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Editorial

Memory, Mediation, and Alternative Epistemologies

With every age, new methodologies, technologies, and tools evolve that shape acts of remembering, forgetting, imagining, and revisiting. In the contemporary times of uncertainty and volatility, there is an ethical challenge to the production of the knowledge. Against the backdrop of digital acceleration, ecological crisis, contested histories, and shifting social identities—there is a larger emphasis on the ‘how’ rather than ‘what’ of knowledge: the methods, mediations, and circulations that determine what can be remembered, imagined, or made visible. Issue 46 brings together these contested perspectives across various disciplines using befitting methodological approaches. It brings forth the essential contribution of humanities by showcasing its impact and participation in the making of the contemporary realities. Though varied in themes and approaches, the contributions remain connected through mediation itself—the ways in which stories, images, institutions, and cultural practices shape collective imaginaries and epistemic framework.

If Foucauldian theory reminds us that knowledge is inseparable from power and discourse, Deleuze and Guattari extend these disciplinarian axes into poststructuralist trajectories of inclusion and fluidity articulated through their concepts of assemblages, multiplicities, and becoming. As literature, media, and other forms of arts are representations of reality; these are challenged for their claims to transparency which then becomes a contested field where meanings are continually produced, revised, and negotiated. Stuart Hall becomes relevant here as he theorises representation as a constitutive rather than merely reflective practice; in the same vein, Judith Butler insists that identities emerge through repeated performances rather than

fixed essences. The research papers align well with ongoing academic discourses surrounding representation, regional marginality, ethical media practices, and the politics of cultural narration in South Asia. Thus, Culture as a lived reality is not a passive reflection of reality but an active site where social meanings get produced, revised, and sometimes transformed.

Human subjectivity too has acquired renewed urgency amidst the changing denominations in the contemporary ecosystem which are increasingly shaped by algorithmic cultures, artificial intelligence, and social media ecosystems. Several research articles engage with this concern by examining the intersections of technology, culture, and identity. Mediation also occurs through the technological advancement which allows the fragmentation of the digital self in ways that compel us to reconsider the relationship between representation and reality, appearance and being, in contemporary times. As societies continue to negotiate the promises and perils of technological advancement, such critical interventions remain indispensable for understanding the evolving contours of human identity and social relations. Posthuman entanglements and ecocritical enquiry further complicate questions of agency and ethics, showing that the human is never autonomous but always entangles with nonhuman worlds.

The first two papers, Iqbal Singh's study of the First Anglo-Sikh War and Chahat Rampal's exploration of Stephen Alter's *Birdwatching*, investigate the documented historical narration to contest the idea of history as a mere collection of facts. They highlight the dynamic processes through which communities remember, participate and negotiate the past; they establish that memory is more than just looking back as it actively constitutes present identities and political imaginaries. This destabilises the belief that the history is simply a repository of facts as it becomes a site of ideological contestation—marked by negotiations,

reinterpretations and becomings—that foreground the fluidity of lived realities against state authored narratives.

A compelling intervention into the politics of representation in the contemporary debates is seen in the article ‘Of the “Disposable”: (De)colonialising Climate Coloniality in Climate Bildungsroman Fiction’ by Faruk Hasan and Dr. Oindri Roy which makes a decolonial critique of contemporary climate politics through a comparative reading of Prayaag Akbar’s *Leila* and James Bradley’s *Clade*. It engages with the idea of the ‘climate Bildungsroman’ in an innovative way to show how narratives of personal growth and social transformation can illuminate the ethical, political and ecological challenges of the Anthropocene. Irrespective of geographical categorisation, both colonialism and neo-colonialism do impact ecological equilibrium through environmental exploitation.

The research papers continue to engage the questions of marginality as they examine regions, communities, and voices often relegated to the peripheries of national discourse. The article on Siddhartha Deb’s *Surface* interrogates the media sensationalism and the historical imagination of Northeast India, exposing how dominant narratives often ‘manufacture’ and politicise rather than report reality. The article is also timely in its discussion of public perception, especially in the context of recent events that demonstrate how racial stereotyping persists and how the Northeastern voices continue to be marginalised in national media narratives. It also brings forth the main cause behind this misrepresentation as the absence of local reporters. Similarly, Anirban Chatterjee’s reading of Tamsüla Ao’s ‘The Curfew Man’ shifts attention from spectacular accounts of conflict to the fragile yet enduring ethics of everyday life. In doing so, it reframes conflict literature from disturbance and tension to micro-narratives of personal negotiation and survival at the emotional level. It foregrounds the nuanced power of silence over spectacle; as a strategy to overcome strain in such

wars over romanticisation of suffering. Together, these essays highlight what thinkers such as Judith Butler and Veena Das have described as the ordinary life of violence and survival, where tenderness, memory, and community become modes of resistance against erasure.

Alternative Masculinities are foregrounded through depictions of insanity in select fiction from Anirudh Kala's *The Unsafe Asylum: Stories of Partition and Madness* that explores how the trauma of the Partition destabilises conventional patriarchal notions of masculinity. The article highlights the asylum as a 'counter-space' or 'heterotopia' where new but innate forms of gendered subjectivity emerge which otherwise remains repressed. The conventions of hegemonic masculinity perpetrate violence, and the psychosomatic suppression they engender damages the socio-cultural fabric of the society irrevocably. The paper by Vivek Sachdeva moves a step further and instead of understanding the challenges of the Partition within the framework of Western theory of the nation, he argues that the Partition caused a schism among *watan*, *mulk* and *qaum* which is crucial to comprehend the dynamics of identities in post-Partition India. This is done through a historical and narrative analysis of *Garm Hava* (1974) and *Mammo* (1994). The paper studies the state of exile more in social and psychological terms than in territorial terms, which gives people a sense of being undesired, unwanted and alienated. It is more about denying people their 'home' and the subsequent feeling of alienation at the hands of power structures or groups.

This is followed by another form of social exclusion akin to stigmatic practice of 'othering' women during the menstrual 'period.' The research paper by Himanjali Kalita and Paramita Dey looks at menstrual seclusion practices in the short film *Gaokor: A Period House* and reveals how social practices become technologies of discipline and control. Such social practices that showcase gender inequality call for interventions

that can challenge embedded cultural structures of control to promote justice and social inclusion. A related contribution, though tangentially different, is the research paper by Azhar Uddin Sahaji and Nidhi Sharma that revisits texts on Manasa Mangal to reinterpret medieval vernacular literature through the lenses of disability, caste, and gender. This can be situated within the broader discourse of Bhāṣā literature, as it demonstrates the vitality of such religious texts that enable them to provide indigenous frameworks demonstrating how medieval local stories still matter and can enrich ongoing debates on embodiment, power, caste, and resistance. Thus, this issue is equally attentive to the politics of embodiment and identity as these essays demonstrate how bodies become sites where power is inscribed, contested, and reconfigured across historical and cultural contexts.

The article ‘Women, Crime and Power: A Postfeminist Study of Delhi Crime Season 3’ examines the OTT series through Rosalind Gill’s concept of postfeminist sensibility, offering yet another timely and intellectually engaging intervention in the fields of gender studies, media studies, and contemporary Indian cultural discourse. It provides a nuanced exploration of how contemporary Indian OTT narratives have become important sites for reimagining women’s identities and negotiations with power. Samridhi Rampal’s ‘Navigating Non-Monogamy: An Exploratory Study of Media Representation and Personal Perspectives among Indian Women’ extends this discussion from the Indian platform to global media narratives, analysing how non-monogamy intersects with the socio-cultural realities of urban Indian women. Here again, tension emerges between the established heteronormative regulatory structures and emerging relational possibilities which are both represented and regulated through media.

The issue steers towards posthumanism with Jaswinder Singh’s re-reading of a canonical Indian English novel in his

research paper ‘A Study of Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* as Posthuman Epistemology’ through the lens of critical posthuman studies. The mystic strangeness of Billy Biswas gets unfolded as a ‘multi-subjective consciousness’ as he is seen as a posthuman subject whose consciousness transcends anthropocentric boundaries. It is noticeable that how there has been a sustained questioning of the human at the central position as the essays collectively participate in what Rosi Braidotti has described as a posthuman reconfiguration of ethical relations. Human identity emerges out of its entanglements with the surrounding tangible or intangible non-human worlds of memories, environments, and technologies and it is never autonomous or self-contained.

Shradhananda Dash and Ananda Sethi take the selected stories from Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* and *The Mistress of Spices* to explore the power of food in the immigrant kitchen. Food becomes a powerful cultural signifier that positions women as custodians, translators, and transmitters of cultural heritage and familial bonding across generations and between continents. The analysis highlights the gendered dimensions of the culinary experience and its contribution to nostalgia and familial identity. Engaging the theoretical lens of hybridity, postcolonialism, and diaspora studies, we see how food operates as a language of affection, a medium of resistance, and a marker of generational transformation. The paper further juxtaposes the traditional culinary practices with contemporary American lifestyles, showing how food becomes a crucial measure of assimilation and negotiation.

The article ‘Digital Representation of the Fragmented Self through the Lens of Reification: A Cultural Examination’ interrogates the transformation of selfhood into a commodified spectacle in contemporary digital representations and offers a compelling critique of postmodern digital culture, where the

digital increasingly functions as a substitute for lived subjectivity. Drawing upon Lukács, Debord, Habermas, Jameson, and contemporary studies on social media behaviour, the paper demonstrates how digital identities become marketable objects, fostering alienation, fragmentation, and a culture of perpetual self-curation.

The present issue is also enriched by a photo essay by Jasmine Kaur Chandla, an ethnographic research that explores the celebration of Sangla Holi in the Baspa Valley of Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, which has a unique religious combination of Bon traditions, Buddhism, and Hinduism. This visual documentation captures the cultural transmission and ‘restored behaviour’ while also lamenting the loss when the sanctity of the ritual opens itself to become a tourist spectacle.

Our creative and review sections complement the research essays; they extend the dialogue across genres, languages, cultures, and intellectual traditions. In the Book Reviews section, Pousali Bhar offers a thoughtful and incisive review of *Climate of Denial: Darwin, Climate Change, and the Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century* (2024) as it highlights Allen MacDuffie’s compelling exploration of denialism as a cultural and psychological phenomenon whose roots can be traced to the nineteenth-century responses to Darwinian thought.

The second book review by Geeta Rani examines Neha Bansal’s poetry collection *Six of Cups* (2024), a collection that situates memory within domestic spaces, culinary practices, family relationships, and everyday rituals. Drawing on the symbolic resonance of the tarot card from which the collection derives its title, the review demonstrates how Bansal transforms ordinary moments into sites of affective and cultural significance, suggesting that history often survives through intimate and seemingly insignificant gestures.

The section devoted to creative writing further enriches the journal as it reveals the power of poetic expression that remains inaccessible to purely analytical discourse. Swapnadeep Kundu's poem 'Lowercase Moments' is a reflective meditation on the poetics of everyday life. Through a conversational tone, the poem transforms ordinary spaces—cafés, bus stops, rainy afternoons, and fleeting encounters—into sites of wonder and emotional discovery.

Complementing this extended lyric meditation are the haiku poems of Neetu Kumari Gupta, which demonstrate the evocative power of brevity. Through compressed imagery and suggestive emotional landscapes, the poems explore themes of affection, interpersonal tensions, betrayal, trust, and shifting human relationships. 'The Salty Sweet' and 'The Playful Jab' reveal the complexities of intimacy, where love is intertwined with irony, teasing, and unspoken understanding, while the concluding haiku reflects on fractured bonds, institutional dynamics, and the subtle erosion of trust. Together, these contributions demonstrate poetry's enduring capacity to illuminate the intimate dimensions of lived experience.

Translation, as scholars from Walter Benjamin to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have suggested, is never a mere transfer of words. It is an ethical encounter between languages and worlds. The translations featured in this issue exemplify how linguistic crossings create new forms of cultural continuity while preserving the distinctiveness of local histories, emotions, and epistemologies. Ramyani Gayen's translation of Rabindranath Tagore's poem 'Abirvab' ('Advent'), originally published in *Kshanika* (1900), brings contemporary readers into dialogue with one of the most celebrated voices of Indian literature. In tandem with the research papers, this poem explores a revelatory moment or 'advent' of spiritual awakening. The translation carefully preserves the lyrical richness, spiritual longing, and emotional intensity of Tagore's original while making it

accessible to a wider English-speaking audience. The second translation of Acharya Shivpujan Sahay's Bhojpuri short story 'Kundan Singh Kesar Bai' is noteworthy as it highlights questions of nationalism, gender, sacrifice, and collective resistance within a village setting. The translation not only recovers Sahay's only Bhojpuri short story as an important literary text but also broadens our understanding of the diverse linguistic and cultural contributions to India's anti-colonial movement. These sections on creative writings invite readers to move between critical inquiry and imaginative engagement, local histories and global concerns, and the archival and the contemporary. In doing so, they enrich the intellectual and aesthetic conversations that define the spirit of this issue.

Whether through critical engagements or through the imaginative terrains of poetry and translation, the contributions remind the readers about the dynamics of knowledge that keeps evolving and is neither static nor isolated. The papers collectively suggest what Rosi Braidotti calls 'a colossal hybridisation.' Through their analyses they seek reformulation of the humanist ideals towards an 'ethical appreciation' of diversity that crosses constructed liminalities. It emerges through dialogue, contestation, interpretation, and creative renewal. This re-instates the importance of humanities as indispensable spaces for reflection, ethical engagement, and critical imagination.

At a time when public discourse is increasingly shaped by polarisation, ecological uncertainty, technological transformation, and competing historical claims, the humanities reaffirm the enduring relevance of literary and cultural studies in fostering nuanced understanding and meaningful dialogue across differences. This is evident from the contributions in this Issue 46 which celebrate plurality—of voices, methodologies, histories, and forms. It invites readers to inhabit these diverse intellectual and creative landscapes while remaining attentive to

the complex interconnections that bind them together. In this spirit, we offer the present volume as both a site of inquiry and a space of conversation, contributing to the ongoing task of understanding our world through the transformative power of literature, culture, and critical thought.

