marriage (“Nebutori”). On the other hand, by policing the female bodies and controlling their behaviour, it reinforces the hidden patriarchal notions that equate a woman’s worth with her physical beauty, domestic diligence, and conformity to the idealised gender roles.

Oseichu or “The Mimicking Roundworm” is another story that tells how *yōkai* always need not be monstrous creatures but can also take the form of infectious diseases. This deadly disease begins with stomach pain and high fever, and ends with the formation of a small bump in the stomach, soon enlarging to develop a giant mouth poking out of the stomach that speaks in the voice of the victimised and continuously demands to be fed. This is based on a story from 1703 CE, where Chusaburo, the son of the labourer Shichizaemon, started showing the symptoms of this *yōkai* disease. Shocked by this strange occurrence, Shichizaemon tried numerous medicines and summoned sorcerers and exorcists of various types to help with the misfortune of his son, but failed to decode the disease. Finally, with the aid of the famous doctor, Kan Gensai, it was diagnosed as an *oseichu* infection and was treated with a combination of six special medicines

that eventually pushed out a roundworm of thirty-three centimetres long from his anus. The worm that resembled a giant lizard was beaten to death by the people present there, and slowly, Chusaburo regained his health and recovered completely (“Oseichu – The Mimicking”). This *yōkai* can be read as a warning to carefully consume food and practice good hygiene to avoid getting infected.

There are a handful of folklores reflecting the consequences of gluttonous behaviour in humans, which is a tendency often negatively viewed and stigmatised in Japan. *Shio no Choji*, or “Salty Choji”, presents the story of a wealthy man named Choji who lived in Kaga province. He loved horse meat so much that he owned a herd of three hundred horses to enjoy horse meat every day. He slaughters and pickles it with salt or mixes it with mayo paste, to be consumed every night. Slowly, his stock of horse meat ran out, and he was only left with an old horse incapable of working and being eaten. Choji, failing to control his craving for horse meat, slaughtered the weak horse and ate it gluttonously. Every night from that day, he was haunted by the spirit of the old horse. Rather than a normal possession, the spirit enters his body through the mouth, down his throat, and then to the stomach, making him feel the pain of his body stretching to make way for the spirit to reach the stomach. Choji’s condition was beyond medical help, and he had a miserable experience with a high fever along with hallucinations, babbling and screaming out the sins he had committed in his lifetime, and died with his body bent like an old horse. Today, horse meat has turned into one of the popular cuisines in Japanese food culture, and this *yōkai* story in contemporary times highlights the consequences of overconsumption (“Shio no Choji”; “Shio no Chōjirō”). Another story that deals with the ramifications of overeating is *Suppon on Onryo* or “The Vengeful Ghosts of the Turtles”, and this narrative revolves around a successful *suppon* restaurant owner, Kiroku, who severs hundreds of turtles in his restaurant daily to serve up to his customers. One night, when he was alone, his body began to feel heavy, everything around him dark and cold, and he was caught by a sense of being submerged underwater with turtles all around him. This strange and fearful happening continued every night until he took a vow not to take a life anymore, and from then onwards the ghosts of the turtles stopped haunting him (“Suppon on Onryo”).

Similarly, *Suppon no yūrei* or “The Ghosts of Soft-Shell Turtles” has “gigantic ghosts with long legless bodies, and prominent, pointed lips just like a softshell turtle” who usually take revenge on the humans who feast on them in abundance. The Edo period was a time when the big cities in Japan had numerous shops specialising in soft shell turtle meat, following a popular belief that this meat was medicinal to treat haemorrhoids. There is a famous tale of three friends from Nagoya, who, because of their extreme love for the taste of turtle flesh, moved from one restaurant to another to consume all the turtle meat they could. One day, they visited a new *suppon* restaurant, but they experienced an overwhelming sense of unease – the chef resembled a turtle with scaly and greenish-coloured skin. When he stood, his unnaturally long legs made it evident that they were under the presence of a *suppon yūrei*. Terrified, they fled the place, returned home, and remained at home for several days in a state of extreme fear, and the experience left a lasting impact on them that they never had the confidence to taste turtle meat again (“Suppon no Yūrei – The Turtle”; “Suppon no yūrei”). There is another *yōkai* called *kowai*, the ghost of a person who exhibited gluttonous behaviour during lifetime that his/her insatiable craving for food is carried into the next life by transforming into this *yōkai* after death. Searching for food, it manifests at night near food stalls and restaurants as a “grotesque human with fox-like features, blood-shot eyes, sharp teeth, and a long drooling tongue”. Driven by endless hunger, it scavenges obsessively, rummaging through the garbage piles, overturning stalls, and attacking late-night food vendors for any edible remnants. Its desperation for consumption has no bounds that it even resorts to rotting carrion from the streets, thus, symbolising its cursed existence for practising a life of gluttony during its lifetime (“Kowai”). A critical reading of these folklores reveals their roots in the Japanese philosophy of mindful eating, which is deeply embedded in the culinary practices of Japan like *ichiju-sansai* (a balanced meal structure), *hara hachi bu* (eating until one is 80% full), and the expressions such as *itadakimasu* and *gochisousama*, which are ritualised appreciation of food before and after the meals, all of which underlines a disciplined approach and cultural commitment to balance, seasonal awareness, and respect for food.

Japan is a nation that stresses the concept of minimal food waste, thus, this culinary philosophy is also reflected through the *yōkai* stories prevalent in Japan. One such *yōkai* is *kasukurai*, and the term *kasu* refers to food scraps and leftovers (specifically the byproducts of food production), reflecting Japan's practice of repurposing waste, like *sake kasu* (pressed lees left from the sake brewing process), a white nutritious and fruity paste used in cooking many dishes in Japan. They are eerie *yōkai* with 'pale white skin, a flabby, misshapen head, bloodshot eyes, thin lips, and pointy teeth . . . wear loose robes draped over their shoulders" and materialise when food scraps are discarded rather than eaten or reused, thus serving as a reminder to avoid wasting food ("Kasukurai"). This folklore can be read in connection with the Japanese principles of *mottainai* (a sense of regret over unnecessary excess or waste) and *wabi-sabi* (an appreciation for natural simplicity).

Many *yōkai* interestingly share a direct relation with *sake*, a Japanese alcoholic beverage made by the fermentation of rice. The popular turtle-shelled aquatic *yōkai* called *kappa*, dwells in rivers and ponds, and is famed for its strength, swimming prowess, and love of cucumbers. Once a feared prankster said to drag children into the water, it has now evolved into a playful and friendly figure, and today even appears as a mascot for some *sake* brands. There is a story of a villager named Gorobe in Chigasaki village who rescued a hunted *kappa* from the villagers, and for that, he was rewarded with a never-ending *sake* carafe as a token of thanks. Overjoyed by the gift, he turned alcoholic and lost in indulgence, and only regained his senses and snapped out of it when he saw his starving horse. *Tanuki* or the Japanese raccoon dog, is considered a *yōkai* animal, and it is renowned for its shape shifting skills in Japanese folklore, enabling it to transform into both humans and objects. Even though frequently depicted as a mischievous figure, it is a symbol of prosperity and commercial success and is commonly illustrated with a straw hat, *sake* gourd or *kakurizaru* (a gourd-shaped container used to store and drink *sake*), and a large bulging belly that it uses as a drum. Shigeru Mizuki, one of the pioneers of horror manga, recorded the story of Fukuro-sage, a cunning and evil *tanuki* from the Nagano region that could transform food into *sake* with its elongated stomach. *Shuten-dōji*, a *yōkai* from Kyoto's mountain folklore, was responsible for the

disappearance of several women, so the emperor dispatched his warriors to defeat him. Disguised as priests on divine advice from deities on the way, they were welcomed by *Shuten-dōji* with *sake*, his favourite drink. Tricking the demon into drinking sacred *sake* given by the gods, they secured their victory by pushing him into a deep slumber and beheading him. Other *sake*-related *yōkai* include *ozake no mushi* or the worm of excessive drinkers, *kosho* or the lover of sweet *sake*, and *haradashi* or the belly exposé. After entering the human body, *ozake no mushi* occupies the abdomen part, releases numerous other parasitic worms and transforms the victim into an alcoholic. With a child-like face and snake-like body, *kosho*, as a lover of sweet *sake*, settles in the space between the heart and diaphragm, a hidden spot where neither medicine nor needles can reach. Lively and playful, *haradashi* enjoys bringing joy to people who are melancholic or lonely and particularly manifests near those who sip on *sake* (Bacci).

The intersection of *yōkai* and gastronomy, and Japan's enduring fascination with *yōkai* folklore, is also visible in the growing café and restaurant culture as well as in *yōkai* festivals. Kitarō Chaya or Kitarō Café, built in 2003 in Chōfu, Tokyo, is a *yōkai*-themed café that celebrates the legacy of Mizuki Shigeru's manga *GeGeGe no Kitarō* through its interior design – a tea room with a menu containing Kitarō latte art and *yōkai*-based sweets, a gallery that exhibits his original works, and a small shop with products inspired by the characters of his manga and other *yōkai* figures for sale (“Kitarō Chaya”). Reflecting the interest in Japanese folklore and culture, many foreign nations have cafés with names like *Yōkai Ramen* in the US and *Yōkai Café* in France. Additionally, based on the defining feature of *yōkai* to pop up anywhere at any time, *Yo-Kai Express*, an innovative high-tech autonomous vending machine that serves a well-prepared gourmet bowl in ninety seconds anytime by operating 24/7 with a robot chef, offering a variety of dishes including ramen, pasta, rice bowl, dim-sum, udon and even desserts, was launched in 2016 in the US (“AI Powered”). In 2022, it was installed in three key locations in Japan – Haneda Airport Terminal 2, J R East Tokyo Station, and Shibaura Parking Area (Albrecht). In Japan, there are also various *yōkai*-related festivals like *Tokushima Yokai*, *Tachikawa Yokai Bon*

Odori, *Shikoku Yokai Matsuri* and many others, where the food stalls in these festivals serve *yōkai*-themed food items.

Conclusion

In essence, this research study examined the intricate relationship shared between *yōkai* and gastronomy, thereby exploring the potential intersection of food and folklore in Japanese foodways. The study unveiled how this interplay functioned both as a medium for entertainment and as an educational framework for guiding people into the culinary philosophies and ethical dimensions of consuming food in Japanese society. The introductory section attempted to define what *yōkai* refers to as a term in general and in Japanese folklore. Following this, the section “The Evolutionary History of *Yōkai* in Japan” traced the evolution of *yōkai* with the changing human history, from its folkloric origins to contemporary times. “Theorising *Yōkai* in Japanese Cultural Discourse” analysed the different ways and categories by which *yōkai* exist within Japanese culture. The core section “The Intersection of Foodways and Folklore in Japanese Culture” identified numerous *yōkai*-related food folklores through which the ethics of eating and culinary philosophies of Japan are communicated. They highlight the philosophy of mindful eating (eating slowly, feeling the food), and mostly act as a warning against gluttony, overconsumption, food waste, and unhygienic food practices that spread diseases. By identifying various folklores connected to food, which can be collectively termed as “food folklore”, this paper is a result of a critical understanding of such food-related folklores in Japan in which the concept of *yōkai* intersects with gastronomy and it was revealed that the creation of such *yōkai* is a cultural act loaded with dominant political ideologies, where it normalises the patriarchal notions and other societal structures on one side, as well as resists and reacts to the prevailing social tensions on the other. From fearful *yōkai* tales that educate the people through the fear evoked through such stories, this food-folklore intersection has also evolved to meet the entertainment side of contemporary culture, both in Japan and internationally, in the form of *yōkai* cafes and restaurants as well as *yōkai*-themed dishes served at various *yōkai* festivals, thus, making its entry into foreign

culture. Today, *yōkai* in its different variations has travelled to a global level and is not limited to the boundaries of Japanese culture.

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**African Folklore, Traditional Religion, and Decoloniality: A
Critical Reading of Nnedi Okorafor's *Zahrah the Windseeker*
and *Lagoon***

Ananya Buragohain* and Lakshminath Kagyung**

Abstract

This paper situates African traditional religious practices, folklore, and decolonial traits in Nnedi Okorafor's *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005) and *Lagoon* (2016) to examine how her writings serve as a medium to recover the indigenous knowledge system of the Africans while subverting dominant Eurocentric ideologies still operating against Black community. This paper sheds light on the contributions made by topical African writings in reviving the African archive of traditional beliefs, folklore, and culture. This paper contends that Okorafor's narratives have transcended the theoretical paradigms of resistive postcolonial representational praxis and binary epistemic related to Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism to explore new horizons associated with Black people's livelihood, future, nation-building, and identity. The selected texts are analysed by establishing points of convergence between the Postcolonial lens and decolonial theory.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Decoloniality, Eurocentrism, Folklore, Racism

Introduction

Through an overview of the content in academia and popular entertainment, it can be deciphered that Africa, African perspective, and African traditional religion have been stigmatised by the West

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since the era of colonisation of Africa by European countries in the 19th century. This has promoted a problematised representation of African traditional beliefs, native African folklore, and Black communities' physiological traits on the global trajectory. Therefore, contemporary Black writers and critics, such as Nnedi Okorafor, Rivers Solomon, Toyin Falola, and Zeinab Badawi, have initiated the process of decolonisation in their works which not only subverts dominant Eurocentric epistemologies operating against Blacks but also asserts the cultural identity of the Black race by introducing the world to the age-old archive of African history, heritage, and culture.

Okorafor's *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *Lagoon*, in addition to participating in the resistive postcolonial representational praxis, authentically depict indigenous African customs and folklore, thereby, guaranteeing the reclamation of the voice of the marginalised section of the black race. The plotlines of these texts introduce the readers to traditional African beliefs and practices such as prayers to natural entities, veneration of native legends, and invocation of deities which reflect the cultural ambits of a section of Africans still adhering to African traditional religion (hereafter, ATR).

Okorafor's narratives illustrate the positive implications of introducing the young generations of Africa to their native repository of mythologies, oral traditions, and folktales because these become a reference for self-expression of Blacks. On a similar note, Peter Wuteh Vakunta in his book *Toward the Decolonization of the Europhone African Novel* (2023) remarks that: "Oral tradition cannot be dissociated from the written in the context of contemporary fiction writings in Africa because the majority of Africans who write are steeped in their indigenous cultures and tend to make use of oral motifs and images in literary creativity" (25). Thus, apart from engaging with the paradigm of binary epistemology of Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism, Okorafor's narratives authentically represent the current socio-political and cultural scenarios of African societies because it is imperative to focus on these dimensions while channelising revival of their native culture and heritage. Her narrative technique and captivating content suggest that contemporary African literature transcends the realm of resistive postcolonial

representational praxis and endeavour to explore the social, political, and religious aspects associated with growth and development of the continent.

Okorafor's *Zahrah the Windseeker*, an African fantasy novel, depicts the everyday encounters of an African girl Zahrah who has been blessed with the superpower to fly. Her native African bodily traits, such as dreadlocks and dark skin, often harbor racist remarks from others. The narrative follows Zahrah and her friend Dari's adventures in the Dark Market/forbidden market of their community. The readers, following their adventures in the Dark Market, come across a grim yet fascinating world of war snakes, gorillas, and demons. The plotline seamlessly blends elements from African folklore, indigenous medicinal practices, and ATR with a tradition of fantasy which helps reclaim a dignified space for the African heritage on the global dais and assist them in reconnecting with their native knowledge system.

Meanwhile, Okorafor's *Lagoon*, a science fiction (hereafter, sci-fi), illustrates how the three main characters of the novel—Adaora, Agu, and Anthony, who possess different superpowers like supersonic voice and strong muscle power, try to save the people of Nigeria during an unexpected encounter between humans and aliens in the region. This text has effectively represented the regressive impacts of the European belief system on the adherents of ATR. The narrative impeccably blends native African folktales with scientific interventions and political activities in Nigeria to portray the livelihood of people in Lagos in a realistic manner. *Lagoon* revived the essence of native African folktales and authentically represented Africa's pre-colonial history, traditions, and cultures to the global audience. The plotline depicts interesting episodes around African legends and deities such as Anansi- the trickster spider, Mami Wata- the water goddess, and Ijele- the grand African masquerade.

African Folklore and African Traditional Religion

Literary productions and popular entertainment representing African folklore and African traditional religion have been promoting solidarity and nation-building among Africans in the homeland and

in the diaspora. This channelises Black solidarity and consciousness on the global trajectory which are intrinsic aspects of Black livelihood. The knowledge system of a particular community/race is often designed to support the indigenous beliefs of the people belonging to that community/race which suggests the necessity to reconnect the younger generations of Africa to their indigenous knowledge system and native repository of folktales. This advocates the necessity to modulate the ongoing narrative techniques and content of African writings which are more susceptible towards resistive postcolonial representational praxis rather than authentically representing the social, political, and cultural aspects of postcolonial African societies. Joel A Adedeji remarks that folkloric literature often displays a variation in content, style, and format because the mediator handling it often re-creates it with skill and sophistication which leads to change (7). Meanwhile, a similar kind of modulation in narrative technique and content can be seen in Okorafor's texts, where native African mythologies and age-old traditions are finely blended with elements drawn from science, technology, and socio-political experiences of Blacks to portray an authentic image of the livelihood of people in contemporary African societies. Thus, Okorafor's works are worthy of an in-depth analysis because her narratives surpassed the paradigms of binary episteme and resistive postcolonial representational praxis, often followed by Black writers, to encourage her Black brethren overcome the trauma of colonisation and visualise a sustainable and technologically advanced future for themselves.

On the other hand, ATR fosters native African myths, legends, and traditions which are custodians of the adherents of ATR. Prominent critics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (2004) remark that: "The contemporary art, philosophy, and literature produced by post-colonial societies are in no sense continuations or simple adaptations of European models" (220). This suggests why recently emerging postcolonial literature from Africa is a product of the process of decolonisation which reclaim the cultural identity of the Africans and interrogate ongoing regressive socio-political tensions in African societies apart from subverting dominant Eurocentric norms. Accordingly, the recently emerging genre of African speculative fiction, which include sci-fi

and fantasies, combines elements from science and technology with native African myths, legends, and fantasies to emphasise how contemporary livelihood of the Africans is different from their earlier ways of living. Apart from channelling Afrocentrism, these narratives highlight the importance of valuing Black solidarity to design a sustainable and technologically advanced future for the Africans.

Jane Bryce contends that speculative fiction has its roots in the African way of storytelling that is associated with myth, orality, and indigenous belief systems (1). From a similar perspective, it can be argued that the selected narratives of Okorafor have been designed by following the African way of storytelling which relies on native African myths to reconnect the young generations of Africa to their indigenous belief system. Okorafor's *Zahrah the Windseeker* adapts the native African myth of Mami Wata, a water deity, who is still venerated by the followers of ATR in Africa. In one of the scenes, Dari and Zahrah talk about Mami Wata describing her as a powerful water deity, "Dari obsessed with Mami Wata Mambos women who honored a powerful water deity" (Okorafor 253). As per the records in the anthology *Africa: The Definitive Visual History of a Continent* (2024), Mami Wata is "a water spirit who is feared and venerated in West, Central, and Southern Africa. The spirit represents wealth and success" (Asaaju et al. 156). During the pre-colonial era in Africa, Mami Wata was highly venerated by the native Africans; however, with the advent of missionary expeditions such myths were declared insignificant and the followers of ATR were persuaded to follow Christianity. Okorafor's adroit way of reiterating the myth of Mami Wata through a fantasy fiction reflects her expertise as a conscious Black writer who recognises the importance of introducing the Black readers to the native African repository of oral traditions and myths. Her narratives subtly deliver the message that it is high time for the Blacks to reconnect with their native roots and reclaim the cultural identity which has been negotiated since the era of colonisation of Africa by the Europeans.

Moreover, European colonisation and Arab invasion adversely affected the African traditional belief system and led to the promotion of Abrahamic religion, Christianity and Islam, among the Africans.

This wreaked havoc on the ATR practitioners and disrupted the native storehouse of African myths and legends. Zeinab Badawi in the documentary video “Ancestors, Spirits, and God- History of Africa with Zeinab Badawi [Episode 8]”, uploaded by BBC News Africa, mentions that at present, out of the 1 billion population of Africa, only 15% of the total population are adherents of ATR while the rest are Muslims and Christians. Nigerian historian, Falola, in his book *Decolonizing African Studies: Knowledge Production, Agency, and Voice* (2022) also opines that “African traditional religion (ATR) has suffered from the impact of colonisation into the twenty-first century. The coming of European culture and Christian religion impeded the growth of ATR” (22). This validates how European missionary expeditions and Arab invasion shattered the ground that has been fostering African traditional religion, culture, and folklore. European colonisation of Africa not only destabilised the economy of the continent but entirely demolished the indigenous knowledge system, native epistemology, and religious beliefs of the Africans eventually problematising their cultural identity on the global platform. This also led to proselytisation and conversion of indigenous Africans to Christianity. *Lagoon* depicts how the African traditional knowledge system was completely destroyed by the European belief system that was once forced upon the Black Africans during colonisation. Missionaries indoctrinated the Blacks to follow the European belief system which was later on passed down to the next generations. This aided in the gradual evolution of the European belief system on the African continent. However, it became a major threat to ATR and black solidarity because it created a breach among the Blacks and divided them on the ground of their religious affiliations.

This ongoing deliberation between the ethics of Christianity and ATR can be seen through the character of Father Oke in *Lagoon* who is a devout Christian but also a fanatic who has failed to anticipate the real ethics of the Christian religion that intrinsically preaches compassion for others. He misuses his position as a bishop and creates his own set of racist and sexist parameters to criticise his Black brethren. He punishes the followers of the Church if they do not align with his conventional religious ideologies. He often manipulates Chris, Adaora’s husband, to abuse her and suggests him

to restrain Adaora from living an independent life. Interestingly, to end Father Oke's growing viciousness against the people of Lagos, *Lagoon* breathes life into the native African myth of Mami Wata. Mami Wata, in the form of a charismatic woman, visits Father Oke and hypnotises him to follow her to the Lagos seabeach which brings an abrupt end to Father Oke's regressive propaganda against the people of Lagos. Moreover, the deity persuades him to contemplate his actions against his own people. This forces him to self-confess and ask for forgiveness. He repents that during one of the sessions in the Church, he had abused a poor peasant woman only because his patriarchal mindset convinced him to do so: "Why had he slapped that woman so hard yesterday morning? Why had he slapped her at all?" (Okorafor 235). The arrival of Mami Wata, in the human world, to protect the people of Lagos from fanatic Father Oke suggests the grandeur of a native African deity over racist Eurocentric insolence still operating against the Blacks. This episode of *Lagoon* illustrates the necessity to subjugate such fanatics who explicitly promote racism and sexism against Black people.