The scholarly rigour of these essays is noteworthy as they foreground contradictions, sometimes embedded, in the politics of the accepted mainstream theories. At times, contributors have read texts beyond analyses of their apparent concern, delved deep into the causes and have offered plausible solutions towards rectification. Many research papers have engaged with the concerns of identity, marginalisation, negotiations with power, inter-species networks, foreshadowing broader issues of environmental interconnections, collective existence, ethical responsibility etc. They successfully participate and contribute to more equitable and humane response to planetary crisis. The contributions in this volume reinforce dialog's commitment to exploring diverse literary traditions, marginal voices, and alternative epistemologies that enrich contemporary scholarship in Humanities. Thus, this edition reinforces the ways in which literary forms shape our capacity to perceive and respond to historical, ecological and cultural realities. Together, these diverse voices reaffirm the continuing relevance of literary and cultural studies as spaces for critical reflection, creative engagement, and intellectual transformation.

We thank our contributors, reviewers, readers, and editorial team for making this Issue 46 of dialog possible and trust that the questions raised within these pages will continue to generate new reflections, dialogues, and possibilities for understanding. My heartfelt gratitude to the editorial team which includes Dr. Kamalpreet, along with Ms. Sonali Negi and Ms. Arushi Bhandari, the editorial assistants. The team has made sustained efforts in reaching out to authors and experts, as well as in updating and disseminating timely information and

communications. Mr. Sukhpal Sharma, Assitant Manager, Press, Panjab University, Chandigarh; and Ankush have also contributed significantly to bringing out this issue of dialog, Volume 46.



The First Anglo–Sikh War as a Discursive Battlefield: A New Historicist Study of Shah Muhammad’s Jangnama and J.D. Cunningham’s History of the Sikhs

Iqbal Singh*

Abstract

The First Anglo–Sikh War (1845–1846) was a turning point in the history of Punjab. The war reveals both the decline of the Sikh Empire and the eventual consolidation of British colonial rule in Punjab. Beyond the military aspect of the war, it shaped cultural and ideological dialogues that eventually reshaped historical memory. This paper compares two contemporary narratives: Shah Muhammad’s *Jangnama* (1846) and Joseph Davey Cunningham’s *History of the Sikhs* (1849). *Jangnama* is a poetic lament which arouses moral critique and grief over the fall of the Sikh Empire; *History of the Sikhs* is a colonial historiography which justifies British intervention, colonial supremacy, and the annexation of Punjab as historically inevitable. These works have rarely been explored as parallel discourses. By drawing on the insights of the American scholar Stephen Greenblatt, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, and the American literary theorist Louis Montrose, the paper analyses the two narratives as cultural products embedded in a network of power, knowledge, and ideology. It further demonstrates that the First Anglo–Sikh War appears as a challenged space of historical memory, where sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity are constantly renegotiated. Both Shah Muhammad and Cunningham reveal the complex process through which the empire is justified, resisted, and remembered of colonial Punjab even today.

Keywords: Anglo–Sikh War, Colonial Historiography, Cultural Memory, New Historicism, Punjab.

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Introduction

The First Anglo–Sikh War (1845–1846) stands as a decisive moment in the history of Punjab. It was an intense confrontation that conclusively marked the beginning of the end for the once-mighty Sikh Empire and the steady entrenchment of British colonial power in Punjab. Indeed, it was not merely confrontation; rather, it concurrently produced a cultural and ideological dialogue that crucially redesigned and repositioned the place of Punjab in colonial history. The war and the events leading to it have been exceptionally chronicled by two contemporary voices from opposing cultural and ideological spheres: Shah Muhammad, a Punjabi poet and eyewitness to the war, and Joseph Davey Cunningham, a British officer and historian. Shah Muhammad's *Jangnama* (1846), composed in rich poetic verse shortly after the war, firmly captures the emotional resonance, internal dissent, and heroic valour of the Sikh forces from within the cultural milieu of Punjab. Significantly, *Jangnama* holds immense historical importance, directly chronicling events when Punjab and Hindustan were distinct entities, and it consequently offers valuable insights despite its concise nature. Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* (1849) provides a detailed and critical account of the rise and the fall of the Sikh Empire. His role as a participant and observer in the British military campaign reshaped his viewpoint, reflecting a colonial worldview. His narrative tries to justify British intervention, colonial supremacy, and the annexation of Punjab as historically inevitable.

It is pertinent to mention that for the Gurmukhi text, this study relies on the digital file of the edition titled *Qissa Shah Muhammad*, published by Rai Sahib Munshi Gulab Singh and Sons in 1904. For the English translation of selected excerpts from the *Jangnama*, it draws upon P.K. Nijhawan's *The First Punjab War: Shah Mohammed's Jangnamah* (2001).

Both works have been studied in isolation by several scholars. Shah Muhammad's *qissa* has been appreciated for its emotional and cultural significance, whereas Cunningham's

history has been acclaimed for its documentary precision. There has been comparatively little engagement with these works as parallel narratives. Both works function in parallel as discursive structures that reshape the ideological conflicts of Punjab. The present paper aims to address this lacuna through a New Historicist lens. It particularly draws on the insights of the American scholar Stephen Greenblatt, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, and the American literary theorist Louis Montrose, foregrounding the reciprocal interplay between discourse and historical consciousness. It explores the two texts as cultural products which are rooted in networks of knowledge, power, and ideology. Shah Muhammad portrays the decline of the Sikh Empire through poetic lament and moral critique. However, J.D. Cunningham stresses the epistemic authority of colonial historiography. Therefore, by comparing these narratives, the paper demonstrates that the First Anglo–Sikh War performs as a contested space of historical memory. In such a space, sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity are constantly renegotiated.

The paper highlights the cultural negotiations, ideological struggles, and historiographical interventions embedded in these accounts. It has been argued in the paper that these accounts transform the war into a discursive battlefield. Such a discursive war continues to shape the cultural memory and historical imagination of colonial Punjab even today. The research paper explores how colonial and indigenous narratives are complex processes through which the empire is justified, resisted, and remembered of colonial Punjab even today.

Shah Muhammad's Jangnama is not only a chronicle of battles, but also conveys the deep social and spiritual upheavals brought by the downfall, lamenting the defeat of the Sikh soldiers, the erosion of cultural identity, and the pulling of Hindu–Muslim unity apart that had sustained the plural society of Punjab for several centuries. As Shah Muhammad pens:

How in the midst of Musalmaans and Hindus,
Living happily together,

Had a scourge of sorts descended from nowhere?
For, O Shah Mohammed! Never in the Punjab,
Was a third caste ever known to have come. (Stanza 03)

The poet portrays colonial rule as a civilisation rupture, causing deep cultural alienation. His lament transforms qissa into witness, protest, and remembrance. As P.K. Nijhawan observes, “From the point of view of the East India Company, it was a war of imperial expansion; the truth of the matter is that the British had been casting a covetous eye on Punjab, long before the actual war took place” (19). Thus, the major battles such as Mudki, Ferozeshah, Badowal, and Aliwal are rendered in *Jangnama* as both historical events and metaphors of moral and political collapse. Being a work of a professional historian, however, Cunningham’s *History of the Sikhs* reveals the rationalist idiom of colonial historiography. Written by a soldier and administrator with intimate knowledge of the Sikh state, it offers a detailed and analytical narrative shaped by imperial concerns. It critically traces the origin and the rise of Sikhism, and records the history of Punjab in the milieu of the geo-political situation prevailing during the decisive period in the nineteenth century. Cunningham’s account shows his sympathy with the Sikh soldiers and their resistance against the British army, yet his framework justifies British supremacy. Viewed through Louis Montrose’s concept of the “reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (20), Shah Muhammad expresses memory through poetic lament; on the other hand, Cunningham explains the memory through bureaucratic record. Both Shah Muhammad and Cunningham construct the past within competing discursive frameworks. Such a discursive framework reveals history as a contested space in which memory, ideology, and power intersect. Both works provide a layered representation of the war in the history of Punjab.

The beginning of the *Jangnama* frames it within a spiritual cosmology wherein worldly events are ephemeral and subordinate to divine will. Shah Muhammad invokes Allah:

First praised be Allah
 Who fills the nature with His redolence and playfulness;
 Who adorns the fourteen worlds in a thousand ways
 supreme;
 Who invests flowers with countless bewitching hues;
 Who despatches the dead wood, verily, into oblivion;
 Who fashions future paths for us, with His ever-renewing
 grace.
 O Shah Mohammed! Him alone must we fear;
 He makes beggars of kings without a tear. (Stanza 01)

From a New Historicist lens, it is not the absolute truth; rather, Shah Muhammad's point of view is shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. His worldview is influenced by Indo-Islamic traditions, cultural anxieties, and the impact of the colonial conquest. He understands the fall of the Sikh Empire through divine causality. He also casts rulers and empires as transient before destiny. Moreover, allusions to Shaddad, Nimrod, Pharaoh, and Akbar reinforce the impermanence of temporal power, turning history into a spiritual elegy shaped by Islamic fatalism and the qissa tradition. However, Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* exemplifies how colonial knowledge and power shaped the narrative of the colonised. Cunningham's perspective, shaped by imperial ideology, attributes the downfall of the Sikh Empire to several factors, such as weak leadership, factionalism, and British diplomacy. His viewpoint illustrates Greenblatt's concept of the "circulation of social energy" (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 19) as his narrative sympathises with the Sikh bravery, yet ultimately justifies imperial authority under the guise of objective analysis. *History of the Sikhs* contains subversive elements of the Sikh Empire, while it finally reinforces British dominance in Punjab. In the case of *Jangnama*, it critiques betrayal within the Sikh regime through divine justice and fatalism, but its critique is circumscribed by its spiritual paradigm. The qissa limits its revolutionary potential, transforming protest into elegy, by locating blame in destiny rather than material conditions. As Michel Foucault observes, discursive practices "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (49). Both writers frame

the First Anglo–Sikh War within a discursive framework that defines what is considered legitimate history and whose voices are heard. Jangnama arises from a vernacular moral framework and the History of the Sikhs from colonial epistemology. In the context of the war, both narratives reveal discourse as a mechanism of power that constructs historical truth and marginalises alternatives.

Shah Muhammad casts Maharaja Ranjit Singh as a symbol of moral authority and a protector against foreign domination. Punjab prospered for nearly five decades under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The poet underscores that British ambitions were held in check during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's lifetime. By lamenting his absence, therefore, Shah Muhammad frames Ranjit Singh as the figure whose leadership might have altered the outcome of the Anglo–Sikh conflict. Cunningham echoes this view, noting that "Runjeet Singh labored, with more or less of intelligent design, to give unity and coherence to diverse atoms and scattered elements; to mould the increasing Sikh nation into a well-ordered state" (133), and further records that "he was supreme in the hills and plains of the Punjab proper; the mass of his dominion had been acquired" (165). Similarly, Charles Gough and Arthur D. Innes affirm:

Ranjit Singh possessed precisely the necessary qualities. His prowess in battle was beyond question; the vigour and shrewdness of his judgment were conspicuous; his promptitude of action was obvious. And he struck a note to which the heart of the Sikh people vibrated, by proclaiming himself always as the servant of Guru Govind, and acting always in the name of Govind and to the glory of the Khalsa. (29)

Charles Gough and Arthur D. Innes acknowledge Maharaja Ranjit Singh's military expertise, political acumen, and spiritual authority. Both Shah Muhammad and Cunningham acknowledge that Ranjit Singh's death symbolised the vulnerability of the Khalsa. In Jangnama, the poet expresses that

the Sikh soldiers were defeated at the hands of the British army due to the absence of their strong leader:

The battle of Hind and Punjab now raged furiously.
On both sides were ranged huge numbers.
Had the Sarkar been alive today, he would have certainly valued
The reckless bravery the Khalsa showed on the field that day.

.....
O Shah Mohammed! But for one Sarkar
The forces lost the battle they, in fact, had won. (Stanza 92)

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's legacy endures as a symbol of unity and inclusive leadership. His legacy is celebrated across traditions in India. In *A History of the Sikhs, Volume II: 1839–2004*, Khushwant Singh similarly remarks:

In the forty years that he ruled, he hammered warring Sikh factions into one and welded people of diverse loyalties into a nation; and he made the nation strong and prosperous. Ranjit Singh was like a massive banyan tree which cast its shadow over the whole of the Punjab; and like the banyan he had sheltered the land beneath him to such an extent that nothing but weeds could thrive in it. (45)

Thus, both indigenous poetic lament and foreign colonial historiography render Ranjit Singh as the last strong leader of the Sikh Empire. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's leadership epitomised the pinnacle of native rule before colonial supremacy. The nostalgic portrayal, where memory and mourning merge with myth, reflects both admiration and a yearning for lost sovereignty. The present disunity and the envisioned unified past under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh can be aptly critiqued through a New Historicist lens. Here, Stephen Greenblatt's idea becomes pertinent: "actions that appear to be single are disclosed as multiple; the apparently isolated power of the individual genius turns out to be bound up with collective, social energy; a gesture of dissent may be an element in a larger legitimisation process, while an attempt to stabilise the order of

things may turn out to subvert it” (“Resonance and Wonder” 15). Shah Muhammad’s lamentation expresses the collective grief of the native society. His critique of Rani Jindan, while dissenting, paradoxically reinforces patriarchal authority. Cunningham’s *History of the Sikhs*, though framed as objective imperial historiography, betrays contradictions: his admiration for Ranjit Singh and the Sikh valour deftly unsettles the narrative of British superiority he seeks to affirm. In these works, therefore, dissent and affirmation, legitimation and subversion, are entangled within the circulation of social energy.

Both, Shah Muhammad and J.D. Cunningham, offer detailed accounts of the political chaos that followed Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s death, meticulously highlighting the instability during Kharak Singh and Nau Nihal Singh’s brief rule. Both writers constantly agree on key events such as the murder of Chet Singh, the internal power struggles, and the suspicious deaths of Nau Nihal Singh and Udham Singh. Shah Muhammad portrays Kharak Singh as a grief-stricken father destroyed by betrayal and unwaveringly highlights the callousness of Nau Nihal Singh, interpreting the tragic deaths as divine retribution. However, Cunningham depicts Kharak Singh as an ineffectual leader whose poor choices, particularly his alliance with Chet Singh and British agents, ultimately alienated his supporters and led to his downfall, while also suggesting political motivations behind Nau Nihal’s death without asserting divine causality. Additionally, Shah Muhammad emphasises personal emotions and familial dynamics, such as Rani Chand Kaur’s selective grief, whereas Cunningham focuses more on geopolitical manoeuvres, succession disputes, and colonial strategy. Furthermore, both accounts join together on key events such as the deaths of Rani Chand Kaur and Sher Singh, the Sandhawalias’ conspiracies, and the rise of Duleep Singh. *Jangnama*, though it registers as a poetic elegy, boldly defends indigenous memory against imperial rationalism. *History of the Sikhs*, though presented as objective, is likewise a fabricated discourse, formed by colonial ideology. Therefore, both works show that history itself is never impartial but a battlefield where colonial and indigenous voices contest to define meaning.

Moreover, both writers particularly focus on Hira Singh's tyrannical rule, his dependence on his advisor Jalla, and their assassinations by discontented Khalsa forces, subsequently the rise of the Khalsa army as a dominant force that ultimately killed figures like Jawahar Singh. However, both writers show that the young Maharaja Duleep Singh becomes a puppet in the hands of the Khalsa forces amid such chaos. Thus, each account functions not as a crystal-clear document but as a cultural product that forms, and is formed by, the historical perception of its era.

Shah Muhammad depicts Rani Jindan as the key figure behind the English occupation of Punjab. He accuses her of seeking the English support to avenge the death of her brother Jawahar Singh by the Sikh forces. His account, moralistic and emotionally charged, emphasises betrayal and revenge, interpreting her actions as the decisive cause of the Sikh Raj's collapse. Similarly, Rattan Singh Jaggi records, "Shah Muhammad blamed Rani Jindan wholly, citing a now-lost and unverified letter. While clandestine dealings with the British may have involved her, Lal Singh, and Teja Singh. By focusing only on Rani Jindan, Shah Muhammad overlooks the larger imperial ambition driving the British to annex the Lahore Darbar, *suggesting that the war's origins were more complex than his poetic lament admits*" (trans. mine; 15). Khushwant Singh also records a broader pattern of collusion: "Rani Jindan, Raja Lal Singh, the chief minister, and Tej Singh, the commander-in-chief of the Sikh forces, and many of the chieftains, both Sikh and Dogra, were in communication with the British and willing to sell the Punjab provided their lives and jagirs were secured" (43). Shah Muhammad's critique is both political and gendered. His critique reflects the patriarchal anxieties of the nineteenth-century Punjab. In his qissa, he symbolises women as destruction:

From the day one, women have had their way.
 For, they alone account for why Ravana lost his sway.
 The Kauravas and Pandavas too suffered at their hands,
 Full eighteen armies perished in the Kurukshetra sands.

.....

O Shah Mohammed! No wonder then that the queen Jind Kaur
Had the entire country laid waste in its darkest hour. (Stanza 102)

Such invocations of myth, therefore, from Ravana to the Mahabharata, transform political crisis into allegory, recasting imperial defeat as the consequence of female transgression. This blame based on gender reflects a critique of women in society, likely influenced by the qissa literary tradition, which falls into wider patriarchal discourses that blame women for social collapse, so even in lamenting the lost Sikh Empire, Shah Muhammad's Jangnama together maintains the prevailing ideologies. Cunningham, on the other hand, does not show Rani Jindan seeking revenge for her brother's death; instead, he finely criticises her character, stating to the "impure mind of Ranee Jindan" (273), locating her involvement in the intrigues and corruption at the Lahore Darbar. Cunningham further records that after Jawahar Singh's death no one assumed supreme authority (280). In this vacuum, Rani Jindan herself took the hold of Lahore Darbar as a supreme administrative authority, and her assertion of authority as a woman highlights both the assertion of female power and the fragility of the political structure of Punjab during that era. While acknowledging her ambition, Cunningham embeds her within a narrative of dynastic instability and imperial response. A New Historicist reading, thus, views both portrayals as fabricated discourses rather than apparent truths: Shah Muhammad mobilises misogynistic tropes to articulate cultural grief, while Cunningham uses moral judgment to rationalise British authority. In each case, therefore, Rani Jindan becomes a site of contested meaning, revealing the entanglement of gender, politics, and ideology in colonial Punjab even today.

Shah Muhammad and Cunningham agree that the Sikhs initiated the First Anglo-Sikh War, though they frame responsibility differently. Shah Muhammad attributes the outbreak to Rani Jindan, portraying her as conspiring with the British to avenge her brother's murder and urging the Sikh armies into battle. In his account, causality is personalised and gendered, transforming political crises into a moralised tale of

vengeance and betrayal. According to Cunningham, the initiation of the war by the Sikhs was a violation of the treaty signed in 1806 between the British and Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Cunningham also interprets the advance as a tactical error rooted in factional intrigue and reckless aggression, privileging a rationalist and military explanation. Cunningham further emphasises internal rivalries, noting that “the selfish chiefs of the Sikhs had always desired that such a degree of interference should be exercised in the affairs of their country as would guarantee to them the easy enjoyment of their possessions” (281–82). In Cunningham’s view, therefore, leaders such as Maharaja Sher Singh and the Sandhanwalas “had clung to wealth and ease rather than to honour and independence, and thus . . . had been ready to become tributary and to lean for support upon foreigners” (291–92). Cunningham also records that the Sikh perceptions of Major Broadfoot and Sir Charles Napier’s actions amounted to a *de facto* declaration of war, reinforcing their sense of British hostility. Yet, importantly, the English policies over the years did not help maintain peaceful relations. Consequently, the English cannot be completely exonerated from the war, even though they did not want it and knew it would benefit them (294). Read through a Foucauldian lens, therefore, Cunningham’s history exemplifies colonial discourse: by casting the Sikh chiefs as selfish and divided, it constructs native incapacity as a justification for intervention. However, his perspective also admits the British’s strategy of opportunism, which reveals the ambivalence of colonial power, exposing contradictions within his narrative that tries to legitimise the annexation as historically inevitable.

Shah Muhammad and Cunningham’s perspectives diverge in tone and emphasis when they narrate the events leading to and including the Battle of Mudki. Indeed, both acknowledge the bravery of both the Sikh forces and the British army, and both recognise the military prowess of the British forces and the decisive superiority of the English artillery. Shah Muhammad also discloses the mental state of the Sikh soldiers who were petrified by the British forces, and eventually they abandoned the battlefield. While Shah Muhammad laments the sacrifices of

the Sikh soldiers in the Battle of Mudki, Cunningham offers a measured analysis rooted in diplomatic missteps, political strategy, and opportunism among the Sikh chiefs. Cunningham notes, “Lal Singh headed the attack, but, in accordance with his original design, he involved his followers in an engagement, and then left them to fight as their undirected valor might prompt” (301). His colonial worldview legitimises British victory in Mudki by attributing the decline of the Sikh Empire to internal betrayal and poor leadership. A New Historicist viewpoint reveals how claims of neutrality mask imperial power in the construction of the narrative of Cunningham. In the context of the Battle of Ferozeshah, Shah Muhammad condemns Pahara Singh for treachery. But he remains silent on the treachery of Lal Singh and Teja Singh. However, Cunningham directly blames these treacherous Sikh commanders, emphasising native collaboration to validate the British victory in Ferozeshah. Shah Muhammad frames the betrayal through poetic invective:

Pahara Singh was the friend of the Feringhee,
For, he bore enmity to the Singhs.
He left the field to tell the Lat,
What, in fact, was a great secret. (Stanza 75)

Both narratives, nevertheless, agree that the British were placed in jeopardy, with Shah Muhammad likening the Sikh assault to falcons swooping upon prey and Cunningham conceding the army faced “real danger and great perplexity” (303). Yet, significantly, where Shah Muhammad attributes the turning point to Pahara Singh’s duplicity, Cunningham emphasises Teja Singh’s deliberate delay and Lal Singh’s retreat. As supporting evidence, Rattan Singh Jaggi observes, “Teja Singh only entered the battlefield on the second day, after the Sikh retreat had begun, though Shah Muhammad depicts him as engaged from the outset” (trans. mine; 19). Khushwant Singh substantiates the allegation of treachery:

Tej Singh’s guns opened fire. The British artillery had no shot with which to reply. Then, without any reason, Tej Singh’s guns also fell silent, and, a few minutes later,

Tej Singh ordered his troops to retreat. Lord Gough quickly realised that the Sikh commanders had fulfilled their treacherous promise. (49)

Moreover, Shah Muhammad condemns Gulab Singh for his conspiracy to undermine the Sikh Empire due to his personal ambition to consolidate Dogra power. In their respective accounts of the battles of Badowal and Aliwal, Shah Muhammad glorifies the heroic resistance of the Sikh soldiers, while Cunningham attributes the Sikh defeat to strategic errors and poor leadership. Therefore, both narratives acknowledged betrayal as decisive but differ in attribution and framing. While Shah Muhammad focuses on communal mourning, Cunningham justifies imperial authority by holding the treacherous Sikh leaders as culprits in the downfall of the Sikh Empire. Shah Muhammad further glorifies the bravery of Sikh soldiers like Mewa Singh, Makhe Khan, and Sham Singh Attariwala:

Both Mewa Singh and Maghe Khan took them head on.
Three attacks of the Feringhee were broken and beaten back.
Sham Singh, the honourable Sardar of Atari,
Was resplendent in the battlefield despite his years.
O Shah Mohammed! In that blinding action,
The Singhs spilled the Feringhee blood like squeezing ripe limes. (Stanza 90)

A significant divergence lies in Shah Muhammad's omission of the exact location of the Battle of Sabraon, while Cunningham specifies it to highlight how the Sikh valour was undermined by flawed leadership. As Cunningham remarks, "The entrenchment likewise showed a fatal want of unity of command and design; and at Subraon, as in the other battles of the campaign, the soldiers did everything and the leaders nothing. Hearts to dare and hands to execute were numerous, but there was no mind to guide and animate the whole" (317–18). Following the battle of Sabraon, the Treaty of Lahore (1846) was signed between the Sikhs and the British, leading to the annexation of significant Sikh territories and allowing the British to wield considerable

influence over Sikh affairs. In Cunningham's view, all the Sikh chiefs, motivated by self-interest, sought British support even against the weakened Sikh army to secure their positions in the Lahore Darbar. He attributes these Sikh chiefs the responsibility for facilitating British influence in the administrative affairs of the Lahore Darbar. However, Cunningham upholds a reverential tone towards Sham Singh Attariwala in his account, writing:

But the ancient Sham Singh remembered his vow; he clothed himself in simple white attire, as one devoted to death, and calling on all around him to fight for the Gooroo, who had promised everlasting bliss to the brave, he repeatedly rallied his shattered ranks, and at last fell a martyr on a heap of his slain countrymen. (319)

Therefore, Cunningham frames Sikh resistance through religious idioms, acknowledging the Sikh spirituality while portraying it as pre-modern, fatalistic valour driven by faith rather than strategy, thus reinforcing the colonial contrast between irrational native passion and rational British command. Ultimately, both authors acknowledge the Sikh bravery but frame betrayal differently. Read together, therefore, their works highlight how historical writing, whether poetic or archival, is never neutral but an ideological struggle over how the war, and its memory, is to be understood.

Furthermore, while Shah Muhammad expresses hope in the enduring strength of the Hindu-Muslim bond as a source of renewal, and further portrays the world as a drama, indicating that the past, present, and future are all predestined according to God's will, interpreting all events as being designed by destiny. However, Cunningham advocates that the British rule over the subcontinent could be maintained through a strong military system, namely "the formation of regiments separately composed of soldiers of different tribes and races" (331), to prevent their unification against the colonial authority and thereby ensure British supremacy. He also added that the social and religious changes in the subcontinent also needed to be

carefully monitored. Sikhism's growth and its distinctiveness from Hinduism and Islam are presented as the ideal catalyst through which significant positive changes could be brought about in Indian society. He further argues that if the Sikh power resurges, people might start to see Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh as their long-awaited saviours. The Sikhs, however, were defeated at the hands of the powerful British army, which established the supremacy of "a third race", consequently altering the mindset and objectives of the people. Moreover, the British introduced new ideas, which created confusion and potentially paved the way for new religious or social movements. Cunningham even speculates that a new prophet or religion might emerge, replacing traditional scriptures and resolving prevalent unrest. He further advocates that the British should guide this change, directing it towards a "religion of truth" and a "government of freedom and progress" (332), thereby indirectly suggesting that Christianity and British governance could serve as the models for this change. In this way, he legitimises the British rule as a progressive mission rather than exploitative in nature, carried out in the name of religion. From a New Historicist viewpoint, therefore, Shah Muhammad's optimistic vision reflects the collective memory and mindset of the native community, envisioning the resurgence of Hindu-Muslim unity and the future of the native community, whereas Cunningham portrays the British governance and Christianity as the epitome of civilisation and progress, so justifying the British rule. Cunningham's emphasis on the British military organisation reveals the divide and rule policy, through which the British consequently exploited differences of caste, religion, ethnicity, region, and language to create mistrust and rivalry among native communities to prolong colonial rule. Thus, these two accounts demonstrate how historical narratives construct power dynamics, with one reinforcing the native community's aspirations for resurgence, while framing its uncertain future as God's will and the other naturalising imperial dominance, simultaneously imagining the better future of the native community under British governance.