Lagoon has also adapted and incorporated the myth of the grand masquerade Ijele who is a revered spirit of the Nigerians. The narrative of *Lagoon* is set during a period of crisis in Lagos, Nigeria following an alien encounter in the place. The crisis took a gruesome turn which gave rise to political duplicities, corruption, and violence. The intensity of chaos, political instability, and circulation of rumours went to such a great extent that life of common people was at risk. To settle the ongoing mayhem and violence in Lagos, Ijele, a native deity of the Nigerians, came to life and calmed down the situation. Ijele, in the form of an apparition, entered the computer screens of an internet cafe and crashed the files/documents circulating fake propaganda about the human-alien encounter. The deletion of those files/documents curtailed the intensity of violence and halted the growing atrocity among the people. Thus, the grand masquerade Ijele protects the people of Lagos from a probable crusade which otherwise might have claimed a lot of lives. Thus, Okorafor has adapted the myth of a native deity of the Nigerians to illustrate how a section of African people still choose to follow their indigenous belief system and seek protection from their native deities

rather than adhering to the religious ideologies preached by the colonial masters.

This also suggests that Okorafor imbibes a new narrative mechanism which has enabled her to use the genre of speculative fiction to explore and introduce the world to the untold pre-colonial history of Africa because the West has been modulating the history and heritage of Africa as per their concern. From a similar perspective, Patrick Chabal remarks that, “It has always been true that the West’s vision of Africa has been the product of its own imagination rather than that of a serious interest in what actually happens on the continent” (36). Thus, Okorafor opts for a decolonial framework in conjunction with the postcolonial lens to authentically represent the socio-political and cultural scenario of Africa apart from engaging with the resistive praxis of countering the West. This gives a new perspective to her works. Therefore, it is a thoughtful move by Okorafor, as a Black writer, to adapt elements from the native African archive of oral traditions and mythologies in order to portray the livelihood of the Africans in relation to the social, political, religious, and cultural dimensions of the continent.

Furthermore, Okorafor has characterised a spider as the narrator of *Lagoon*. This again directs us to West African legends where Anansi, the trickster spider, is considered to be an intelligent spirit and master of cunningness. In one of the scenes, in *Lagoon*, it has been mentioned that the narrator of the story is Udide Okwanka who is a spider, “I am the spider. I see. I feel taste. I hear touch. I spin the story. This is the story I’ve spun” (Okorafor 291). As per the records in the anthology *The Black History Book* (2021), “Asante oral tradition has it that the cloth’s patterns were inspired by the web of the spider Ananse, a trickster figure in Akan folk legends, who also crops up as Anansi in Caribbean folklore” (Blyden et al. 149). Meanwhile, similar findings, about the legend of Anansi, are also drawn by Sarita G in her paper where she mentions that:

In the folktales, he appears as a West African god who frequently assumes the shape of a spider and is considered to be the life force of all knowledge of all the stories on earth. But he is neither worshipped nor

has any shrines to his name. Anansi also appears as a trickster, a rogue, and an animal with human traits. (199)

Thus, Okorafor's narratives serve as a medium to introduce the young and upcoming generations of Africa to the lesser-known history, heritage, culture, and folklore of the continent. Her writings have the potential to educate Africa's youth to value their native roots, connect with the past, and map out effective ways to live an emancipated life. The future, as manifested in her narratives, should be furnished through scientific advancement and technological progression where the Blacks can experience liberation from the shackles of racism. The plotlines of these texts illustrate the genesis of a gradual shift in African writings where content, style, and narration equally contribute in capturing the attention of Black readers and thereafter, assisting them to comprehend the significance of reclaiming Black identity by cherishing the grandeur of indigenous knowledge system of Africa which is an archive of oral traditions, folktales, and medicinal practices.

Thus, Okorafor has experimented with the genre of African speculative fiction to formulate her content and convey her message through a fresh perspective to the global Black audience whose voice and thought-process are still subjugated under racial politics. Moreover, she has relied on the age-old native archive of Africa to draw images, interlink myths with futuristic approaches, and articulate the Africans' longing for a better future of the Black race. From a similar point of view, Kimberly Cleveland remarks that, "It is no surprise that in adopting science fiction conventions for African storytelling, African writers relied on an existing archive of images drawn from indigenous cultural forms" (xii). Therefore, it can be contended that Okorafor's writings are new narratives which have been addressing the topical issue of nation-building through scientific advancements apart from engaging with the postcolonial paradigm of countering the West. This suggests that Okorafor's texts are not archetypes of resistive postcolonial representational praxis but are new narratives designed through a fresh perspective which have been acting as a medium to recover the native African knowledge system apart from questioning the Eurocentric parameters overtly operating

against the Blacks. Furthermore, revered ATR practices, valuing Black solidarity, and cherishing Black consciousness are recurring motifs in her texts. This strengthens the decolonial viewpoint present in her works which undeniably questions the colonial gaze and reveres the culture, heritage, and traditions of the Africans. The readers can identify that the Black characters in the selected texts revere the richness of their traditional practices rather than conforming to Eurocentric norms. The selected texts of Okorafor demonstrate how the individuals of postcolonial African societies can experience a meaningful existence by restructuring their traditional belief system and reclaiming their epistemologies of the pre-colonial era. Thus, the decolonial aspect in Okorafor's texts broadens her perspective to identify new angles associated with the well-being of the people in Africa.

Contemporary Black writers are trying to master the technique of decolonising the mindset of the Africans by assisting them in unlearning and overcoming the racist and sexist parameters popularised by the West. Topical African writings, like sci-fi and fantasy, urge the Africans to shape a technologically advanced future that can empower them to live a sustainable life divorced from political instability and racial politics. It processes a whole new agenda to recover the intrinsic identity of the Blacks reinforced by their traditional knowledge system. The growing concern among Africans about their future initialised the process of decolonisation of language, knowledge, and epistemologies to challenge the Eurocentric narrative of racial hegemony and redefine the grandeur of indigenous knowledge system of the Africans. Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike contend that contemporary African culture is under foreign domination. Moreover, African culture has to destroy all encrustations of colonial mentality and thereafter, figure out new details for an African modernity (47). Okorafor's narratives reflect a similar ideology because postcoloniality is just a partial agenda in her works while her writings are more focused on representing the nuances of African perspective, intra-political scenarios, indigeneity, and livelihood of the people in Africa.

Thus, a sensible aspect of Okorafor's writings is her subtle representation of the socio-political and cultural scenario of

contemporary African societies to highlight how the natives are also struggling because of corruption, weak governance, and rifts among the followers of different religions. However, the futuristic viewpoint and optimistic approach in her writings differentiate her texts from the writings of other Black writers who are more concerned about countering the West and its Eurocentric ideologies. Her narratives are more concerned about highlighting the internal affairs of the continent while encouraging the Africans to create a better future for themselves by prioritising Black solidarity, scientific advancements, and good governance. Thus, Okorafor's works succeed to surpass the paradigm of resistive postcolonial praxis by highlighting the social, political, cultural, and religious aspects associated with Africans' nation-building.

Decolonial and Subversive Traits in Okorafor's Writings

Okorafor has adopted a technological lens to recover native African myths, ATR practices, and indigenous knowledge system among the Africans through her speculative fiction. Moreover, her narratives attempt to recover the African traditional medicinal practices which were once deemed demonic by the erstwhile colonial masters. Falola mentions that, "Traditional medicinal practices and indigenous religious activities were demonized and replaced with 'modern' Western medicine and religions" (101). Black authors are of the opinion that reviving native medicinal practices can also help in recovering and strengthening the indigenous knowledge system of the Africans. Moreover, the natives relate to it. *Zahrah the Windseeker* introduces the readers to the traditional medical system once followed by the native Africans. However, during European colonisation those procedures were declared irrelevant and demonic by the colonisers and were replaced with Western medicinal procedures. In one of the episodes of *Zahrah the Windseeker*, a gorilla named Obax brings Zahrah to his village in order to heal her injuries. The gorillas administer a traditional therapeutic medicinal course to cure her wounds. They first ask her to take a herbal oil bath and thereafter, prick her forehead with three pointed sticks. The traditional process administered by the gorillas helped her recover faster. Thus, *Zahrah the Windseeker* made an effort to introduce the current generation of Africa to the traditional medical system which

was previously deemed obsolete by the European colonisers. This will encourage the growth of consciousness among the Africans about their age-old medicinal procedures which were locally practised by learned persons to cure ailments of patients with the help of locally available herbs. Moreover, recovering the age-old medicinal system is another pertinent aspect associated with the revival of native African knowledge system.

Falola highlights that decolonising the epistemology of Africa can become a major start to re-establish the dismantled knowledge system of Africa and emancipate the psyche of the Africans from the predicament of racial stigmatisation. African writers and critics have used the literary platform to decolonise the psyche and epistemologies of Africans from dominant Western hegemonies. This will eventually channelise the growth of Black consciousness about their own culture and indigenous institutions which were demolished during European colonisation of Africa. An overview of the literary productions by several non-Black writers will permit us to argue that they have consciously stigmatised the physiology, medicinal practices, folklore, and indigenous epistemologies of the Africans in their writings. This provided enough space for Western ideologies to grow and evolve over time. Furthermore, this scenario convinced nearly everyone to believe that the West is superior and the rest should be considered inferior. Thus, as highlighted by Falola, Western languages succeeded to occupy the central positions in academia and socio-cultural domain while expertise in indigenous languages has been demarcated as a pointer of illiteracy (101-102). Falola aptly notes that “African renaissance emphasized on Africanized system of knowledge production that can attend to the demands of African reality: that is, the decolonization of African studies through its educational institutions” (7). Meanwhile, Ania Loomba, in her acclaimed text *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2016), remarks that the line separating the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ is not fixed rather it is shifting (83) which suggests that the binary of self-other, established by the West, is still subject to change and there is ample space for the Africans to reclaim their cultural identity and marginalised voice. Thus, African literature often criticises the periphery status determined for the Africans by the West and Okorafor’s writings nevertheless highlight the same issue.

Thus, contemporary African literature seeks to educate the Black reader about his native African knowledge system, African culture, and ATR. These narratives not only subvert the attribute of the “other” endorsed upon the Blacks but also introduce the pre-colonial history of the Africans to global readers through a modernised lens that blends scientific advancements with traditional beliefs. Therefore, contemporary literary productions of Black authors and critics redefine indigenous beliefs and folklore of the Africans, furnished through African epistemologies, and operate as repellent of racist Western ideologies while contributing in the growth of African folk studies.

Furthermore, a particular race/community can safeguard its identity and heritage on the global stage if the individuals of that race/community value the history, culture, and folklore venerated by their forefathers. However, it is quite appalling that the history, heritage, and folklore of the once colonised countries are still stereotyped, stigmatised, and misrepresented by the West. It can be seen that several non-Black writers from the West deliberately stereotype the traditions and cultures of the Blacks. Similar findings are drawn by Anand Prahlad in his paper where he remarks that, “In the nineteenth century, most writings on Africana folklore were colonially inspired, stereotypical renderings of black people” (254–55). For instance, classic works by non-Black authors, such as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (2010) and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (2006), disparaged the Blacks and their traditions. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has encountered serious criticism for its representation of the native Africans of the Congo basin. The novella portrayed the local Black workers of the European ivory company as barbarous and characterised them as helpless slaves of the white masters. It can be argued that Conrad’s narrative tried to create an erroneous supposition of the nature and mannerisms of the indigenous people of Africa by representing the Black workers as savages, niggers, and brutes. The racist terminologies used by Conrad to represent the Black workers illustrate his Eurocentric insolence. Conrad’s colonial gaze is reflected through the thought-process of Charles Marlow who is the narrator of the text. Marlow labels the Black workers of Congo basin as mere labourers who should be bound to work for a living. It is pertinent to quote a few lines from *Heart of Darkness* to delineate

how Conrad has used his narrative as a medium to represent the native Blacks of Congo basin as moribund non-being devoid of an identity:

These moribund shapes were free as air - and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, and enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. (19)

In one of the scenes, Marlow questions the value of a worsted worn by one of the Black workers on his neck. Marlow contemplates: "He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck—Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act?" (Conrad 19). Here, Marlow, with his colonialist gaze, questions the value of the worsted worn by a Black worker and marks it as a mere piece of nuisance. However, the Black worker believes the same worsted to be a valuable token or charm and feels protected. Furthermore, it can be deciphered that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* also has an underlying tone of Eurocentric insolence against people carrying Black legacy. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* represents a Creole, Bertha Mason, with animalistic and non-human traits. Bertha can be marked as a victim of racial stigmatisation and patriarchy. In one of the scenes, Mr Rochester, Bertha's husband, explains to his acquaintances that, "Bertha Mason is mad: and she came of a mad family: idiots and maniacs through three generations! - as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before" (Brontë 337). Thus, Brontë's text has represented a Creole woman as a non-human creature who attacks others and is devoid of any humanistic qualities. However, the same text portrayed a white woman, Jane, with great refinement and decency. This suggests that the narrative of *Jane Eyre* indulges in the binary epistemic of racial prejudice which condemns people carrying a Black legacy as non-humans and whites as ideal type. Thus, it can be concluded that at times, even academic writings are used as a medium to propagandise racial politics.

Furthermore, similar scenarios of misrepresentation of Africans and their traditions can be seen in films. For instance, *District 9*, a 2009 sci-fi film directed by Neill Blomkamp, portrayed a demeaning picture of the Blacks in the South African city of Johannesburg. Blomkamp, a non-Black director, portrayed the local people of Johannesburg as assailants, sorcerers, illiterates, and cannibals. The film was set in a period of political instability in Johannesburg, following a sudden encounter between the locals and a group of insect-like aliens. The sudden entry of the extraterrestrial creatures in Johannesburg territory incited a hue and cry situation in the location. Nnedi Okorafor, in her sci-fi *Lagoon*, questions Blomkamp's portrayal of the Africans as savages and their culture as barbarous in his film. On the other hand, *Lagoon* subverts and challenges Blomkamp's racist perspective towards Africans and represents the Africans' belief system in a dignified manner. The episode illustrating the debate between Mami Wata and Father Oke suggests Okorafor's deliberate attempts to subvert racist parameters of the West by venerating the indigenous knowledge system of the Africans. Thus, contemporary African literature in a very nuanced way writes back to the West while deconstructing dominant Eurocentric ideologies operating against the Africans on the global trajectory.

However, an in-depth analysis of recent literary productions by Black authors will enable us to establish that writing back to the West is no more the sole motive of contemporary Black authors. They are now more concerned about decolonising the mindset of their Black brethren from the trauma of colonisation internalised by them and thereafter, encourage them to pursue Black solidarity for a collective growth of the Black race. These works seek to serve as an eye-opener for those Africans who are still dealing with the implications of their dark past while helping them visualise a better future furnished through proper governance, technological advancements, solidarity, and revival of their indigenous knowledge system. Thus, decoloniality adds to the postcolonial traits in contemporary African works and Okorafor's writings nevertheless reflect the same idea. Okorafor has strategically incorporated elements from African mythology, native traditions, and technology to encourage her Black comrades to overcome self-doubt and collectively work for an

empowered future furnished through technological advancements. Moreover, it can be deciphered that as a Black author, Okorafor has consciously promoted the idea that a community's strength lies in its oral traditions, folklore, and heritage passed from one generation to another because these socio-cultural factors strengthen the identity of that specific community/race on the global platform. From a similar perspective, Sarita G remarks that, "Folklores handed down through generations either by word of mouth or through carefully stored scriptures form the very backbone of every nation's cultural legacy" (197). Thus, enabling the Blacks to reconnect with their native roots through literature—a creative way to foster solidarity among the Africans in the homeland and in the diaspora. This will eventually contribute to the revival of indigenous knowledge systems and ATR practices which were once deemed insignificant by the European colonisers.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that Okorafor's African speculative fiction illustrates a subversive tendency against dominant Western ideologies apart from operating as a platform that seeks to revive the indigenous knowledge system of the Africans. This can systematically guide the Africans to reconnect with their native roots, strengthen their intra-political ties, and reclaim a dignified identity in society. Moreover, Okorafor's writings promote the idea that a Black person divorced from his/her native roots eventually fails to reclaim a dignified space in any society across the world. This illustrates why contemporary African writings are reviving the forgotten history and heritage of Africa. Therefore, the aspects of subversion, decoloniality, and postcoloniality are recurring themes in Okorafor's writings. Her narratives authentically represent African history, heritage, and indigenous knowledge system on the global stage. Thus, Okorafor's texts, along with other such topical African works, are creating a remarkable contribution in the lives of the Africans because these works assist the Africans to visualise life through a modernised lens fostered by an optimistic approach. Therefore, promoting scientific advancement, good governance, and black solidarity for a better livelihood of Africans is a pertinent theme of Okorafor's texts.

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Translation

Harishchandra: The Truth Incarnate

(Translation of Nautanki Satyavadi Harishchandra into English)

Ravindra Pratap Singh
Characters

Indra

King of gods in Hindu religious tradition

Harishchandra

King of Kashi

Premier

Prime Minister to Harishchandra

Vishwamitra

A Sage

Vashistha

A Sage

Sadhu

Vishwamitra disguised as *Sadhu*

Brahmin

Vishwamitra in Disguise

Tara

Harishchandra's better half and queen

Rohit

Harishchandra's son

Initiation

Just relax and wait, have a seat dear friend,

I narrate a wonderful tale.

Its virtuous rays when beam their glow,
fades away evil, and all pangs of pain,

It saves one from humdrum lenience,
and purges the evils of misconduct.

Yes, it redeems us, in flash, the biggest
of the sins.

None so truthful ever I found,
for what to balance this age, in vain, it
shines.
People indulge in theft, they conspire
and graft,
A brother assails the other, siblings
harm- just see!
A reflection ever haunts my mind and
soul-
For our countrymen how can I make a
ingenuous start?
So I deliberate, I recall, and find a
sagacious soul,
who never compromised truth, and for
protecting truth.
he relinquished the empire and clan,
went for a paltry job at *Shamshan*-the
graveyard.
People call him Harishchandra,
Tara his consort, and Rohit the son.
Vishwamitra felt envious of
Harishchandra's fame,
and planned to validate it all.

SCENE: ONE

¹Indra's Court

Narration: *A pleasant morning, Guru Vashistha, reaches the court of Indra, and talks about the virtues of Harishchandra. Indra feels jealous. Coincidentally Vishwamitra also reaches there, the same time. Indra requests him to investigate the veracity of Harishchandra's glory and magnitude, devising a test whatsoever.*

*What happens next - let's perceive
Here it is offered in dramatic form.*

¹ In Hindu mythology, Indra is the King of gods.

(Indra is seated on his throne. Heavenly artists are performing dance)

Gate Keeper: Hail to Devraj! Trepidation to enemies!
Indra: Come in, clearly tell the fact.
Gate Keeper: *Rishi* Vashistha has arrived, My Lord!
If Your majesty permits, Should I fetch him in.
Indra: Of course, go and fetch him with due regards
Gate Keeper: (*Offering his obeisance*) Sure, my Lord!
Indra: (*Addressing the performing Apsaras²*)
Rambha, Urvashi and Tilottma³!
Disperse, you all, for now.

(Rambha and others depart. Sage Vashistha enters. Everybody greets him, arising from their seats).

Indra: Please have a seat!
Please recline! (*with folded hands*).
Here, the king of gods bows!
Blessed I feel,
and so does the empire, *Maharishi*⁴!
From where does your grace arrive?
Vashistha: O, king of gods! Be blessed, and prosper, profuse.
Straight I come from a kingdom great-
That is a Harishchandra's ingenuous state.
Indra: Wonderful! Should I believe the fact-
That there's a truthful state!

² In Hindu mythology a celestial nymph

³

⁴ An expression for a great saint. It is a cultural term, and no equivalent is available in English. Such words cause problem while translating. So, such words have been put in italics.

The *Trilok*⁵ I see without a truthful
Soul,
I doubt there any trusting soul,
And so my senses complain.
Vashistha: King, any sham I never I have state;
always the verity, I narrate.
He lives in truth,
acts the truth,
performs the truth-
I've seen it; so I assert.

(Vishwamitra arrives. He receives due obeisance. By his mystic powers, understands the erstwhile development.)

Vishwamitra: Well, I know it too well- you are plain-
And you have never spoken a lie.
But it's like finding a mare's nest
Just fly-by-night, thinking ingenious
someone a mortal, who there in
Martyalok resides.
I doubt.
Never found someone so across the
*Trilok*⁶.

Vashistha: Just do one thing-
If you don't believe- go and test him,
You'll find indisputable, every inch.

Vishwamitra: Never call my patience on the test,
Whetting the anger would never bring a
chill.

If my irritation meets the form of rage,
You'll repent, just you'll repent.
Vashistha: Never do I speak absurdly, hey saint!
You know it too well; I mean what I say.
If you ever feel like testing the fact,

⁵ Three worlds- Dev Lok, Mrityu Lok and Paataal Lok

⁶ The Mratyu Loka, The Swarga Loka, and The Paatal loka, three habitats of creatures in Hindu mythology.

Why not you just make a move?
I'm sure,
King Harishchandra will never buzz.
Vishwamitra: So confident if you sound;
I will, of course, do,
I'll see-
How does he take the test, that I plan.
(Vishwamitra departs crossly)
Vashistha: *(Arising)* Well, Devraj⁷. Now I'll take
your leave.

(Everybody offers obeisance. Vashistha departs)

SCENE: TWO

Harishchandra's assembly: Early Hours in the Night

(King Harishchandra is presiding over the procedure, a sentry rushes in)

Sentry⁸ *(Paying obeisance)* Jai Ho. Be fear to
enemies!
Your Excellency! I see hurly- burly at the
gate.
The royal gardener wants to appear before
you, my Lord!
Harishchandra: Call him accordingly,
Sentry: *(Bows in respect)* Positively my master!
(The royal gardener arrives)
Gardener: Excellency! See my appearance, riff-raff,
Please decode it all,
How should I spell- what's happened
untoward?

⁷ King among gods, Name of Indra

⁸ Sentry word is English, but it has been adapted in Hindi. In Hindi folk expression, to which this folk text belong, the word Sentry is written as *Santari*. In the present case *Santari* word has been translated as Sentry.

A boar, mighty King, a boar suddenly appeared,
 And made our garden threshed.
 The royal lawns turns withered slouch,
 As the hog cluttered the fauna and flora *etal.*

Harishchandra: Let it go, if the lawn goes arid,
 Let it go if the vegetation decent,
 never has it suited-robbing of a life;
 But, wait, when the cordon of night is unveiled- he'll fail to save his verve,
 whosoever.
 Just wait for the Sun.

Gardener: Excellency! And you command for me?

Harishchandra: Go, and have a proper rest,
 I'll see with the rays of the dawn
 that the perpetrator departs this world.

Gardener: (*Paying obeisance*) No doubt, my Lord!
 (*departs*)

Harishchandra: (*addressing the Prime Minister*) Mr. Premier!

Premier: My Lord!

Harishchandra: Raise the guards for seizing up the lawns,
 by the time the Sun sucks up dark.

Premier: For sure my Lord!