To conclude, the juxtaposition of Shah Muhammad's Jangnama and J.D. Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* offers a rich and multifaceted exploration of the decline of the Sikh Empire, providing divergent perspectives on the crucial episodes of the First Anglo–Sikh War while simultaneously creating dialogic interventions formed by political, ideological and cultural disruptions of a transitional epoch. Through a New Historicist approach, both works underscore the infeasibility of a singular and neutral historical truth. They reveal history as a discursive space where power, identity, and memory are contested through language. Shah Muhammad's elegiac qissa inscribes the downfall of the Sikh Empire through divine will, internal betrayals, leadership failures, the erosion of cultural identity, the fracturing of Hindu–Muslim unity and moral decline. These factors transform lament into cultural resilience and memory. However, Cunningham's colonial historical prose is a meticulous and analytical account. It—shaped by his imperial concerns—precisely highlights the political instability, military strategy, leadership failures, and administrative flaws that became the reasons for the collapse of the Sikh Empire. His perspective simultaneously normalises colonial rule and encodes the ideological underpinnings of colonial historiography. With these disparate narrative modes, however, both writers come together on the matter of internal betrayal as the catastrophic point of historical rupture. Indeed, both writers acknowledged the bravery of the Sikh forces and the British forces, and both recognise the military prowess of the British army. Hence, these works reciprocally demonstrate that the First Anglo–Sikh War was both a physical battle between armies and a battle of ideas and narratives, with literature playing a conspicuous role in shaping historical meanings.

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Histories in Flux: Memory, Fiction, and the Contestation of Canonical Authority in Indian War Narratives

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Abstract

This paper examines how memory, fiction and history coexist as a heterogeneous *mélange* in the representation of the past, focusing on Stephen Alter's *Birdwatching: A Novel* (2022), which reimagines the 1962 Indo-China War. It argues that history does not operate through a binary of the 'documented' versus the 'invented,' but emerges through their continual interpenetration, as myth, memory and narrative constantly co-form historical meaning. History is not merely an act of recovering objective facts but is deeply entangled with cultural memories and the subversion of established canons. Through a reading of Alter's work, the paper explores how the novel illuminates those historical and lived experiences that are often left unarticulated in official accounts of the Sino-Indian conflict. The argument is drawn from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of assemblages which posits that history, like memory, is not a static record but a dynamic interplay between the 'factual' and the 'fictional,' the 'real' and the 'imagined.' A Deleuzo-Guattarian analysis demonstrates how fiction contests state-authored narratives while retrieving inconspicuous strands of the past. *Birdwatching* offers an alternative interpretation of the past where memory and myth together shape one's understanding of historical reality. Within this framework, history is constantly in a state of 'becoming,' and truth, much like fiction, remains fluid and contested. The study ultimately conveys that the boundaries between fiction and history are porous, continually reshaping historical understanding.

Keywords: 1962 Indo-China War, Cultural Memories, Deleuzian Assemblage, Historical Fiction, Indian Military History, National Myths

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Introduction

Since its independence from the British Empire in 1947, the Indian nation-state has witnessed numerous milestones and setbacks in the course of its military history. By undertaking an investigation into Indian war history, while perusing the confluence of history and fiction, the present study demonstrates that the past does not only exist in the ‘catalogued’ and ‘archived’ domains, but also in the ‘mythical’ and ‘fictional’ realms. The rhizomatic assemblage of the two terrains reflects a dynamic, ever-changing conception of ‘truth’ and ‘reality.’ To illustrate the above, the paper focuses on the 1962 Indo-China War as portrayed in Stephen Alter’s *Birdwatching: A Novel* (2022). To interrogate the interrelationship between fiction and history, this paper juxtaposes the novel with three significant historical documents. These include: “The Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report” (1962–63; henceforth called *The Brooks-Bhagat Report*), *History of the Conflict with China, 1962* (1992; hereafter referred to as *History of the Conflict*) and *The Sino-Indian Border Dispute* (CIA Papers, 1964). In contrast to the official traditions, the novel earmarks a version of history that collates historical fictions and fictional realities. It simultaneously underscores a model of the past that establishes the genre as a ‘credible’ source for sketching the Indian subcontinent’s military foundations.

Alter, an American author of numerous fictional and non-fictional works, was born in the Indian hill station of Mussoorie. He is known for his writings including *In the Jungles of the Night: A Novel about Jim Corbett* (2016) and *Wild Himalaya: A Natural History of the Greatest Mountain Range on Earth* (2019). Much of his writing centres around the Indian Himalayan ranges and the broader Himalayan region, including his memoir *Becoming a Mountain: Himalayan Journeys in Search of the Sacred and the Sublime* (2014). His novel *Birdwatching*, first published in 2022, contextualises the trans-historical and geopolitical backgrounds of the 1962 war through the character of Guy Fletcher, an ornithologist—a scientist and researcher who studies different species and specimens of birds.

Alter's fictional work under discussion received the 2023 'Green Book of the Year Award' at the Green Literature Festival, Bengaluru, and adds to the reader's overall understanding of India's historical past from a distinctive lens.

More than being a fictional tract that imaginatively represents the war, *Birdwatching* can be scrutinised as a text that seeks to present an 'authentic' depiction of the events of the early 1960s. Through the theoretical lens of rhizomatic assemblages, the paper examines how fluidity and fragmentation underlie structures such as truth, reality and human agency. It simultaneously unearths how "history slides into fiction" and vice versa (Sethi 1). In the context of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of assemblage, entities—both past and present—are in a constant state of 'becoming,' suggesting that the conjectural idea of a singular 'truth' remains tentative at best. Thus, history becomes as fictional as fiction becomes historical. The paper maps the aforementioned arguments through a Deleuzo-Guattarian framework and analysis.

The 1962 Indo-China War, a brief yet pivotal conflict, was fought between India and China. It marks a significant rupture in the subcontinent's postcolonial military history that was rooted in competing territorial claims over Aksai Chin in the west and Arunachal Pradesh (then the North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA) in the east. The war officially commenced on 20 October 1962 and drew to a close on 21 November 1962 and is recounted as one of the significant events of the Nehruvian era. This paper underpins the relative absence of the historical event in popular historical consciousness and literary representations until recent decades. This silence has, in turn, enabled a space where fiction—unencumbered by state narratives or archival limitations—can imagine, reconstruct and reframe the conflict. By situating *Birdwatching* within this lacuna, the study not only underscores the text's representational significance but also interrogates how historical voids are filled through narrative invention. It simultaneously underlines how fiction, when positioned in opposition to official narratives,

becomes a vehicle for recovering processual histories and interstitial spaces.

A Deleuzo-Guattarian Approach to Military History

This section briefly outlines the methodological framework employed by the paper to undertake a critical analysis of the Indian subcontinent's military past. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari first introduced the theory of 'assemblages' in their collaborative work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). Deleuze and Guattari's critical oeuvre constitutes a radical reconfiguration of philosophy, psychoanalysis and political theory, primarily articulated through their two major volumes *Anti-Oedipus* (1972; translated in 1977) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980; translated in 1987), which together form *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Their scholarship departs from traditional structuralist and psychoanalytic frameworks, offering instead a dynamic ontology of becoming, multiplicity and desire. Central to their project is the critique of representational thinking and the elaboration of concepts such as 'rhizome,' 'deterritorialization,' 'assemblage' and 'schizoanalysis.' Drawing from a wide range of disciplines—including Marxism, biology, literature and mathematics—they construct a non-hierarchical, immanent theory of subjectivity and social production that resists totalisation. The aim of their scholarship is "not to represent the world as it is or what it is, but to survey and map its tendencies or becomings, for better and for worse" (Holland 37; emphasis added). Their work simultaneously inaugurates new ways of thinking about power, creativity and resistance beyond static identities and templated structures.

The concept of assemblages, also referred to as *agencements* in French, underwrites a complex, dynamic network of heterogeneous elements and entities that conjoin to form a unity. These elements can range from the social, political, material, linguistic or historical tangents, which interact in non-hierarchical ways. They describe the idea of unity as follows: "An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its

connections. There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” (Deleuze and Guattari 8). This illustrates that an assemblage is not a mere collection of parts that exist in isolation. Furthermore, it underscores how each part is connected to a larger whole. The ‘expansion’ of multiple domains results in a unit which is not fixed or permanent, but in a continuous state of ‘becoming.’ Moreover, it retains its characteristic nature of heterogeneity and open-endedness.

The theoretical notion of the assemblage holds utmost significance in the theory of rhizomatic nodes of reality wherein the epistemological and ontological foundations of human history are characterised by non-linear and multiplicative communication links. These links always remain in a state of flux—both developing and dissolving—and challenge conventional traditions of historical fixity and categorisation. The dynamic and contingent configuration of diverse elements, then, challenges the foundational conception of history as a rigid and stable organisation of narrative points. The existing multiplicity of narratives is further magnified by the “discontinuity of word and thing” (Adkins 25). This paper not only interacts with the idea of ‘multiplicity’ but also reframes the notion of the past that merely exists as a linear, chronological painting of historical events. The constellation of relations among historical and literary narratives re-establishes fiction on a pedestal where one re-cognises the entire framework of identity, organisation and power. Through a Deleuzian lens, this study attempts to “create new concepts . . . and enable readers to create their own new concepts by making new connections” (Adkins 23).

By employing the framework introduced by the two French scholars, this paper underscores that fiction and history intersect when situated on a uniform plane. It is significant to study the war through the lens of this underlying homogeneity in order to highlight an alternative version of ‘truth’ that Alter establishes through his fictional narrative. The 1962 Indo-China War stands as an appropriate example of ‘in-betweenness.’ Its textual

renderings likewise exhibit a sense of ‘middle-ness,’ as different genres blend in their attempts to represent history, which this paper will analyse in the following sections.

Stephen Alter’s *Birdwatching*: Reconceptualising War in Fiction

Stephen Alter’s *Birdwatching* is set against the backdrop of the 1962 Indo-China War. It is one of the few fictional texts which narrate the conflict amongst works including Jon Cleary’s *The Pulse of Danger* (1966), Rita Chowdhury’s *Chinatown Days* (2018) and Rupa Srikumar and A. K. Srikumar’s *Mahaveer: The Soldier Who Never Died* (2019). *Birdwatching* is narrated from the perspective of an American Fulbright scholar who, while on his fieldwork in India, gets exposed to the phenomenon of military and ideological warfare. The book introduces Guy Fletcher, who returns to India after attending college in the States to study the migratory habits of bar-headed geese in Bharatpur. In the novel, Fletcher, trained as an ornithologist, undertakes research and fieldwork on this species during the early 1960s.

The fictional text begins in the “unruffled universe of New Delhi in early 1962,” as Fletcher receives an invitation to an American ambassadorial reception held in honour of the visiting First Lady of the United States, Jacqueline Kennedy (Sengupta, 2022). However, during a birdwatching excursion on Delhi’s Ridge, Fletcher unexpectedly discovers a corpse, an incident that subsequently exposes an elaborate cover-up orchestrated by both the Indian and the American intelligence agencies. Soon after, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—a civilian foreign intelligence service of the United States federal government—approaches him, “telling him his fluent Hindi and his cover as an ornithologist are very useful assets” (Sengupta, 2022). After his formal training, he is sent to Kalimpong, West Bengal. Having joined the CIA, Fletcher “mostly follows instructions, but every so often charts his own course . . .” (Sengupta, 2022). He eventually navigates the upheavals of the 1962 war alongside characters such as Captain Imtiaz Afridi of the Indian army,

before the novel reaches its denouement in the remote forests of Bhutan. As the narrative unfolds, Fletcher becomes increasingly entangled in geopolitical affairs and structures of power.

In many ways, the novel engages with broad global contexts, foregrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis, the coordinates of the Sino-Indian War, the competing interests of the United States, the Tibetan resistance movement, and the bilateral relations among nation-states of the subcontinent in the aftermath of the conflict. It resurrects a period from human history that could have concluded in a nuclear Armageddon. The fictionalised account of Fletcher's transformation from an ornithologist to a CIA operative exemplifies how individual subjectivities are subsumed into grand historical processes, yet these processes are themselves mediated through narrative choices. By embedding archival fragments, geopolitical references and temporal disjunctions within the literary form, the novel blurs the boundaries between historical documentation and literary imagination.

The text constructs a hybridised narration where the reader is constantly made aware of the 'constructedness' of both history and stories. This not only destabilises traditional notions of historical objectivity but also illuminates the ontological and epistemological labour involved in narrating the past. Literature, in this framework, becomes a site where historical meaning is contested, produced and continuously reinterpreted. The interface between history and literature reveals how both the disciplines rely on narrative structures to make sense of the past. While history seeks to document events, literature imaginatively reconstructs them, often by illuminating the affective and ideological dimensions that traditional historiography may bypass. Together, they form a dynamic space where fact and fiction converge to produce richer understandings of historical experiences. It would now be of significance to highlight some of these instances which ultimately result in the intersection of the two spheres of knowledge.