(*the assembly adjourns*)

SCENE-THREE Early the next Morning

Harishchandra and his forces have cordoned of the royal gardens.

Harishchandra: Kill the Boar will seek accolades.
 Letting it go will be a catastrophe

Soldiers: Of course, Maharaj⁹! In no way will the Boar escape,

⁹ Used here for Emperor.

In no time, our arrows will slake their fate.

(The forces take their position tactfully. The Boar jumps over. The lights turn off on stage. In the backdrop, the noise of 'trap and kill', 'catch and kill' is heard. A big hullabaloo is observed. Again, a flashlight streaks on the stage. The boar¹⁰ is seen, and the soldiers chase him.)

Narrator: The Boar takes the wrong course; chasing it, Harishchandra reaches the river bank.
(Suddenly, the boar disappears.)

SCENE: FOUR
Bank of the Ganges

Vishwamitra appears in the guise of a Brahmin

Harishchandra: Greetings, revered Brahmin!
May like to share some clues of a Boar,
If you have seen it coming this way.

Vishwamitra: Torturing an animal is how far fair?
It upsets our ecosystem.
Leave it all, and come on,
The moon shines complete today,
Bring forward *Daan* my way.
It's a propitious time, don't waste for the game.
Take a dip in the Ganges' flow,
And let the delaying mood go.
You'll execute on Brahmin's hopes so.

Harishchandra: I forgot, it's the full moon today!
Linger a spell, let me take a bath.
But, nothing I have to offer at this instance,
Holy man, no idea what to pledge?

Vishwamitra: You have nothing!

Harishchandra: Nothing but the keys of royal reserves.

Vishwamitra: If nothing else, your belonging makes,

¹⁰ (Animals) an uncastrated male pig

Let these keys be your pledge partake.
Harishchandra: It sounds great, holy man. Please accept these.

(Harishchandra offers the keys. Sadhu accepts it with a smile.)

Vishwamitra: Thanks, but *Dakshina*¹¹ for this *daan*¹²?

Harishchandra: Of course, please speak; I'll fulfill your wish.

Vishwamitra: Not much I wish for,
Yellow metal 60 thousand will *make dakshina*.

Harishchandra: Gracious Brahmin!
Just 60 thousand coins¹³!
You don't want more?

Vishwamitra: The more is meaningless, Maharaj¹⁴!
Sixty thousand would suffice my daughter's nuptials.

Harishchandra: Fine, grace my abode.
Here is a promise for 60 thousand.

(The king and Brahmin reach the royal palace. The retinue bends)

Harishchandra: Please, noble Brahmin, have a seat.
In no time, I am paying off dues
(Dictates the Prime Minister) Mr. Premier!

Premier: Your Highness!

Harishchandra: Bring 60 thousand gold coins, and offer them to the Maharaj.

Vishwamitra: O, hello, I can't make sense;
Which treasury are you referring to?

Harishchandra: Fair enough, the treasury of the state
Maharaj!

Vishwamitra: Good job! Wow truthful!
Once you've given away the keys in *daan*,

¹¹ Offering in complement to charity.

¹² Charity

¹³ Used for Hindi word "*Swanra Mudra*"-the Gold Coins.

¹⁴ Here the word Maharaj is used for a Noble Brahmin.

Harishchandra: How can you claim control?
(thoughtfully astonished) Yes, you are right.

Vishwamitra: It's not me but you who owns the treasury.
 Then, alright,
 Offer me Dakshina or express your inability
 So that I could move homeward.

Harishchandra: How can I drift from the truth?
 Don't fret, come may what,
 Unquestionably, I'll pay the *Dakshina*,
 As promised.

Vishwamitra: Well, set off to manage by any means.
 Don't ravage time.

Harishchandra: *Maharaj, please* take it easy.
 I'll be back, conferencing with the queen,
 in next to no time
 I will shell out the *Dakshina* due.

Vishwamitra: Sanctioned, but speed up.

Harishchandra: Clear in your mind, *Maharaj*¹⁵ *(departs)*

(Tara is seen on the other side of the palace. She looks alarmed. Rohit approaches her and gets amazed)

Rohit: Why do you feel distressed, Mom?
 What causes you to be anxious, and so
 helpless you look?

Tara: Where to start the cause of concern
 I don't know, my child, why do I feel
 distraught?
 It's an impulsive dream unpleasant.
 That makes me torn.
 It's a vista where a saint,
 in malice, usurps our throne,

15

A king or prince in India ranking above a raja, especially the sovereign of one of the former native states

We move like a pauper, learning it all,
 You, my son, are famished a lot.
 Numbness makes my body feel,
 And the heart fully sinks at its flaws
 My regent since then, I am at a loss.
 May the Almighty maintain,
 I'm famished.

Rohit: Dreams seldom come true, *Maa!*
 Nothing is going to happen so,
 You're shedding tears in vain,
 drop the doubts far aside,
 Come on, give me a loving hug!
 It's not fair, *maa*¹⁶ You're losing patience
 (*Harishchandra enters*)

Harishchandra: Your dream comes true, my sweet consort.
 I was a king yesterday, now as a beggar I
 stand. Since Palmy days we have spent,
 now, just passing 'today', thinking the days
 are imminent.

Tara: (*uneasily*) Please speak again! Has my
 dream turned into a nightmare?

Harishchandra: It did, Tara, the dream twisted valid. The
 context, I narrate:
 Chasing the Boar, I reached river riverbank
 and found a saint over there.
 For charity, he pushed for.
 In custom, I pledged and took my bath.
 It was the key of the Royal treasury,
 all that I had,
 following the *Dharma*, without a pang,
 I gave them away in *Daan*¹⁷.
 The saint wished for 60 thousand gold
 coins more,
 as *Dakshina*,¹⁸
 With a promise to pay, I took him here,

¹⁶ Mother

¹⁷ Charity

¹⁸ A part of the *Daan* (Charity)

It was an ill omen.
I sensed, what right do I claim?
Over the reins and wealth of the state?
The saint now exerts all sway over royal
treasure.
Dear Tara!
Losing the empire is not my
apprehension's cause;
I'm helpless in paying *Dakshina*- It pains
me a lot.

Tara: Don't be anxious, relax, my Lord!
My necklace comes greater than coins
-60 thousand.
Offering it to the *Sadhu*¹⁹
Shed the distress off.

Harishchandra: That's the issue-don't you think- the
necklace is the property of the state,
neither mine nor yours.
It is now an asset, now to the gracious saint.

Tara: But, my Lord! It is my father's gift,
The necklace is solely mine.
Come on, don't delay.
(*The family approaches the saint*)

Vishwamitra: If you intend for offering *Dakshina*²⁰,
come and make it fast.
Delay sounds void,
If you feel unable, state it plainly,
no use pretending.

Harishchandra: Drifting from the promise,
Impossible until I respire ultimate.
Death, I prefer to deviate from the right
path.

Tara: Believe me,
I'm happy to know my lord's charity for
the state.
Your *Dakshina* is left - here it fulfills-

¹⁹ Saint

²⁰ Offerings after charity, a kind of charity in Hinduism

Vishwamitra: I offer my necklace -please have it.
How come?

Tara: It is the owner alone who uses the property.
Right, Sir, but the necklace is my father's gift, not my husband's.

Vishwamitra: Gracious queen!
Your father has offered not the necklace alone
but you too, tell me,
Does he still own you?
Am I wrong, saying:
You owe only your husband.

Tara: Maharaj²¹! A husband always exerts his rights over the wife.

Vishwamitra: If so, in the case that a husband has his right over the wife, nothing but logically Harishchandra commands his rights over the jewelry and other belongings, including this necklace. By virtue of me, as the recipient of the charity, not only the empire, but every item of the state, comes to me. Come on, prompt- the three of you. Give up your jewelry and the royal clothes. Manage to pay *Dakshina*, and get in the *Bhagwa* clothes.

Harishchandra: Dear Tara, Maharaj is right. Just shed off these clothes and ornaments (*Tara, Harishchandra, and Rohit give up their royal clothes and jewelry and put on the cheap minimum*)

Vishwamitra: Well! Now offer the *Dakshina* and choose the path whatever you like.

Harishchandra: Maharaj, now you own us. May like to collect *Dakshina* by selling us.

Vishwamitra: (*Surprisingly*) Repeat, you want to pay by selling yourselves!

²¹ Here used for husband.

Harishchandra: (*addressing Vishwamitra*). Maharaj, there is no way out.

Vishwamitra: Well, but where to put you on sale?
You have ruled over the state....

Harishchandra: That is the point, but I have never claimed my influence over Kashi, the town of Lord Shiva.
Let's move over there, so I can pay my debt by selling us.

Vishwamitra: Your wife and son are also prepared for the auction?

Tara: (*Interrupting*) Unquestionably, I am already of a mind to be sold just for paying the liability of my husband. Come on, saint, don't delay.

Vishwamitra: (*Addressing Rohit*) And you?

Rohit: Why to qualm if being sold for paying father's obligation,
I'm ready even to die for the cause, hurry up Maharaj, please.

Vishwamitra: Well then, just move.
If you are ready to be sold,
clasp it as the royal plan, and move.

Rohit: Are you really concerned for our pleasure and pain or simply aim at realizing the *Dakshina*! Come on, Maharaj, why to delay.

Vishwamitra: (*Loudly beckons his disciple*)
Moorkhanand²², my child!

Moorkhanand: (*the disciple responds in tatters and appears*)
I'm here *Guruji*.

Vishwamitra: Listen carefully, take them to Kashi, and manage 60 thousand gold coins, selling them off.

²² There is no mythological evidence of this character. It has certain folk comic vibrations.

Moorkhanand: *Guruji!* It does not sound appropriate moving from here. Please you may like to marshal the task.

Vishwamitra: Not appropriate! But why?

Moorkhanand: So simple *Guruji!* Here, everything is in dole drum! The system will collapse without me. I have to put things a right.

Vishwamitra: Which system, what is detracted?

Moorkhanand: So simple, gentleman, many *Dharamshalas*²³ function here, that need to be turned into the alehouses. In lieu of fine steed, donkeys need to be taken for general transport. The art- premises need to be turned into brothel.

Vishwamitra: *Moorkhanand!* You remained just a blockhead, what prospects do ye see in doing all this.

Moorkhanand: (*surprisingly*) *Guruji* don't you reckon the benefits? Big dividends! Please allow me to share. If the *Dharamshalas* are closed the free eaters will return to work, so state's revenue would be saved. Ale houses at their places shall add to state income. Secondly, finding Donkeys for the steed is for their low cost of maintenance. In battle field also the donkey riding soldier would hit at the enemy from the front, and the donkey will follow the course with the hind feet, and thirdly. . . .

Vishwamitra: Stop nonsense, and follow what I say (*Dictates whispering in his ear*)

Moorkhanand: Nodding, Got it *Guruji*²⁴, got it well. (*Addressing Harishchandra and family*) You trio, Follow me. (*The three follow him*)

²³ Inns made for the pilgrims

²⁴ Preceptor

Harishchandra: The nation no longer promises shelter,
neither food.
What owed allegiance till the movement
past,
now keeps no charm.
The mirth incarnate- my son,
It's this all- this all -
all set to bear the blows black.

Rohit: My feet, now, refuse to move,
Excruciating pain they do shoot
Within the twinkling of eyes, you know,
I feel, I'll lose my life.
Now it is unbearable.

Harishchandra: From where to manage potable water,
Almighty!
Keep patience, my child, let me search for
it.
Some hill appears nearby; it may have
some source there.
Let's move and manage a draught, for son.

Moorkhanand: (*addressing Rohit*) Child! How come have
you thought for dying
Without paying the dues? (*Offering
Kamandal²⁵ to Harishchandra*) Take it,
there is some water in it, drinks yourself,
and offers it to your child and queen as
well.

Harishchandra: Sorry Maharaj! Neither I'll drink the water
nor offer it to them.

Moorkhanand: You won't drink my water! Do I stand
untouchable?

Harishchandra: Not at all, Maharaj! In fact, I already owe a
lot, how come I commit a sin further. It
leads to the punishment for hell by
consuming a Brahmin's water.

Moorkhanand: I see!

²⁵ A pot (like jug) for carrying water generally used by saints in India

Anyway, if you don't want to have my water, go and bring some, and make him drink. I won't object.

Harishchandra: *(To Rohit)* Let's . . . my son, let's move anyhow up to the mound, and drink some water there.

Rohit: Father, but I am unable to move even a step more.

Harishchandra: Come into my lap. *(Takes Rohit in his lap)*

Moorkhanand: Veracious Harishchandra! What an irony! You've taken the child up in the lap, and make me move on feet. Now you move alone, if you feel like, I'm not going to buzz even a step. Yes, an option is there if you want me to perform, step him down, and walk along taking me in your lap.

Harishchandra: But, Pious Soul!

Moorkhanand: *(interrupts)* No ifs and buts, if you want to take me, come on and do as I said, otherwise pay off the *Dakshina* here and now.

Harishchandra: *(addressing Tara)* Tara, may you take Rohit in your lap, I'm picking up Maharaj *(addressing Moorkhanand)* Come on Maharaj!

(Makes him seated on his back, and walks on, slowly)

Narrator: They have entered the town of Kashi.

SCENE: FIVE

A Market at Kashi²⁶

Harishchandra: We are on sale, please buy-whoever intends, They two on sale, I've brought wife and son. They won't deny!
Folk, whatever be the job; we are hardship torn. This queen- maid turned, shall all chores perform, and this loving son shall become a crony;
no complain ever this slave would make,
It's just ill luck; this moment has struck.
(*A harlot appears*)

Harlot: Oye! Is this beauty on sale? Tell me the price, don't delay.

Harishchandra: Why to delay, if you're a genuine buyer.
Go, bring twenty thousand gold coins in cash she would be yours.

Harlot: Definitely, I will pay twenty thousand gold, just follow me to my *Kotha*²⁷.

Harishchandra: You simply ask one to follow,
Why don't you introduce first.

Harlot: A celebrated harlot here I stand,
Never should your smell a rat.
Wait, I'm just coming.
(*The harlot departs*)

Tara: O God! What's my sin that I stand for sale facing a harlot? Is it an enigma or your plan that a queen is set to become a harlot. If to her I am sold, oh God, who, in you, shall keep faith. Nobody will ever remember you;
Neither will you be known as the savior of the world.

²⁶ The City of Benaras, Varanasi.

²⁷ Used for Brothel in Urdu, Hindi

(Suddenly appears *Dharma*²⁸ in the guise of a *Seth*²⁹)

Seth: You want to sell her, if so, pronounce the rate,
In search of a maid here I stand,
tell the price without getting late.

Harishchandra: Coins twenty thousand golden she does cost.
If it suits come on, make purchase,
Yes please note, less than that, the deal would lost.

Tara: As fate is making me a maid,
Do a small favour more.
Save this child from mother's separation,
Buy him too, paying ten thousand more.

Seth: Well, if you urge, I purchase the child too.
Here are coins ten thousand.
(By the time the harlot returns, the deal has been finalized)

Harlot: Take it and count twenty thousand coins gold!
I'm rushing for home.
Offer me the Beauty, where is she?"

Moorkhanand: Sorry, the beauty is sold, the child as well.
This matador *(indicating Harishchandra)* stands,
He'll do everything, accept him in lieu.

Harlot: Of what use this musketeer stands?
What the hell, would he sleep with customers?
(She leaves the street muttering, appears another customer, named Kalua.)

Kalua: Kalua they call me,
I'm born in *Bhangi*³⁰ clan,

²⁸ A god, keeper of good and truth in Indian mythology

²⁹ A businessman

³⁰ A caste name in Indian caste system. Mostly they were sweepers.
Now a scheduled caste under the Constitution of India

Moorkhanand: I need this man; proclaim the rate.
Stand apart, speak from a distance,
you graveyard's Lord.
If really you want to purchase, offer gold,
in coins,
that too thirty thousand.

Kalua: (*Offering the money*) Here it is thirty
thousand coins of gold
(*to Harishchandra*) and hello, why you still
stand still? Come along.
Oh yes! You haven't told your name how I
would address you?

Harishchandra: Sir, people call me Harishchandra.

Kalua: Nice name, but sounds quite big!
If I address you Hariya, hope you won't
object.

Harishchandra: Not at all.
(*Aside*) If the loss of kingship, wife and son
could not affect, how would this paltry
change do?

Kalua: All right then.
Look, Hariya, I am a *Bhangi*, and reside on
the graveyard. You, too, will stay over
there, doing an alert job. You have to take
the tax from whosoever brings corpse,
Oh yes, once in a blue moon, our job
warrants the task for hanging the culprits.

Harishchandra: Sure, sir got it.

Kalua: Handing over a bamboo stick. Let's leave.
(*Moorkhanand and Kalua depart*)

Moorkhanand: Good, the deal is done!
The client is alive
or he's no more,
It makes occasion for a nice feast
Be it *Pooja*³¹, or *Barahi*³² be

³¹ A religious rite in Hindu household.

³² Celebration on the 12th day of the child birth in some Hindu families
in North India.

Be it *Terahi*³³ or foundation of a home,
 Be it reception or a *bon voyage*
 There should be some nice feast.
 Be it *Mundan*³⁴ or *Yagyopaveet*³⁵
 be it some offering great,
 A Brahmin is pleased, when belly is full.
(Vishwamitra enters irately)
Vishwamitra: You remained just a moron.
 Even my company couldn't help you.
 Simply filling up the belly-all your
 business count.
Moorkhanand: What happened to them? Answer.
 Take a chill pill, lord. Selling away wife
 and the son,
 he, in a go, sold himself.
 Thus, and he paid off the remaining dues.
 Truthful was he, and remained, till the end.
 He has put us all ashamed, oh Guru!
Vishwamitra: Never shall I accept defeat; I'll attack
 through all means. So furious I'll become,
 that it'll break erstwhile horrible
 landmarks. *(Departs)*

SCENE: SIX The House of Seth

Tara is shown washing dishes

Tara: Now tears chase my vision to naught,
 The pleasant days are past.
 Who had minions at beck and call,

³³ A purgation feast on the 13th day of the death of a person. A Hindu rite in North Indian Hindu households.

³⁴ A *samskara*. The first shaving off the head of a child in Hindu families.

³⁵ A *samskara*. A sacred thread is put on by a child in Hindu family. On this day traditionally a Brahmin used to go for Vidya in Gurukuls.

now spends her days on petty falls.
Whom the heavenly charms couldn't apart,
just for a morsel her fortune rests.

Sethani³⁶: I observe from the very first day you have
stepped into this household, nothing but
tears, in shower flow.
You are shirking from all the work
Just for unwanted spans of working duties.

Tara: The work you gave is fully finished
I never shirk from work, Mistress!
It does not sense you blame in vain,
Its just aversion I guess.

Sethani: I don't find words to express,
You so impertinent.
The saying holds cent percent true -
a walnut tree needs beating alone.
(Sethani hits kicking Tara)

Tara: It's your right, mistress mine,
Kick as much as you wish,
Silently, I'll stand and bear,
Be it kicking
Or ragging mean.

Sethani: Lock up your lips, you coquet,
lest I should be lead beating you to death.
Oh yes, where roams your gourmand son,
the entire day he continues his game?
Does he feel it her granny's home?

Tara: Since morning last, hunger impinges on my
son.
He was sobbing standing here. So to
diverting his attention, tactfully I have sent
him for a move-
Just for diverting attention-
You say...
(Rohit comes suddenly)

Rohit: Mother, food! . . . Unbearable my hunger.
Sethani: Why don't you die, Rascal!

³⁶ A Hindi expression for the wife of the Seth(A Big Businessman)

Every moment just hunger chant.
 No work: just born to eat.
(Addresses Tara) Listen, this warning last-
 This day onward, what to speak of a meal,
 I won't give even a grain of food,
 He remains alive or succumbs to death.

Tara: I do my entire share, and complete this
 child's part.
 I'll do everything what you command,
 Please don't admonish him anymore.

Sethani: Tell him to bring flowers; I need them to
 offer to the gods.
 Its a failure –not to speak scolding, indeed
 I'll bang him.

Tara: Where would this naive move?
 I'll bring them soon.

Sethani: You'll move for bringing flowers!
 Who will wash my clothes, then?
 your man?
 I'm leaving for my bath.
 Send him on errands for flowers sake,
 Lest my aggression should bring fatality.

Tara: Go my child, and pass some flowers from
 the garden.

Rohit: Well, mom! *(Departs)*

SCENE-SEVEN³⁷

(Rohit is seen in a garden. He approaches to pluck a flower, and suddenly falls down. An older boy is seen roaming nearby. He rushes to Rohit with an intention to help)

Narrator: *Rohit reaches the garden for bringing flowers. Vishwamitra in the form of a*

³⁷ The heading of this scene has been inserted by the translator. In the original text, this scene division is not there. But no change in the dialogue is done.

serpent bites him. Rohit falls down and dies.

Boy: *(Surprisingly)* what happened to him, he helped and fell down!

Vishwamitra: *(Appearing in Sadhu's costume)* Oh, poor boy, perhaps a serpent has bitten him. I sense he is no more.

Boy: He died? *(the boy starts sobbing)* How will his aggrieved mother forbear more?

Vishwamitra: *(addressing the boy)* Listen child; rush up to his mother for putting it into words. *(The boy leaves. Vishwamitra disappears. Tara comes weeping.)*

Tara: *(crying)* Why are you leaving your unfortunate mother,
 What's my slip?
 realm is lost, the abode lost,
 peace lost, grandeur stepped, lost spouse
 too, my only anchor, now you, too, moving
 far,
 For whom should I live.
 I'll atone till death.
(Vishwamitra appears in the guise of a saint.)

Vishwamitra: Lady, hold on,
 Your wailing goes in vain,
 Leave fast, and arrange for rites,
 It's now a sod, not your son.

Tara: I can't keep patience,
 senses have turned numb.
 How would I manage cremation³⁸,
 not even a shroud, I can afford.

Vishwamitra: Follow any means,
 And burn it on pyre soon,
 if time passes, you cannot take it on.
 The body is poisoned, it'll ruin.

Tara: You sound good!

³⁸ A Hindu cremation, by burning the dead body on pyre.

Soon, I'll bear my son's corpse
 And offer a part of my sari in a shroud.
(Tara is seen carrying the dead body wrapped in her sari's part. At the other side of the stage Harishchandra is shown around the Ghats of Shamshan³⁹, holding a bamboo stick.)

Harishchandra: Merciful Almighty!
 Your wishes infinite, enveloping the universe.
 It is unexplored, and stand
 Enigmatic even to the most knowledgeable.
 An emperor, who till yesterday, was ordained,
 Just watches the affairs of the *Marghat*⁴⁰ today.
 He, who vanquished the foes with a mighty sword,
 Now carries a bamboo stick as arms,
 But, firm as a rock, he stands for truth;
 Even having put everything at stake.
(Tara reaches there in tears, carrying Rohit's body)

Harishchandra: Was there none at your home
 You've come carrying the corpse?⁴¹
 Who are you? Just speak, come on- speak,
 Why you sob... and utter silence.