History, Fiction, and the Rhizome

This section examines the rhizomatic assemblages that exist between history and fiction. To undertake such an analysis, it is pertinent to highlight Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical formulations regarding the nature of assemblages. On a horizontal axis, an assemblage comprises both 'content' and 'expression.' Meanwhile, on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both "territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 88; emphasis original). This distinctiveness underlined by the two French critics can be traced in Alter's novel. In many ways, the author underwrites the war in a unique 'literary' way. Contextualising the narrative in 1962, the story highlights:

October 22, 1962. Listening to radio broadcasts in the evening, Fletcher learnt that fighting had broken out between Chinese and Indian troops in two separate regions of the Himalayas. The armed conflict had begun three days ago, on 20 October. One theatre of conflict was in NEFA, on the Thagla Ridge, immediately to the east of Bhutan. The other was in Ladakh, along the perimeter of the Aksai Chin and in the Galwan Valley, adjacent to disputed border areas of Pakistan. In both cases the fighting was at high altitudes, between 12–14,000 feet above sea level. (276)

The above extract from the novel illustrates several important details about the war. First, that the conflict took place in two theatres: the Western and the Eastern. Secondly, it underlines the transient and unsettled nature of boundaries and borders. Thirdly, it illuminates that the event was one of the most prominent instances of mountainous, high-altitude warfare. And, lastly, it underscores the temporal and spatial dimensions of India's past. The war between the two nation-states officially commenced on 20 October 1962. Yet, it is pertinent to note that during a Rajya Sabha debate held on 20 February 1961, the then Prime Minister noted that one of the earliest and a "major

advance of the Chinese forces into Indian territory in Ladakh took place in the summer of 1959, about a year and [a] half ago” (“Statement in Rajya Sabha” 381). It is quite evident that the official timeline of the war exists within a disputed domain; the armed operations did not ‘begin’ on 20 October and hostilities continued even after the ceasefire was declared. Although the dates remain historically contested, the novel bypasses this uncertainty around extant ‘objective’ facts and statistics. Instead, as seen in the above paragraph, it mentions in retrospect that fighting began ‘three days ago, on 20 October,’ before shifting its focus to more significant concerns, particularly the transformation of ‘borders’ into ‘theatres’ of conflict—and consequently into broader metaphorical constructs—and the harsh weather conditions endured by soldiers. The novel’s evocation of contested borders and zones of conflict maps itself onto Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of ‘deterritorialization.’ The two thinkers argue that territorial representations always imply ‘vectors of deterritorialization’ (A Thousand Plateaus 382). They further posit that ‘deterritorialization’ is not the contrary of territory, it is a result of creating territories itself (A Thousand Plateaus 433). Alter’s tale further narrates:

In Ladakh the situation was also dire, though Indian troops had been able to hold back the Chinese at several points despite heavy shelling. The arid terrain provided little cover and, as winter was approaching, temperatures had dropped below freezing. Much of the Aksai Chin had already been occupied by the Chinese, through earlier incursions. This area consisted of desolate, high-altitude desert and salt plains, with a few lakes like Pangong Tso to the south. In Ladakh, it was easier for the Indian Army to supply their troops because of airfields in Leh and Chushul as well as a seasonal highway from Kashmir. (277)

It is relevant to note that the Indian ‘Forward Policy’ played a significant role in intensifying hostilities within Sino-Indian bilateral relations. Sanctioned by the Government of India in July 1954, the Policy—which aimed to counter Chinese

advancements by positioning military checkpoints in disputed border areas—initially focused on the Western Sector before being extended to the Eastern Sector in December 1961. Official interpretations of the policy, however, remain contested. While The Brooks-Bhagat Report characterises the Policy as a military initiative undertaken without adequate political backing (10), History of the Conflict presents it instead as a political strategy implemented without the necessary military support (415). Furthermore, these state-authored texts bypass any sustained engagement with the CIA’s considerable involvement in exacerbating tensions that culminated in the war. Such instances point towards deeper structural and institutional contradictions within the civil-military apparatus. In contrast to dominant strategic narratives and political shibboleths surrounding the 1962 war, the paragraph cited above from the novel foregrounds the ‘lived’ realities of the conflict, revealing the human, emotional and experiential dimensions often absent from official histories and military analyses.

The above excerpt from Alter’s work explicates the past and the present by juxtaposing temporal and spatial realities being faced by soldiers of the Indian armed forces. In copious ways, the text not only underlines the historical sphere but also unfolds the ‘lived’ tangents of the war. It states how the “Indian soldiers in NEFA were heavily outnumbered and outgunned by the PLA [People’s Liberation Army, China] forces, estimated as two battalions, equipped with artillery and mortars” (276). It further notes that “[a]ccording to the limited information available from military sources, an Indian detachment had been routed, with many casualties” (276). Situating the text amidst such granular details helps in charting out the political and experiential tangents on a uniform plane of existence. Deleuze and Guattari rightly note that although every assemblage is territorial, it is also deterritorialized; it is in a constant state of ‘becoming’ (A Thousand Plateaus 10). The novel sketches the war as much more than a closed historical fact; it highlights its ongoing multiplicity—connecting topography, policy, memory and narrative form. As Fletcher returns to India, in November 1962, the fictional narrative further recounts:

By the time he returned to India on 4 November, there was a lull in the fighting along the Himalayan frontier, though tensions remained high. Neither India nor China had actually declared war, even if that was what the international press was calling it. Mounting casualties on both sides proved that it was anything but an ordinary border skirmish. The PLA had pushed the Indian Army back in both theatres and there were reports in the papers that Nehru and Chou En-lai were exchanging letters, attempting to reach some sort of ceasefire agreement. (303–04)

It is germane to emphasise that the novel underscores how the two countries never ‘declared’ a war. Placed alternately, a recently declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) document, originally written in 1964 and released for public scrutiny in 2007 by the United States of America, underpins how the Hong Kong Communist newspapers were instructed that on “no account was the border fighting [between India and China] to be described as ‘war.’ In discussions, only such words as ‘conflict, fighting, and dispute’ indicating a localized engagement were to be used” (The Sino-Indian Border Dispute: CIA Papers 1964 p.63). Emulating and foregrounding history through such ‘real’ events, the novel contextualises the past in a much more ‘historical’ vein, rather than in a fictional or ‘imaginary’ way. It highlights the role of the media and the international press in accentuating discourses and politicised conversations around the phenomenon of warfare. In the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis (16–29 October 1962)—a thirteen-day confrontation between the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union—the novel further stresses the ‘futility’ of wars, paradoxically noting that most “people [do not] realize how close we came to global annihilation” (308). In its discussion of the Sino-Indian War, while highlighting the unilateral ceasefire that was declared in November 1962, it states:

It looked as if the war would stretch on into December, with temperatures dropping steadily in the mountains

and the risk of snow blocking the high passes. But then, on November 22, the Chinese took everyone by surprise, declaring a unilateral ceasefire, effective within twenty-four hours, and promising to withdraw from most of Indian territory by the first of December. (313)

The paragraph above clearly exemplifies the history-literature continuum which the text attempts to uphold. By injecting minute instances, even if fictional, such as contextualising the ‘first of December’ as an important reference point to access the past, the novel transitions itself from being a mere literary episode to an expansive re-presentation of the war. This is not to contest the objectivity of history; however, the broader argument underlines the unequivocal stance that the past always survives in a tendentious state. A Deleuzo-Guattarian lens helps in identifying that a fictional delineation of the war is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, [and] susceptible to constant modification” (A Thousand Plateaus 12). Fiction, then, emerges as a form of mapping which is open to reconfiguration, unlike the archive. The historical moments of the 1960s are not static points, but rather nuanced and layered formations of history that are open to reinterpretation and fictionalisation.

The modern practice of ‘bird-watching,’ or ‘birding,’ first became popular as a scientific sport in the 20th century, which included the observation and identification of birds in their natural habitats. Its modern form was made possible largely due to the development of optical aids and resources that enabled humankind to study wild species without harming them. The symbolic resonance of the title *Birdwatching*—including the act of ‘bird-watching’ itself—lies in the novel’s fusion of ecological observation with geopolitical espionage. Fletcher’s identity as an ornithologist is inseparable from his role as a CIA operative witnessing and mediating the war. Furthermore, the chapter titles—drawn from specific bird species including the ‘Asian King Vulture’ and the ‘Great Himalayan Barbet’ amongst others—mirror the shifting phases of the conflict and the

protagonist's inner transformation. Each chapter of the book "begins with a bird description and the bird finds its way into the chapter, often just a flutter of wings, but a happy distraction from the combustible geopolitics of the moment, a sign that the natural world goes on even as men get ready to kill each other over many kilometres of frozen land" (Sengupta, 2022). Through the metaphor of 'birdwatching,' Alter transforms the act of observing birds into a symbolic reflection of the culture of suspicion and surveillance that defined the Sino-Indian frontier conflict. As the protagonist "maintains the fiction of studying birds [after his recruitment as an agent] . . . real and fictional characters intermingle" (Sengupta, 2022). The novel astutely employs ornithological imagery to expose the intrusive and problematic presence of the CIA within the larger machinery of conflict. It simultaneously rewrites the 'recorded' and the 'forgotten' aspects of the 1962 war.

The representation of the 1962 war within the novel also draws attention to the historical silences that surround the conflict in India's collective memory. By giving a narrative form to an event often marginalised in mainstream historiography, *Birdwatching* occupies a critical space between remembering and reimagining. In this sense, fiction becomes not merely illustrative but also constitutive of history—participating in what Michel Foucault would term the 'discursive' formation of knowledge. The Deleuzian conception of the rhizome, with "neither beginning nor end" but always a 'middle' or milieu (A Thousand Plateaus 21), helps in understanding this fictional intervention as non-hierarchical and horizontally expansive, capable of producing meaning through 'connection' rather than 'origin.'

War Narratives and Public-Cultural Assemblages

This section probes into the rhizomatic structures that exist in the public-culture sphere and are demonstrated by Alter's novel. While situated within the sheltered confines of an academic scholarship, Fletcher's journey charts the psychological transition of a young researcher as the war progresses and he is

recruited as a CIA agent. The text not only revisits a neglected episode of history but also interrogates the complicity of academic spaces in reproducing, silencing and weaponising narratives of war. As ‘geopolitics’ gets entangled with the ‘social’ realm, one gets to scrutinise the role played by academic landscapes during national and international conflicts. Fletcher returns to his research towards the end of the book and remains within his secure academic space, even though readers realise that knowledge-production is never neutral.

Despite being a fictional text, the novel *Birdwatching* contextualises the role of literature in creating a ‘safe space’ that, according to common perception, is embodied by academic traditions. War, as a seminal part of human history, finds an ‘authentic’ narration in the novel because the genre has the capacity to accommodate both the cultural and militarised aspects of war. Studying the text as a ‘trans-historical’ verbal object, thus, is significantly influenced by the discussions propagated by Foucault, with the poststructuralist practice carving “full correlative connections between literature and history” (Weimann 263; McGann, 1988).

Fletcher’s transition from an academic observer to an Intelligence agent typifies the fluidity of identity within rhizomatic structures wherein roles, spaces and ideologies are not fixed but constantly shifting. In Deleuzian terms, such a transformation signals the movement from one assemblage to another—where the university, the intelligence agency and the war zone function as overlapping yet discrete territories of power. Deleuze and Guattari rightly observe that there is no cultural ideation or representation, only “operations of reterritorialization that stabilize the aggregate at a given moment” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 88). Fletcher’s complicity, therefore, is not merely individual but symptomatic of larger cartographies of knowledge that operate through connections between statecraft, academia and narrative production.

The academic space that the protagonist occupies is not immune to militarised influence; it instead functions as a

deterritorialised zone where fiction and policy converge. This aligns with the notion that an “assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 23), demonstrating how even ‘safe’ intellectual spaces are embedded within the affective and operational logics of war. The novel’s portrayal of Fletcher’s academic retreat thus transforms into an instance of ‘reterritorialization’—an epistemic anchoring that, paradoxically, continues to be shaped by the very conflict it seeks to study. As such, the retreat does not signify withdrawal, but rather a reconfiguration of certain epistemologies within academic discourse.

The protagonist’s scholarly practice, far from existing in isolation, becomes complicit in the very structures it attempts to critique. This complicity exposes the porous boundaries between knowledge production and geopolitical power, underscoring how institutional frameworks—such as schools, universities and other educational architectures—are shaped by broader authoritative imaginaries. Moreover, it underwrites the history-literature interface that this paper illuminates, in which history becomes textual and literary texts become historical. The resulting entanglement problematises disciplinary distinctions—including broader issues of nationalism and patriotism—inviting a reconsideration of how narratives of conflict are both constructed and consumed.

The convergence of history and literature in Birdwatching also resonates with the foundational assertion that historical narratives are inherently constructed and shaped by the same tropological and emplotment mechanisms that govern fiction. It highlights that “[n]arrative, or the syntagmatic dispersion of events across a temporal series presented as a prose discourse . . . would represent the ‘inward turn’ that discourse takes when it tries to show the reader the true form of things existing behind a merely apparent formlessness” (White, “Historical Text” 96; emphasis original). Historiography is not a transparent reflection of the past, but rather a narrative act that organises events into coherent, often ideologically charged, storylines. In this sense, Alter’s novel does not merely represent historical events like the

Indo-China War or the Cuban Missile Crisis—it enacts the process of history-writing through narrative entanglements.

The novel's protagonist, Guy Fletcher, becomes an emblematic figure and a postmodern subject—caught within assemblages of scholarship, espionage and affect. His progression from an academic researcher to a CIA agent reveals the entanglement of intellectual spaces with geopolitical machineries where knowledge production is not isolated from, but deeply embedded in, the ideological structures of war. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the assemblage foregrounds this argument, highlighting how academic, political and personal spaces are never discrete. Fletcher's eventual return to the academic realm does not signify a resolution but a 'reterritorialization' where his scholarly detachment becomes a mode of engaging with—and perhaps rationalising—his complicity. The novel thus underpins the obfuscation of neutrality in fiction and history alike, as both are shaped by forces of political power, social perception and cultural positionality. It simultaneously emphasises the varied strands of 'fiction' that are always contained within historical discourses.

Assembling the 'Ideas' of Reality: A Conclusion

This paper not only explores *Birdwatching* as a tract that portrays the past but also as a rendition that represents India's military history. By examining the porous boundaries between myth, memory, history and fiction, the novel situates narrative shibboleths within the theoretical frameworks of Deleuze and Guattari's scholarship and the broader poststructuralist discourse on historiography. The novel's portrayal of the 1962 Indo-China War illustrates how literary fiction can intervene in historical memory by constructing affectively resonant modes of accessing 'mythical' and 'real' pasts. By doing so, Stephen Alter challenges the sanctity of the archive and reclaims the 'imaginative' space as a legitimate site of knowledge production. Rather than framing the novel as recovering an alternative or marginal history, the paper reads it as an event—a fructification on the surface of historical possibility—through

which multiple strands of the past become visible. By tracing what the historical record documents and what it necessarily filters out, the analysis underscores how these ‘lines of flight’ are taken up and fictionalised within the novel, in turn revealing how subjective fiction adds texture and information to lived reality. Thus, history is approached not as a repository of objective facts but as an assemblage in which the ‘factual’ and the ‘fictional’ continually shape one another.

Angsar Nünning highlights that such narratological categories are “particularly helpful in the attempt to come to terms with the epistemological, historiographic, and ethical implications” of historical novels representing the phenomenon of warfare (359). Through its treatment of spatial and temporal multiplicities—from the Eastern and the Western theatres of war to the high-altitude topography of the Himalayas—Alter’s text mobilises a ‘rhizomatic’ structure of storytelling that resists linear, state-sanctioned narratives of conflict. The novel, while representing a war that ‘wasn’t’ (Verma 2016), underscores ‘contemporaneity’ and ‘history’ side by side on a uniform plane of reference (Anjaria 20). It simultaneously traces the historical specificities of the 1960s through lived ‘historical thought,’ thereby highlighting the cultural sagas that are encased within India’s national history (Collingwood *The Idea of History* 244). This study further argues that the most significant aspect in the conception of language—whether historical or literary—is the connection between its parts, rather than the parts themselves. It simultaneously contends that these connections emerge from the interactions between history and literature in the public-cultural sphere, that is, from a wider socio-historical context. Ultimately, *Birdwatching* demonstrates that the past can neither be fully archived nor completely imagined; it oscillates between documents, memories, silences and stories.