Tara: Who am I-I know not.
 Simply, I know- I am fate-torn.
 Will fate bring more batters?
 Being a mother, here I hold my child's corpse.

Harishchandra: Lady, only the aggrieved loom in this place,
 This is the daily course,

³⁹ Hindu cremation ground.

⁴⁰ Hindu graveyard

⁴¹ In popular Hindu cremation system, the women are not allowed to visit the graveyard /*shamshan ghats*.

If you want it to burn over here
 Simply pay a *taka* as a fixed tax.
Tara: Sorry, *taka* as tax!
Vishwamitra: Yes, bring a *taka* as tax, and then make the
 pyre.
Tara: If I had a *taka* for the shroud, why would
 have I shrouded in my Sari's part.
Harishchandra: Lady, I am bound by my master's
 command. I won't allow you to burn the
 corpse until you pay a *taka* as tax.
Tara: I beg your favour with folded hands,
 Feel pity on me, like a beggar I stand!
Harishchandra: Wonderful! One who wears a gold ring can
 never be a beggar.
Tara: This ring is my husband's gift. I cannot
 lose it.
Harishchandra: Is your husband alive?
Tara: Yes, he is....
Harishchandra: Where is he? What's an irony? He is not
 accompanying you to the funeral ground!
Tara: I don't know where he is, or in what
 condition. He is not with me.
Harishchandra: Lady! The ring seems familiar. Would you
 mind showing it to me?
Tara: Not at all, if you like, you may see it.
 (*Tara shows the ring*)
Harishchandra: (*recognizing*) Tara, it is you, dear!
Tara: (*surprisingly*) You? Lord of my soul! A
 coincidence! (*sobs*) See, the stiff.
Harishchandra: God! It's our heart that I see!
 The empire got lost; the habitat followed
 suit,
 What remained- my patience; that too
 shakes today.
Tara: (*collecting herself*) You'll stain your truth,
 and that too, at this juncture? Never, my
 Lord!
 Here's the corpse of your loving son.
 Please put it on fire.

Harishchandra: *(After a thoughtful silence)* Sounds good, Tara
 You have saved me from drifting from the truth. *(pause)*.
 Do you have tax?
 Tara, I am a sold-off slave,
 Neither can cremate the body
 nor allow you to do it without tax.

Tara: But I'm unable to pay.

Harishchandra: Essentially, do it by any means,
 Nothing but pay off the tax,
 Otherwise, take the corpse away
 and flow in the river somewhere else.

Tara: Almighty God! *(Pause)* What to do!
(silence for a while) Where should I
 manage the tax? *(gloomy thoughtfulness)*
 Well! Take it *(rips a part of her sari and offers)*

Harishchandra: *(Accepting the piece of sari)* How ill-
 timed!
 Almighty, why do I see it all? Go, Tara, go
 and set Rohit's pyre.
*(Harishchandra walks up the other side of
 the stage. putting the pyre of her son, Tara
 faints away. Vishwamitra appears
 suddenly.)*

Vishwamitra: (aside) You are great! Harishchandra!
 I put you through the mill,
 devising the tests odd, on and on.
 I failed to make you buzz.
 But still, the greatness is to be proved.
 Hmm. I'll devise a test and
 Harishchandra's truth will collapse like the
 palace of cards...the universe will astound.
 I will abduct Kashi Naresh's⁴² innocent
 son...and convey him that a witch has
 entered the town to practice cannibalism.

⁴² The King of Kashi

She has eaten several children and has rushed up to the graveyard with a kid. Listening to it, the King will, pat, order a sentence for her death; It shall be marshaled by Harishchandra. Yeah, let's see, how Harishchandra kills his beloved wife, now....

(Vishwamitra moves aside, Harishchandra is visible the other side of the Shamshan, fully watchful. A troop of soldiers is seen dragging Tara that way)

Soldiers: O Hariya, call Kalua, the keeper of Shamshan,

Harishchandra: The king, here ordained, to behead this soul
If my master is instructed by the King of Kashi

Bring her here,
My master is not here
I will behead her in a go,
But, which crime's sake?

Soldier: This witch (*indicating Tara*) has eaten up many kids, even
The prince of Kashi.

Harishchandra: Heinous! Don't delay, bring the sword.
Instantly, I'll cut off the head of this foe to humanity.
Since the master is absent, I'll act (*taking the sword*)

Be prepared, nasty witch!
Be ready to die.

Tara: No crime I have committed,
But readily I stand,
Cut off my head, my Lord!
The soul will get salvation,
In your hands.

Harishchandra: My Goodness! What here I see!
Who's she?
Tara, my love!
My dear Tara! (*pause*)

I know you're innocent, even then,
And my job.
I'll execute the royal will,
(drags up the sword for the act, but feels his hand numb)
I'll execute, but the hand turns numb,
I will perform my duty,
Let no mercy evaporate my eyeballs,
I'll cut your head. *(Mutters and closes the eyes with a tape. As soon as he sets for the blow, Vishwamitra appears and catches hold of his wrist.)*

Vishwamitra: Open your eyes, and look this way,
Please throw away the sword,
You're a victor all the way.
I'm vanquished, have nothing to say.

Harishchandra: *(Removing the tape off the eyes)*
Who's there? Sage Vishwamitra, you!

Vishwamitra: Don't call me a saint,
A deadly culprit, here I stand,
Listen, I got jealous in Indra's court
When Vashistha had for you, all praise,
It's me, who has perplexed you so,
put you on tests through all means,
Devising the toughest of the tasks.
(Pauses indicating Harishchandra)
Here, I find the truth's actual profile,
That's in you and you alone!
Don't worry; your son is living,
he's not deceased.
(Chanting some Mantra brings Rohit back to life)

Rohit: *(as awakening)* My mom! My dad!
Tara: *(in wet throat)* My son! My heart!
Suddenly appears Indra, with the King of Kashi and Kalua, etc. They feel guilty and apologetic facing Harishchandra. Indra offers him his crown. Vashistha blesses

Harishchandra, and Vishwamitra feels sorry.

Vishwamitra: Extremely sad and remorseful, here I stand. Please forgive me and ask a *Vardaan*⁴³, Emperor Harishchandra!

Harishchandra: Nothing to feel sorry, but if you really want it, please promise that you will not put anybody on such tests, otherwise, the truth will be called to question.

Vishwamitra: I have seen. Now rest assured, it will so happen, as you wish.

The Narrator: So, sailed, Harishchandra sailed in test obscure,
in posterity, a place he secured.

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⁴³ A wish to be fulfilled, blessings



Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena: Interrogating Life through Poetic Vignettes

Anup Beniwal

A multifaceted and prolific talent, Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena (1927-1983) was a prominent Hindi writer. With his signature wit, satire and communicative economy, he infused Hindi poetry with rare density of observation, aesthetic and activist energy, and compactness of thought and resistive vision. This aspect of his creative oeuvre specially came to fore in his propensity to capture the context at hand through poetic vignettes. He positioned these vignettes as layered life observation and interrogation tools to articulate and unravel the exploitative seams of society. These vignettes also endowed his poetic explorations with structural and communicative economy, analogical astuteness and resistive – against the grain – possibilities. To give his creative-critical endeavours depth, expanse and inclusiveness, and capture the complexities of the context, Saxena would often etch a series of interconnected vignettes. The following translations sample Saxena's poetic propensity for vignettes as 'micro-observations on modern life'.

1

Prayer - 1

No God, I shall not beg
For your power or help.

I'll earn it in death and disintegration
I'd come back whole after annihilation
No shame, if trodden under-feet in the process
I won't let the mountain collapse
I won't seek safe shelter in any case.
No God, I shall not beg
For your power or help.

Smell-less flowers never seek fragrance

Nor sharp, standing thorns seek softness
Whatever you gave me was fine
Whatever I now have is just mine.
Sleep, distraught night, now I shall awake
No God, I shall not beg
For your power or help.

Prayer - 2

May the travails of the path be yours,
May the trailing feat, tiredness be mine.

May failures be my travel mates
May limitation befall on me as my fate
May happy scenes and sights be yours
May tear-filled, smarting eyes be mine.
May the travails of the path be yours,
May the trailing feat, tiredness be mine.

With courage hauled up on my shoulders I say
Let me keep on walking, till you melt my body away
May your creations tread immortal ways
May my life forever be under death's sway
May the travails of the path be your,
May the trailing feat, tiredness be mine.

Prayer - 3

I have to be proud
of my frailties.
I ought to acknowledge
my boundaries.

Each moment I ought to know
What is it that I have to forgo
How much to enjoy, what sad tear to shed
God, help me acknowledge
My joys and adversities

I have to be proud
Of my frailties.

Let there be no such stake
That I possibly cannot take
If my shoulders are burdened, so be it
Nothing should remain unattended beneath.
God, this much I should
Understand about my dreams.
I have to be proud
of my frailties
I ought to remember
my boundaries.

Prayer - 4

This, God, is my only prayer
When I am down, don't appear.

If I stand defiant and tall
Despite your armoured onslaught
Sent me to purgatory for my fault
I would be happy, in heavenly thrall
Pat me for my bravery and courage
If you are compassionate and sage
I don't seek the joys that blind devotion envisage.

Eyes of sadness are vast
Nothing is outside their cast
This galaxy is so very small
How come you are in its thrall.
Grant me a mere tear-drop of life
Take away all the eons and their strife.

2

Dust - 1

You are dust -
The dust trodden under feet.
Rise with the agitated gust,
Be a storm
Fly in their eye
Beneath whose feet you lie.

There is no place
Where you cannot be,
There is none
Who can control your pace.
You are dust
Trodden under feet
Be one with it!

Dust - 2

You are dust
Suck in the dampness of life
Be a termite.

Move through the night
Usher in the light
Through windows,
Doors, ventilators
Onto the wall
Shut off since centuries
From one and all.

You are dust
Draw vitality from the moistness of life
Be a termite, march ahead.

Once you are on the right way
None can sniff your life away.

3

River -1

The whole afternoon
I strolled on your bank
Without knowing:
From where you originate
Whom you plan to meet
What is your depth?
I loved those waves
That arose in you -
Simmering in the sun, laughing
Turning like fish, sliding.
Constantly wondering and asked
Where does this flow vanish
When I scoop you in my palms.

The whole afternoon -
I sat on your warm sands
Which I found cool on removing a layer
That you would bring in wave after wave
And spread them on each other laughing.

The whole afternoon -
I played with shells
That lay scattered in your sand
Kept etching deep and deeper in the sand
And watched how cleanly
Every script is erased slowly.

The evening is setting now
I will presently go
Without knowing, whether you know
That someone walked on your bank
Sat in sand
Played with shells
And watched his script vanishing.

River -2

Whatever water
I can scoop in my palms from your depths
You are only that much to me.
I quench my thirst with just that
With that, I offer oblation to the sun
 Rising within me.
And every time
touching my eyes and head with
the empty palms
I experience you
 And watch you
 Flowing within me.

River - 3

In this seclusion
un-cladding myself
I will jump
Into your surging waves.
This clean body
Will become cleaner.
And then we two
Would leave each other
And depart.

4

Wolf - 1

Wolf's eyes are red.

Gaze at them
Till your eyes begin to burn
And turn red.

What else can you do,
When the wolf is in front of you?

If you turn fugitive and take flight
You will find him standing inside
Only if you survive.

Wolf's eyes are red hot.
And yours?

Wolf - 2

Wolf howls
You lit up the torch.
This is the basic difference
Between you and him
Wolf cannot light up the torch.