India’s military history, therefore, is not only represented but revived, reimaged and re-narrativised through Alter’s text. It realigns history with the experiential terrain. The novel neither asserts fiction as superior to history nor collapses one into the other; it instead presents a dynamic interaction between the two.

This interplay underscores how histories constantly remain in a state of flux. It simultaneously undergirds the ways in which fiction always carries some part of history within itself. In reading the text through a Deleuzo-Guattarian lens, this paper thus foregrounds how ‘multiplicity,’ ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘assemblage’ function as critical tools for unravelling not just the representation of the 1962 war, but the mechanisms through which knowledge about the past is produced, circulated and critically contested in contemporary public-cultural discourses.

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Of the ‘Disposable’: (De)colonialising Climate Coloniality in Climate Bildungsroman Fiction

Faruk Hasan* and Oindri Roy†

Abstract

This article undertakes a comparative study of two climate Bildungsromans: the Indian author Prayaag Akbar’s *Leila* (2017) and the Australian writer James Bradley’s *Clade* (2017). The paper explores the multiple layers of climate injustices through Bildungsroman, analysing how the colonial power structure perpetuates climate coloniality. The Bildungsroman narrative in the novels offers an opportunity to examine how climate coloniality in developed nations of the Global North differs from that in developing countries of the Global South. An attempt will be made to discuss that the nation-state as a political institution not only fails to address climate change properly but also reinforces its disproportionate effects on the marginalised populations. A comparative analysis of Bradley’s depiction of the South Asian climate immigrants in Australia and Akbar’s portrayal of the marginalised Slummers provides a critical understanding of how a climate border—established between developed nations of the Global North and developing nations of the Global South, on the one hand, and between the rich and the poor within developing countries, on the other—renders the disadvantaged people disposable. Finally, the paper will argue that developing a decolonial, anti-capitalist scholarship of climate change involves examining multiple social categories, such as race, class, and gender, that intersect to generate a form of climate coloniality.

Keywords: Climate Bildungsroman, Climate Crisis, Climate Fiction, Disposable People, Global North/South Binary, Slow Violence

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Introduction:

The comparative study of James Bradley's *Clade* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*, both published in 2017, offers a scope to explore the relevance of the Bildungsroman narrative in revealing how climate injustice is interlinked with other political and socio-economic factors. Bradley's *Clade* is a climate story set in Antarctica, Australia, and England and Akbar's *Leila* centres on a fictional Indian city that remains nameless throughout the text. Bradley's depiction of two relationships—one between Adam Leith, a climatologist and Ellie, an artist, and the other between Ellie and Amir, a Bangladeshi climate immigrant in Australia—lends readers insights into the future of climate change and its inequitable impacts on the marginalised people of the low-lying developing countries of the Global South. In *Leila*, the fictional city is a microcosm of India as a postcolonial nation-state. Akbar's depiction of an interfaith love story of Shalini and Rizwan narrativises the evolution of India in the post-independence era. These texts have been traditionally interpreted as climate dystopia, whereas the current study focuses solely on Bildungsroman aspects to pursue a new direction of inquiry that relates to the realities of the climate crisis, especially the Global North/South divide.

Through textual analysis of *Clade* and *Leila*, it shall be possible to note that both of these novels represent the Global North/South divide. The categorisation of the Global North and Global South is determined by not only geographical differences but also by the “political and socio-economic differences between the richer, more developed regions, and the poorer, less developed regions of the world” (Gruenbaum 23). According to Annette Trefzer et al., the geopolitical paradigms of the Global North and the Global South are “mutually reinforcing and inextricably linked, and can exist within the same geographic space” (4). In this study, the Global South and the Global North are conceived as a framework that focuses on caste, class,

gender, and race-based injustices prevalent in both developed and developing nations worldwide. Although the Bildungsroman is a Western literary phenomenon, the article conceives the multicultural variations of the genre in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The article, divided into four sections, begins with the history of the Bildungsroman as a genre and then relates it to the climate crisis, drawing from the novels portrayal of the climate crisis as human failure and then as failure of the nation(s), which becomes instrumental in redrawing the Global North/South binary. This entails an inquiry into the decolonising potential in the texts, towards redefining the climate crisis beyond the oppressive discourses of national development and national security, which generates a form of resistance to climate injustice.

Bildungsroman: The History of the Genre and Its Ecological Configurations

As this study investigates the role of the Bildungsroman narrative in the climate crisis, a brief history of the genre is necessary. This shall help us understand how the Bildungsroman functions as a literary device for representing various social realities, including climate change in fiction. The term “Bildungsroman” was coined by the scholar of rhetoric Karl Morgenstern in an 1819 lecture to denote “romans” or novels focused on the “bildung,” or the “spiritual and intellectual maturation” of the protagonist (Boes 1). Although the term gained formal currency in literary criticism in the nineteenth century, it originated in the eighteenth century’s literary works, such as Wieland’s Agathon (1767) and Blanckenburg’s Versuch über den Roman, or “Essay on the Novel,” published in 1774 (Swales 13). The growth of the genre in English literature surged in the nineteenth century with Thackeray, Brontë, and Dickens and continued to flourish in the twentieth century in Joyce’s modernist experimental fiction.

Gradually, a dissociation of the genre from the specifically Eurocentric ideals was actualised; the social-political-moral concerns of the world as a cultural space gained relevance, leading to the inclusion of post-colonial and post-modern tendencies in the narrative theme, mode and structure. By drawing attention to the relationship between aesthetics and ideology, and between rhetoric and reality, the genre emerged as a significant site for articulating the concerns and perspectives of historically marginalised identities in the works of Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Notably, in postcolonial literature, rethinking the colonial past is often characterised by an intensive emphasis on the coloniser's violence against both the colonised peoples and places. The postcolonial writers' literary endeavour to reimagine the colonial history of environmental exploitation leads to the formulation of what Gayathri Goel has called "environmental Bildungsroman" (42). Goel argues that the environmental Bildungsroman creates an imaginary landscape in which the development of the protagonist and the "natural world he inhabits are co-constituted" (43). This, evidently, can be construed as the praxis of decontextualising the Bildungsroman, widening the genre's scope.

Remarkably, since the 1970s, the world has undergone numerous extreme climate events, such as the 1970 Bhola Cyclone in Bangladesh, the long-term droughts in Western Europe in 1975-76, the 1995 heatwaves in India and the US and so on. These climate catastrophes garnered significant global literary attention. Although several writers adopted the Bildungsroman as a narrative technique to address the realities of the climate crisis in fiction even before the new millennium, critical analysis of the Bildungsroman genre in climate fiction has emerged only after 2020. Indeed, in her 2025 essay on Jenni Fagan's *The Sunlight Pilgrim*, Nandita Mahajan coined the term "Climate Bildungsroman", which she defines as "a form of storytelling that narrativises the process of moving beyond the

shock and mourning that follows large-scale death or planetary devastation; of transforming these affective states into meaningful action; and, ultimately, of adapting to a changed world” (53). Mahajan argues that the climate Bildungsroman creates a narrative space for grief, enhancing human capacity to adapt to the climate crisis.

In her article, “From Elegy to Climate Bildungsroman: Jenni Fagan’s *The Sunlight Pilgrims*”, Mahajan argues that the climate Bildungsroman depicts not only ecological grief but also enhances human capability to adapt to the climate crisis (52). Again, in “Coming of Age in Crisis: The Bildungsroman and Resilience in Climate Fiction”, Karoline Huber reflects on the significance of the Bildungsroman narrative in portraying children’s resilience to the climate crisis. Huber focuses on how the transformation of the Bildungsroman as a genre aligns with ongoing ecological degradation. Unlike the traditional Bildungsroman, the climate Bildungsroman, she argues, depicts children’s resilience not through reconciliation with socio-cultural systems but through the restructuring of the conventional nature-culture binary (174-79).

While both Mahajan and Huber primarily highlight the Bildungsroman’s propensity to depict climate adaptation strategies, the analysis of its representation of human failure to combat the climate crisis remains unexplored. This lacuna in the climate Bildungsroman discourse offers an opportunity for the present research to examine the connection between the Bildungsroman narrative and the representation of the human inability to respond effectively to the climate crisis, in both the Global North and the Global South.

Bildungsroman and the Slowness of Climate Change

In this section, the paper highlights the significance of the Bildungsroman narrative in depicting why and how humanity

fails to envisage climate change as an existential threat in both developed countries of the Global North and least developed or developing nations of the Global South. This section of the article examines the connection between the Bildungsroman and climate change as “slow violence.” The most common feature that characterises a Bildungsroman narrative is that it “follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity” (Baldick 27). However, in *Ecocriticism and the Idea of Culture: Biology and the Bildungsroman* (2014), Helena Feder’s definition of the genre resonates with the contemporary environmental crisis. The Bildungsroman concentrates not only on the protagonist’s transition from childhood to adulthood but also on humanity’s gradual separation from nature.

In *Clade*, the notion of climate change as slow violence—“a violence of delayed destruction”—is poignantly represented through Bradley’s Bildungsroman narrative structure (Nixon 2). The novel centres on a relationship between Ellie, an artist, and Adam, a climate scientist, and their ultimate separation. Although the story opens in Ellie’s adulthood, the flashback narrative technique offers a glimpse into the ecological abundance of Bondi Beach during her late childhood. After Ellie’s mother dies, her father, Tom, marries a woman named Maddie. After their marriage, Tom and Maddie settled in Bondi, which seemed to be a biodiversity hotspot. As the narrator says,

When she [Maddie] and Tom bought the house, it was impossible to sleep past sunrise, especially in summer, daybreak bringing kookaburras and cuckoos and swooping flocks of cockatoos, their crazed laughter and screeching clamour echoing through the trees like a memory of the primordial forest. The diversity and profligacy of the birdlife was a big part of what Tom loved about being here. (Bradley 54)

Later, when Ellie visits the place on her father's death, she witnesses a different view of Bondi's natural landscape. The majority of the birds have now disappeared from this coastal region. However, Maddie is "not sure when they [birds] began to disappear" (Bradley 55). The disappearance of birds in Bondi without Maddie realising it elucidates ecological transformation as "slow violence that occurs gradually and out of sight" (Nixon 2). Humanity fails to recognise the existential challenge it poses for the future. Maddie's indifference to the disappearance of the birds suggests that "at some level people do not understand the scale of transformation that is overtaking them" (Bradley 102). Moreover, the absence of political action against "huge die-offs" of birds illustrates how the slow effects of climate change that trigger ecological transformations remain invisible to global political discourse.

Similarly, in *Leila*, Akbar employs a Bildungsroman structure to trace the gradual ecological alteration brought about by human dominance over non-human nature. In the novel, he portrays a female protagonist, Shalini, whose childhood memories showcase the verdurous urban ecosystem of a fictional postcolonial Indian city. She says,

The treetops are different, lustrous green, gently swaying and leaning into one another. Even Ma is surprised by how many trees there are. I press my nose to the chilled glass. A toy city, overgrown with broccoli. Through the leaves, [anyone can] see houses, white or yellow, with small rooms on their roofs. It is the sight of the trees that stays with me. A trembling canopy over the city. (Akbar 30)

This articulates the synchronisation of the city's urban development and ecological exuberance during Shalini's childhood.

Notably, the Bildungsroman is more than “the story of the origin and development of the individual” (Feder 18). Instead, it elucidates the gradual transformation of a particular society or nation. In Akbar’s *Leila*, the fictional urban cityscape serves as a microcosm of postcolonial India, characterised by sociopolitical turmoil and rapid industrial expansion. The integration of Bildungsroman elements into the narrative structure of Akbar’s climate fiction shows how a nation perpetuates the exploitation of the natural environment through the rhetoric of economic growth, exacerbating the climate crisis that disrupts social harmony and disproportionately impacts marginalised populations. As the climate crisis continues to escalate, the Council, a totalitarian political regime, takes over the city. The Council divides the city into several sectors, each cordoned off from the others by sector walls. The Council’s construction of the walls causes irreparable ecological damage in the city. Shalini recounts that “[s]ome forty years after Purity One [first sector wall] was erected, there are no trees. The stunning canopy is gone” (Akbar 31). The Bildungsroman genre as a novel of formation shapes Shalini’s idea that the colonial power dynamics inherent in the Council’s ideology of constructing sector walls accelerate human “separation from and opposition to nature” (Feder 18). Shalini’s transition from childhood to maturity parallels the city’s ecological transformation. Hence, it is possible to contend that the Bildungsroman is a literary tool that, by focusing on the protagonist’s personal growth, represents the social, political, and ecological changes of a postcolonial cityscape.

In *Leila*, Akbar revisits the colonial past to examine how postcolonial nations follow the colonial practice of indiscriminate, unplanned urbanisation, which disrupts people’s harmonious coexistence with the natural environment. The narrator states, “a hundred years ago, the city’s first wealth settled on Lakshmi Hill. Rice merchants, factory owners, or, like my great-grandfather, builders for the British, raising the new

city” (Akbar 31). The hill states in India witnessed considerable urban development under British colonial rule, benefiting the colonial rulers and the Indian elite class (Sharma and Pathak 3). The colonial enterprise of urbanisation in India had adversely impacted the country’s ecological equilibrium. Akbar’s representation of the Council’s dominance over the natural landscape historicises India’s ecological degradation under colonial rule. It also offers a critique of the colonial legacy of environmental exploitation in postcolonial India.

Notably, Sarah Graham argues that the postcolonial writers employ the Bildungsroman to “respond to the trauma of colonialism and neo-colonialism” (7). It is to be noted that the postcolonial subjects’ traumatic experiences result not only from revisiting the physical violence inflicted on them by the colonial masters, but also from remembering their ecological loss. Like Akbar, Bradley rethinks the ecological repercussions of European colonialism through an intergenerational Bildungsroman that speculates on how the political and personal approaches of the present generation to natural resources shape the climate for future generations.