Now with the torch ignited
Approach the wolf
It would take flight.

With a million hands holding the torch
March forward to every bush
All wolves would surely be on the run.

Drive them out of the jungle
And leave them in the snow
Hungry wolves will howl at reach other
And tear apart one another.

Wolves will be dead
And you?

Wolf - 3

Wolves would return.

Suddenly
Someone among you would
Turn into a wolf
Its progeny would multiply.

The wolf must return
For you to know yourselves
To recognise the joy of being brave
To learn to light up and carry the torch.

The history of the jungle
Will always evict the wolf from its den
The man in courage and unison stand
Holding the torch ablaze in hand.

History would live
And you too
But what happens to the wolf?

5

Five Urban Tropes

Delhi:

A paper box, exquisitely painted in
watercolours
With a fake diamond inside
Wrapped in genuinely priced cash memo.

Lucknow:

An old, empty vial of perfume
Lying in a makeup box
Presently only a cork in which
Lies decaying.

Banaras:

A talisman tied with an ancient cord
Ripped open on one side
To be used as a hemp box.

Allahabad:

A palmful of trickling Ganges;
Offered as oblation for friends

through the day
And in the name of arts
In the night.

Basti:

A mirror in *paan*-vendor's shop
In some rural fair
Layered with so much dust
That no image can be discerned.

6

Shoe - 1

My shoe is torn
At many places
The dirt pricks
I halt
And ask the shoe -
“Why don't you move forward?”
The shoe replies -
“I am still ready
If you too move!”
I keep shut
How do I tell
That I'm also torn
In different places.

Shoe - 2

Since I
Bought new shoes
My gait has altered
But the ways of the world are still old.
Friends say
I put more stress on my left foot now
But I do so
To avoid the pain in my right foot.

Shoe - 3

He said:
In the shine of my shoe polish
You can see your face.
Agitated I thought
Fortunate are those people
Who don't have a face.
But I had a second thought -
No, those are good people
Who don't wear the shoe?

Shoe - 4

Smeared in tar and gravel
On the road lies
A twisted, bent over, misshapen
Shoe.
I think about those feet
Which this shoe might have secured
And
Bow down in respect.



Five Poems by Archana Sahni

My Grandmother's Quarantine Bread

My grandmother is long gone, but I'm eating her bread,
golden-brown multigrain bread, straight from my oven,
its aroma bringing in memories of fallen eucalyptus buds
after rain, pumpkin vines glistening on moist earth, and
the cries of hawkers outside our ancestral gate.

I visit a nearby store wearing a mask, and buy a packet
of yeast to make her bread, my maiden attempt.
There aren't too many places to go to these days. My
favourite is the kitchen, and the other, within. Dolphins
suddenly visible in the oceans, and deer basking
in the winter sun on empty roads tell me all is not lost.

Hers is not the only bread I bake. I bake my mother's
bread,
my sister's bread, my neighbour's bread. I bake Irish soda
bread,
focaccia from left-over pizza dough, and medieval
sourdough bread.
I bake the bread of all the places I want to travel to but
can't.
Each time the alchemy of yeast and heat inside the dough
makes
the bread rise and brown, spreading aromas that meld time
and space.

Mostly I bake my grandmother's bread. Her bread
is the canvas on which I bake my dreams, discovering
the magic of what hands can resurrect, and the privilege
of going within. Her bread is now my bread.

Hidimba's Gift

Bhima's thirst brought forth
a girl's nervous laughter from
behind a bush, then her dark body
holding water vesseled in a leaf.
Wild honey and wild fruit lay at her feet.

Not knowing the same
language, all that was exchanged
between them must've been
a languid glance; then, their drinking
of each other.
This too, Hidimba explained to Bhima,
was a marriage.
A strange light, a strange love, shone
in her eyes as she spoke.
Aryaputra Bhima
learnt something new that day.

It's still the same in the
land of the *Mahabharata*:
a different law of love for those
who make history, and
for those who sneak up
from behind its pages
with wild honey and wild fruit.

At Thornhill Cemetery *for Clara Blackwood*

And I thought, there is a beauty
in death and dying
that life and living cannot equal.
It is the difference between

the invitation of an empty wooden bench
and the silence of a smooth white
gravestone five steps away from it;
the difference between
the bare branches of this tree
and the lush grass
beneath it.
It is the difference between
my inhalation of this woody fragrance
which is my eternal spring,
and my exhalation in which
I die a little, in every moment,
with every breath.
Love, find me
somewhere between the two,
walking my tightrope, twilight walk
tonight.

Elegy for a Butterfly

I found a butterfly, wings
folded and motionless, on my
early morning walking path.
Sometimes it takes an open
burial to reveal nature's beauty.

Rose Transfigured

Every rose I see
is the death of me:
I cannot be the same
as my eyes follow
the swirl of petals
unfolding, and folding in,
holding nature's paradox
of ultimate beauty
and cruelty of love
in one gaze.

Every rose
pulls me in.

Every rose
intoxicates me.

Every rose
makes me meditate.

Every rose
is become
my mandala.¹

¹ A Sanskrit word for circle, a mandala is a symbolic diagram or geometric pattern representing the cosmos or a spiritual path in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, often used as a tool for meditation and for performing sacred rites.



Book Review

The Poet's Song: 'Folk' and its Cultural Politics in South Asia.
Priyanka Basu. London and New York. Routledge, 2024. Hardcover.
Rupees 1595 (South Asia Edition, distributed by Atlantic Publishers
and Distributors)

Dr Tapashree Ghosh

Dhol baahey, hoy Kobigaan
Banglar maan, Banglar gaan
[As the drum plays, Kobigaan proceeds
It is the song of Bengal and its pride] (Basu 31)

Priyanka Basu's book *The Poet's Song: 'Folk' and its Cultural Politics in South Asia* explores the 'folk' performance genre of Kobigaan, a dialogic song-theatre form in which performers verse-duel in contemporary West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. Part of the South Asian History and Culture series, this book claims to be a major intervention in South Asian folklore and performance studies.

The book is divided into seven chapters and begins with a note on transliteration and translation where the author explains the logic behind transliteration and translation of all Bangla words and phrases used in the book. Bangla words and phrases are an integral part of this book as it explores Kobigaan, a Bangla folk performance genre. Understanding of the nuances of the language is crucial for any folk performance hence this note of transliteration and translation is an important addition for global readers who may not be familiar with the subtleties of Bangla as a language.

The introductory chapter, aptly titled "Nomenclatures", defines the genre of Kabigaan [made up of two words 'Kobi' (poet) and 'gaan'(song)] and differentiates it from other similar musical folk performances such as Jaarigaan and Gambhira in Bangladesh, Rasiya (Rajasthan), Akhara (Madhya Pradesh) and Dugola (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh) in India, Ladishah in Kashmir, Dohori in Nepal, and Virindu in Sri Lanka. All these folk performances contain "social commentary, humour, verbal ribaldry, religious sermonising and

entertainment” (3). Two other indigenous Bangla folk forms namely Jatra and Tarjaa are close to Kabigaan but Kabigaan is an elaborate performance that mingles song and theatre, has a distinct structure of “Invocation- Narration-Verse Duelling-Songs-Concluding duet” (3). A typical Kobigaan performance comprise of two groups (kobir dawl), headed by a lead singer (kobiyaal or sarkar), at least two chorus singers (dohaar) and a set of instrument players (4). The chapter also briefly focuses on how the folk genre has adapted itself to modernity and emergence of social media platforms. The issue of ‘authenticity’ is crucial to the understanding of any folk genre. Hence, apart from mapping out the structure of the book, the author also spells out her purpose, methodology adopted, sites of field-work, historical journey of the folk form, kobigaan as a ritual performance, existing archive and limitations of archival documents, connections between ethnography and archive in order to establish “what is and what is not Kobigaan?” (6).

The second chapter, titled “The Travelling Archive” analyses two ‘authentic’, full-length Kobigaan performances, one each from West Bengal and Bangladesh and makes a comparative-contrastive study between the performances. Apart from entertainment and refreshment of cultural memory these performances also act as platforms for mass-awareness-building as performers are often employed by the government to educate rural people on issues such as gender violence, women empowerment, polio vaccination. The author as an ethnographer learns through the process of fieldwork that Kobigaan is claimed by three groups of performers-the kobyiaals from West Bengal, the sarkars from Bangladesh and the cross-border Matua community who use Kobigaan as a tool to foreground their identity as Namasudras. The third chapter titled ‘Afterlives’ critically analyses the archival documents, literary canon on Kobigaan performances and focuses on the role and contribution of individuals like Rabindranath Tagore, institutions like the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Marxist cultural movements like the IPTA which helped to develop and transform Kobigaan into a folk cultural practice. The fourth chapter titled ‘Past Continuous’ critically engages with several cinematic and literary adaptations of Kobigaan. Along with the written, official, historical archive of the nineteenth century the importance of the archival effect of cinema cannot be overlooked and

the chapter diligently explains the necessity of looking at cinema as an archive of Kobigaan performances. The fifth chapter- “Temporary Exhibits”- focuses on truncated Kobigaan performances that are included in fairs and festivals to trigger cultural memory and act as souvenirs, markers of Bengali identity. The author calls such performances as “vestigial” and “emblematic as remnants of a once dominant and popular tradition” (179).

The sixth chapter, titled “Writing Sisterhood” focuses on the challenges of becoming a woman Kobiyaal. The chapter begins by briefly analysing the life of Nati-Binodini and her position within Bengal’s performance history, looks into the life and challenges faced by Jogeshwari, a nineteenth century woman Kobiyaal. It discusses the challenges faced by women kobiyaals as Kobigaan performances involve travelling with the troupe, space-sharing with troupe members- acts which may harm the reputation of a woman kobiyaal. Women Kobiyaals of contemporary West Bengal such as Dulati Chitrakar, Sanchita Paul, Madhumita Pradhan, Buri Murmu Hembram and Ambika Ghosh are well aware of the challenges posed by gender and develop several strategies to deal with such challenges. The chapter analyses such strategies at length. Questions of caste and ethnicity further problematise the understanding of the politics of gender. The chapter also focuses on the reception of Santhali women performers who have joined mainstream practices and provides a detailed account of the life of Dulati Chitrakar, a veteran woman kobiyaal from West Bengal. In the ‘Epilogue’ to the book, the author focuses on the representation of ‘Kobir Larai’ (verse-duelling between poets) at the Hay Literary Festival, 2012 in Dhaka. The ‘Kobir Larai’ is only a part of an authentic Kabigaan performance but is used interchangeably with Kabigaan in several modern performances thereby re-visiting the key issue of ‘authenticity’ and ‘vestigiality’ with which the book critically engages.

The book is the result of seven years of painstaking research and fieldwork. It is noteworthy that every chapter contains endnotes which provide the reader with detailed accounts of references made in the text and also suggest secondary reading materials on various topics. This added information might be extremely useful to students of literature or advanced researchers. There are several illustrations,

tables inserted at key moments of the text to explain the nuances of Kobigaan performances. These techniques, along with detailed bibliography and index, further add to the usefulness of the book. The book is well-researched, well-organised and well-explained. The author is extremely disciplined and spells out her purpose in each chapter of the book. However, a noticeable gap in the book is the unavailability of any separate chapter on the history and refashioning of the cross-border Matua community as Kobigaan performers. The contribution of this book lies in problematising and historicising 'folk' (260) thereby enabling the readers to critically re-think existing concepts and stereotypes associated not only with Kobigaan but also other folk practices present within the broader disciplines of Performance Studies and South Asian History and Folklore.

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