However, in *Clade*, it is not the former colonies but England, a former colonial power, that undergoes a massive ecological transformation as a consequence of its dominance over nature. On his way to Norfolk, Adam notices that what was once a land of ecological diversity has been degraded into a place of ecological desolation. The narrator says,

. . .these fields were once wetlands, a vast interconnected maze of low pools and streams and marshes stretching from Cambridge to the sea. Then, two hundred years ago, humans drained the land, constructing embankments and pumping the water out to sea to create space for farms and roads and forests. With the water gone, the land changed. Fishing and

fowling gave way to farming, farms to factories. Even the birds that congregated here began to disappear, some dying, others finding new breeding grounds, altering their migratory routes. And in their place the land itself took on new shapes. (Bradley 101)

Bradley's depiction of England's ecological transformation from a vibrant landscape to an industrial wasteland serves as a reversal of colonial exploitation in the former colonies. It also implies that the environmental exploitation by the former colonial powers has not ended but continues in the postcolonial era. In fact, the developed nations' imperial ideology of modern development dominates the natural world and perpetuates climate change as a form of slow violence. Bradley explores the interplay of climate change as a slow violence and the human inability to take effective action against it through the metaphor of "boiling the frog" (102). If a frog is placed in a pan of boiling water, it instantly leaps out of the pot. However, if the water is gradually warmed from cold to hot, the frog fails to recognise the threat and eventually dies.

Nonetheless, it is not the slow impacts of climate change that make people fail "to galvanise effective action" (Bradley 102). Rather, it is their inability to link the climate crisis to the lived experiences of day-to-day life. In both novels, children are disproportionately affected by climate change. For example, in *Leila*, the eponymous character, Leila, Shalini's daughter, "began to get dizzy spells. She seemed tired all the time, pale. Her doctor said it was sun exhaustion" (Akbar 65). The doctor advised her parents to "make sure she got lots of water" (65). Similarly, in *Clade*, Noah—Summer's son or Adam's grandson—suffers from anxiety disorder. He is always "on the spectrum" and obsessed with the reports of extreme climate events, such as floods and storms (Bradley 111). In both novels, the lived experiences of the mental and physical impacts of climate change do not find any significant voice in international

politics. Humanity's inability to link existential crises to climate change demystifies how this planetary crisis is understood as slow violence.

Bildungsroman, Nation, and Disposability: Investigating “Climate Border” through Climate Coloniality

In this section of the paper, the focus shifts to examining the nuances of climate coloniality in the Global North and the Global South. Farhana Sultana delineates climate coloniality as a “means demonstrating how legacies of imperial violence insidiously live on, not only in exacerbating environmental degradations, but in increased climate-induced disasters experienced by variously marginalised populations globally, who are disproportionately made vulnerable and disposable in the process” (“Urgency” 3). Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* problematises the concept of climate coloniality by linking it to the discourse of national development and the ideology of purity. In the novel, the Council's rationale for dividing the city into different sectors is to protect it from the impurity of inter-caste and interreligious social relations, as depicted through an interfaith marriage between Shalini, a Hindu woman and Rizwan, a Muslim man.

In *Leila*, the Bildungsroman narrative device helps to explore the interconnection of the violence of societal division and climate coloniality. To resist the violence of religious dogmatism and patriarchal exploitation, Shalini, along with her husband, moves to the East End, the only sector in the city that is not “bothered with the Council's indices of purity” (Akbar 64). Shalini's movement from the sector of her in-laws to the East End uncovers the hidden truth of the Council's development ideology. While living in the East End, Shalini notices one day that the Repeaters, a band of armed young men who work for the Council, have intruded into this sector. They ransack the house of an anonymous climate activist couple who

oppose the Council's capitalist ideology of development. The Repeaters call the activists "traitors" because they claim that the activists' climate campaign impedes "the work that will make this city rich" (Akbar 79). This illustrates that postcolonial nations exercise the rhetoric of national development to justify environmental exploitation, portraying the climate activists as anti-nationalists.

Notably, the postcolonial countries' discourse on national growth caters only to the capitalist greed of political elites and industrialists. In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin contend that development ideology in the postcolonial nations is "a disguised form of neocolonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed to serve the economic and political interests of the [privileged]" (29). The unequal economic growth within postcolonial nations creates an internal neocolonial system, in which a "climate border" is established between the powerful and the powerless, and between the privileged and the marginalised. The climate border is a hegemonic sociopolitical system wilfully created by those in power to deprive the people, who are least responsible for anthropogenic climate change, of their fundamental needs during climate disasters. In *Leila*, while ordinary people lack access to sufficient water, corporate capitalists flourish in their "factories that took the groundwater almost to zero" (Akbar 67). This demonstrates that the Council's discourse of building a financially strong nation works as a "financial apparatus" that "merely increased the gap between rich and poor" (Huggan and Tiffin 31). Hence, Shalini's move to the East End is construed as a spatial-temporal dimension of the *Bildungsroman*. It familiarises her with the Council's climate coloniality that both institutionalises dominance over the natural environment and perpetuates a climate border that renders the marginalised populations disposable.

Similarly, in *Clade*, the spatial-temporal dimension of the Bildungsroman is crucial for comprehending the interplay between the political ideology of neocolonial domination and ecological transformation. In the novel, Bradley's Australian protagonist, Adam, spends a summer in England during his student years. At that time, England was a country where "the flat fields and rows of hedges and houses always seemed like a reminder of another age, unaltered by the passage of time" (Bradley 99). However, on his second visit to the same country, almost two decades later, Adam observes that the coloniality of nature has brought about a massive ecological transformation of the English landscape. As the narrator says,

The most visible of the various organisms developed in the last decade or so to consume and store carbon dioxide, [are what] came to be known as triffids, a name that captures the unsettlingly alien blurring of plant and flesh. (Bradley 99-100)

This vivid description of the triffids manifests that the dominant ideology embedded in contemporary environmental activities of developed nations in the twenty-first century repeats the violence of colonial exploitation of natural resources in former colonies. Bradley's representation of "genetically engineered trees" articulates how the developed nations of the Global North, such as England, establish climate coloniality in the name of decarbonisation. In *Ecocide: Kill the Corporation before It Kills Us* (2020), David Whyte succinctly captures the neo-colonial ideology inherent in the environmental politics of Western nations. Whyte argues that "in colonial history, civilisation is the precept on which colonial violence was so often based. In the colonial present, environmental sustainability is the precept on which environmental violence is so often based" (68). The depiction of the triffids in *Clade* illustrates that the Western nations' promise of economic growth and environmental sustainability emerges as a neocolonial strategy. The claims of

creating an economy without harming the ecology act as “a microcosm of the model of European colonial development” (68). Thus, Bradley’s description of the triffids is a critique of climate coloniality embedded in the sustainable strategies of the developed nations.

Notably, climate coloniality is not confined to the exploitation of the environment by human societies. Rather, it entails a critique of the intricate dichotomy of the developed nations’ contribution to climate change and their inadequate climate financing for the least developed nations, which are disproportionately affected by climate change. Farhana Sultana reflects on this dichotomy by identifying “racial capitalism” and “uneven consumption” as two significant factors of climate coloniality (“Urgency” 3).

In *Clade*, James Bradley’s portrayal of the protagonist, Adam, elucidates the climate coloniality of developed nations. Despite his awareness that “the planet was on a collision course with disaster,” Adam, an Australian climate scientist, believes that the “technological change and economic restructuring” will not save Earth from meeting an apocalyptic climate catastrophe (Bradley 18). His sceptical view that economic and technological changes are unable to deliver an effective climate solution reveals developed nations’ reluctance to provide climate financing to climate-vulnerable countries.

Moreover, the major economies of the Global North, especially the U.S.A., are reluctant to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to enhance climate sustainability, explaining it as a threat to their economies. For instance, George W. Bush, the former president of the United States, did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol. He said that he opposed the protocol because it “would cause serious harm to the US economy” (Jehl). In Bradley’s *Clade*, climatological perspective of Adam—who represents Australia, another developed state of the Global North—aligns

with President Bush's political ideology. Adam's perception that "to consume less" is not a way to address humanity's impact on the atmosphere resonates with the developed nations' denial of reducing greenhouse gas emissions as a solution to global warming (Bradley 18). Thus, this climate change denialist approach of the developed nations establishes a new form of coloniality—climate coloniality—exacerbates the precarity of the peoples of the Global South.

Noticeably, the impacts of climate change in the Global South are not only environmental but also economic and geopolitical. In *Clade*, the author sketches how the changes in the patterns of the South Asian monsoon trigger crop failures, famine, and food shortage, ultimately leading to economic collapse and "widespread unemployment" (Bradley 30). The intersectional crises of climate change and economic collapse disrupt the social and political order, causing riots in central Indian metropolitan cities such as Mumbai and Calcutta (30). The depiction of the connection between climate change and its devastating impacts on the subcontinent's sociopolitical and economic systems articulates the exigencies of climate financing for strengthening climate adaptations in postcolonial developing nations.

However, it is not only the developing and least-developed countries of the Global South but also the developed states of the Global North that experience the devastating impacts of climate change. Like the South Asian countries of India and Bangladesh, Australia has also experienced food crises and 'crop failures' due to climate change (Bradley 55). This global aspect of the detrimental impacts of climate change destabilises the geopolitical North/South boundaries.

Still, the disproportionate burden of the crisis falls "on the formerly colonised and brutalised racialised communities in the developing world" (Sultana, "Unbearable" 2). In *Clade*, the

extreme climate events in the Indian subcontinent, such as drought, heavy rainfall and severe flooding, led to over a million deaths and “left another hundred million people homeless” (Bradley 30). Although countries in both the Global North and Global South are adversely affected by climate change, differences persist between these geopolitically divided regions. Unlike in the South Asian developing nation-states, socio-political order and economic stability in developed nations are not disrupted by the climate crisis. While the citizens in the developed nations do not have to be displaced to survive the climate cataclysm, marginalised people in the developing nations are left with no option but to migrate to a safe place.

In Clade, migration is a complex concept that reveals the multilayered injustices of climate coloniality pitted against postcolonial developing nations. In the novel, the vulnerable people of the Global South adopt migration as the only viable means of survival. However, it renders them disposable in Australia, their destination country. The notion of “disposable people” refers to communities whose (eco)precarious conditions remain invisible to mainstream global climate politics, and who are treated as expendable (Nixon 4, 278). In Bradley’s Clade, the disposability of climate refugees from developing nations is articulated through a Bildungsroman narrative technique that builds a relationship between Amir and Ellie, who are from Bangladesh and Australia, respectively. Through her conversation with Amir, Ellie learns that the combined effects of political turbulence and climate disasters have prompted Amir and other South Asian climate refugees, such as Mishkat and his family, to migrate to Australia.

However, in Australia, South Asian immigrants encounter a climate border that denies them access to climate safety. Instead of formulating protection policies for climate immigrants, the Australian government, in the name of securing national safety, employs the oppressive practices that lead to the “random

harassment . . . the detention and forced expulsion of anyone the government deems undesirable” (Bradley 167). The denial of climate safety for Amir and other climate-induced immigrants is associated with the “policy aspects of climate coloniality” (Sultana, “Unbearable” 2). Farhana Sultana argues that the contemporary climate crisis reveals colonial practices that were prevalent not only in the past but also influence and control institutions, laws, and policies in the current geopolitical context (2). The developed nations’ political strategies in using the idea of nationalism to deny immigrants access to safety establish a form of double coloniality. The marginalised people in developing countries are not only disproportionately affected by climate change but are also made disposable when they migrate to developed nations, where they confront coloniality in the form of existential denialism. In the novel, when Nisha—the daughter of Amir’s friend, Mishkat—becomes sick, her parents do not dare to take her to the hospital because they are “afraid of being arrested” (Bradley 172). Hence, the Global North’s climate coloniality not only continues the legacy of colonial violence in accelerating the climate crisis but also in deepening the disposability of the disempowered communities of the Global South.

Nonetheless, the issue of climate coloniality goes beyond the Global North/South binary. The interconnectedness of climate coloniality and the disposability of marginalised people is also prevalent within the boundaries of developing nations of the Global South. In Akbar’s *Leila*, to survive the adverse climate, the Council initiates the Skydome project, a climate-controlled dome engineered to purify the air and maintain a moderate temperature. This becomes a prototype for the infrastructure of the other sectors also as “all the high sectors have begun to look like this” (Akbar 127). People living outside the high sectors are denied access to the climate-dome and are unjustly exposed to health hazards accelerated by the combined effects of the harmful substances released from the Skydome and

air particulates coming from “the factories [and] cars” (123). This further aggravates the disposability of impoverished communities, consolidating the climate border between the high and low sectors.

Remarkably, the Skydome serves as a paradox of national growth. While the Skydome enhances climate adaptability for the rich, it deprives the poor of a livable environment. This exemplifies what Homi K. Bhabha explains as ‘ambivalence’ of the modern nation-state. In Leila, the city’s uneven development “inscribes both progression and regression” (Bhabha 2). Akbar’s depiction of the disparity between the high sector and the Slummers articulates that people in postcolonial third-world nations “are still colonised, this time through climate change, the development industry, and globalisation” (Sultana, “Unbearable” 2). It elucidates that the development discourse of the Global South exacerbates the precarity of the socio-politically and economically backward people. Hence, it can be argued that colonial violence has not yet ended; instead, it has altered its mode of exploitation.

Decolonising the Climate Coloniality

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon observes that the “conjoined ecological and human disposability . . . [leads to] a resurgent environmentalism of the poor” (4). The existential crisis that the South Asian immigrants in Clade and the Slummers in Leila encounter gives them an impetus to resist the violence of climate coloniality. In Clade, upon hearing that Ellie could have arranged faster treatment for Nisha if Amir had informed her of Nisha’s health condition earlier, Amir says:

Could you? How? We don’t just need access to hospitals, we need medicine, schools, jobs, not to be frightened all the time. To be able to buy food without

being terrified somebody will become suspicious because we're using cash, or report us to the police because they don't recognise us. (Bradley 174)

Similarly, in Akbar's *Leila*, the exclusion of the Slummers from access to fundamental needs like water breaks the silence against the political and ecological injustices perpetuated by the Council. The young Slummers' question of "why their families had been ignored so long" is an attempt to decolonise the Council's oppressive, discriminatory system (Akbar 67).

Both Amir's furious response to Ellie in *Clade* and the Slummers' question in *Leila* accentuate that resistance comes from "lived experiences that were/are devalued in Eurocentric modernity and climate coloniality" (Sultana, "Urgency" 3). In *Clade*, the climate immigrants' "lived experiences" of inaccessibility to the fundamental requirements are "legitimate sites of geopolitical knowledge" (12). The challenges they encounter in developed nations provide solid grounds for decolonising the climate coloniality by exposing the "racialised colonial practices" embedded in the contemporary global politics of climate change (13). In the novels, the disproportionate impacts of climate change on the impoverished communities demonstrate the urgency of integrating "more decolonial, anti-colonial, . . . anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and ecosocialist critiques and struggles into mainstream climate discourses and practices to redress ongoing oppressions and marginalisations" (6). Hence, decolonising the climate necessitates addressing this planetary crisis at the intersection of race, class, and caste.

Moreover, Ellie's relationship with Amir provides her with an opportunity for self-realisation. Her familiarity with him gives her an insight into how the marginalised communities of the Global South confront the violence of climate coloniality.

Ellie's epiphany of the violence of developed countries' climate coloniality drives her to raise an ethical question:

Where, after all, are those who have sought refuge here meant to go? The islands of the Pacific are disappearing, Bangladesh is gone, as is much of Burma and coastal India; hundreds of millions have been displaced and are in need of assistance. Yet in the face of their suffering, politicians do little more than posture and parrot slogans. (Bradley 167)

The dichotomy between the developed nations' contribution to global warming and the unequal impacts of climate change on the least developed countries motivates Ellie to interrogate the political dynamics of the West. This also evokes in her a sense of ethics, care and love for the vulnerable climate immigrants, which acts as a powerful force for decolonising the climate (Sultana, "Urgency" 9). In Bradley's *Clade*, Ellie's love and empathy for South Asian climate immigrants demonstrate that the principles of care for the vulnerable communities motivate resistance against the oppressive colonial matrix.

Moreover, decolonial scholarship on climate change requires an in-depth analysis of the man/woman binary, rooted in "ecological superiority of humans and the cultural superiority of men" (Mallory 309). In Leila, Akbar's *Bildungsroman* narrative accentuates multiple layers of violence that women experience in a patriarchal, authoritarian political system. The Council interprets the climate crisis as a punishment for the sin of disobeying the tradition of heteronormativity and the intracaste, class and religious relationship. However, it is only the women who are taken for penance to the Tower, where the Council treats them badly.

Again, in James Bradley's *Clade*, gendered violence against women is indirectly represented through climate injustice. In the

novel, all the primary female characters bear the unequal burden of human-induced climate change. In the novel, Ellie's repeated "failure to conceive" without any apparent cause offers an opportunity to analyse how climate change affects women's reproductive system (Bradley 14). The ecofeminist scholar, Mary Mellor, argues that "ecological impacts and consequences are experienced through human bodies" and one of the significant disproportionate impacts of the climate crisis that women endure is "failed pregnancies" (2). Besides Ellie's difficulty in pregnancy, Bradley's depiction of Nisha's appendicitis illustrates the inequitable impacts of climate change imposed on women by capitalist patriarchy.

The representation of disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalised people in both the novel challenges the capitalist patriarchal and racialised Eurocentric discourse that believes that "people are free to exploit nature" (Merchant 1). In both novels, the depiction of modern technological dominance over nature and its detrimental impacts on the disposable people is a clarion call for a decolonial, anti-capitalist perspective on the climate crisis. Both Bradley's and Akbar's apocalyptic visions of ecological transformation and the precarious conditions of marginalised people advocate "a new ethic of the nurture of nature and the nurture of people" (1). Hence, the decolonisation of the environment hinges on decolonising the disposable people from violence based on caste, class, race and gender.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Bildungsroman narrative technique in both Akbar's *Leila* and Bradley's *Clade* accentuates that the failure to take effective measures to address climate change stems from the human inability to relate it to their lived experience. The Bildungsroman elements in both novels emphasise that people around the world fail to develop practical frameworks to combat

climate change because they lack an understanding of the spatial-temporal dimension of the crisis. Bildungsroman also proves crucial for exploring how the fetishisation of the notion of nation perpetuates climate coloniality, which disproportionately impacts impoverished communities. The Bildungsroman narrative in *Leila* is not only the protagonist's transition from childhood to adulthood but also the transformation of a postcolonial nation from an egalitarian, secular democracy to a caste- and class-stratified autocracy. Similarly, in *Clade*, the self-proclaimed climate resilience of countries in the Global North is called into question through Bradley's depiction of children's vulnerabilities in these developed nations. The interconnections in the Bildungsroman between nationalist development and climate injustice highlight the paradoxes within nationhood. Instead of enhancing climate adaptation for the marginalised, the nation often exacerbates their disposability by excluding them from the opportunities of national development. The reading of the Bildungsroman narrative in both novels encapsulates the globality of the climate crisis, decentring the so-called Global North/South divide during climate emergencies. In reading the two texts around the bildungsroman pattern, the Global North/South binary loses its geographical fixity and becomes a geopolitical factor.

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Manufacturing the Frontier: Media Sensationalism and the Historical Imaginary of Northeast India in Siddhartha Deb's *Surface*

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Abstract

Set against the prolonged history of insurgency in Northeast India, Siddhartha Deb's *Surface* (2005) offers a sustained critique of the mainstream media's role in producing and sustaining stereotypical representations of the region. Through the character of Amrit Singh, a journalist, the novel illustrates how ambition, sensationalism, and institutional bias converge to frame the Northeast as a marginal and violence-ridden frontier. This article situates *Surface* within the historical construction of the Northeast as a "frontier" and examines how the misrepresentation of the area in national newsrooms perpetuates a cycle of distortion and cultural othering. By exposing the complicity between media markets, audience prejudice, and journalistic malpractice, Deb's novel underscores the urgent need for greater accountability and inclusivity in reporting on marginalised territories. The study contends that *Surface* functions as a literary intervention that critiques the ethical failures of mainstream journalism by pressing for more responsible engagement with Northeast India in national discourse.

Keywords: Frontier Gaze, Media ethics, Media Mis-representation, Northeast India, Sensationalism, Siddhartha Deb

Introduction

Siddhartha Deb, a writer originally from Meghalaya, has earned recognition for his nuanced exploration of Northeast India's rich sociocultural diversity and intricate political landscape. His debut novel, *The Point of Return* (2003), narrates a poignant tale

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of Hindu Bengali immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) who resettled in the Northeast. The book captures the experiences of many Bengalis facing postcolonial displacement and uncertainty in the wake of the Indian subcontinent's partition. His second novel *Surface* (2005) – the focus of this study – offers a compelling depiction of life in pockets of Northeast India affected by militancy. In recognition of his literary brilliance, Deb received the PEN Open Book award in 2012.

A substantial portion of Deb's *Surface* depicts Northeast India's socio-political landscape that is shaped by decades of insurgency. This theme shares commonality with several English-language novels from the region, including Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005), Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), Aruni Kashyap's *The House With a Thousand Stories* (2013), Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma* (2014), and Ankush Saikia's *Red River Blue Hills* (2015), among others. What distinguishes Deb's novel, however, is its critical examination of the mainstream news media's misrepresentation of the Northeast, which reduces the area's intricate socio-political dynamics to the image of a conflict-ridden periphery. This critique unfolds through the protagonist, Amrit Singh, a journalist assigned to cover the place. His effort to report the "truth" paradoxically reinforces the very stereotypes that paint the Northeast as a disturbed area. Examining this contradiction would expose the factors that restrict reporters like Amrit from moving beyond reductive and clichéd portrayals of Northeast India.

Public understanding of Northeast India remains constrained due to the national media's tendency to oversimplify the region's cultural, historical, and political complexities. Arijit Sen affirms that "the [media] coverage of the Northeast remains trapped in stereotypes," often positioning the zone as India's "wild frontier" (6). Daisy Hasan similarly observes that "ethnic

strife', as reporters chose to call the several movements for political autonomy has been over-reported" (269). This fixation on violence and insurgency is not incidental but financially driven; as Payel Chakrabarti argues that the media "[c]overage of violence [in the Northeast] appears to be motivated by profit margins, perceived populist appeal and often bends on the sensationalist representation" (7). As a result, Northeast India is widely misrepresented and misunderstood as uniformly conflict-ridden. This study seeks to interrogate such distortions in media coverage by situating them within the historical construction of the Northeast as a "frontier" and by analysing their effects through Amrit's journalistic conduct. Doing so would demonstrate how psychological pressures, market imperatives, socio-cultural biases, historical legacies, and political factors collectively shape—and restrict—the mainstream media's narratives on Northeast India.

Literature Review

Scholarly readings of Deb's *Surface* have predominantly emphasised its political nuances, while offering comparatively little analysis of its engagement with journalism and media ethics. For instance, Gora Chand Das notes that the novel links Northeast India's political volatility to chronic misgovernance aggravated due to its geographic isolation from national power centres, resulting in "a turbulent and destructive arena for sorting out disputes regarding ethnic identities" (60). Seram Guneshwori Devi situates the novel within a broader tradition of Northeast Indian Literature that "explain[s] the same genre of violence from the state of Manipur" (81). Prachurjya Borah echoes this emphasis on politics: "Siddhartha Deb in his novel *Surface* brings out the truth related to the various rebel groups working in the North-Eastern parts of the country" (311). Elsewhere, Siambiakmawi and Sivasish Biswas engage with the novel's depiction of "a land long plagued by several groups of insurgents" while also uncovering the existential philosophies it

conveys (47). Another critic goes so far as to characterise Deb's vision of Northeast India as "a dismembered world of betrayal and lies," again reinforcing the critical focus on politics and violence (Roy). Only one scholar gestures towards the novel's journalistic texture: "Chunks of *Surface* are written with a journalistic or travelogue feel, as Siddhartha Deb plays with the blurry boundary separating fiction from fact" (Paul). Although insightful, such observations seldom interrogate the structures through which Northeast India is framed, circulated, and consumed—especially by mainstream media houses and their metropolitan audiences. This paper takes up that task, examining how larger media apparatuses, particularly non-Northeastern ones, perpetuate simplified portrayals with little accountability.

Another strand of criticism draws parallels between *Surface* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), though such studies overlook the novel's engagement with media practices. Rossella Ciocca, for instance, observes that Deb's depiction of Northeast India recalls Conrad's Africa:

In many descriptions the almost mystic beauty of the land appears sullied by the dismal ramifications of polluting modernization. As a result, a very old and mysterious land, through a peculiar mix of atavistic practices and the ecological byproducts of modernity, appears shrouded in a sort of uncanny atmosphere, which from the very start summons up the African jungle depicted by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. (93)

While surveying global literary output shaped by Conrad's legacy, David Miller finds that Deb's *Surface* "echoes Conrad playfully in a number of ways" (131). Although such comparisons situate *Surface* within a global literary tradition, they tend to obscure the novel's more immediate preoccupation with the media's role in shaping perceptions of Northeast India, a concern that this research foregrounds.

Historical Construction of Northeast India as a “Frontier”

While Deb blames media practices for hindering the Northeast’s seamless integration into the national mainstream, historical circumstances and their long-term impacts appear to be the root cause. As the novel explores, the divide between Northeast India and the so-called “mainland” India stems from longstanding structural realities. Understanding these deeper past roots is key to explaining why dominant media outlets continue to propagate reductive and negative images of the region. Although the sociocultural fault line is gradually narrowing, its origins can be traced back to the pre-independence period when the Northeast was first perceived as a borderland. David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar argue that the region’s status as a frontier is not a recent phenomenon but the outcome of long historical processes. They contend that the Northeast has, across centuries, functioned as the “imperial fringe of the Mughals, the British Raj, and the Indian successor state” (143). This trajectory firmly positioned the area as both a geographical and political periphery—a perception that originated during the Mughal period and was subsequently entrenched under British colonial rule. Nityananda Kalita concurs, noting that the term “Northeast” was “formalized through the British colonial administration as a frontier region,” a label that reinforced its marginal and liminal status in both historical and contemporary discourses (1354).

At present, certain people, including journalists, continue to perceive Northeast India as an enduring “frontier”—not only of India but also of Southeast Asia, with which it shares deep social, cultural, and ethnic affinities. Subir Bhaumik astutely locates the Northeast at the “crossroads of a great ethno-cultural frontier that separates two of Asia’s greatest civilisations: the Indo-Gangetic and the Southeast Asian” (“Negotiating Access” 143). Rather than enriching the national imagination, these affinities are frequently invoked to underline the region’s

difference from the Indian mainstream. Consequently, despite their active participation in the Indian polity, Northeasterners are persistently subjected to processes of ‘othering,’ as dominant mainland perspectives recast them as exotic figures or cultural outsiders. Journalists, such as Amrit from Deb’s novel, whose worldview is shaped by such inherited misconceptions, tend to produce reportage that reflects only a superficial grasp of the place. Thus, the Northeast “continues to baffle or conjure up images of ritualistic weirdness for many in the mainland, the politics and culture wars of the world’s largest democracy – which is now a majoritarian democracy – have become part and parcel of social life in the north-eastern states” (Chophy). In this way, the Northeast remains symbolically cast as an uncivilised margin, juxtaposed against the ostensibly modern and cultured Indian heartland.

Media’s Reproduction of the Northeast as “Frontier” and Its Consequences

Deb’s *Surface* is perhaps the only Northeast Indian English novel to challenge the mainstream media’s distorted portrayal of the territory, a distortion rooted in its historical construction as a “frontier.” Contemporary cases demonstrate how this inherited bias continues to dictate media reporting on the Northeast. The widely sensationalised “Meghalaya honeymoon murder” of 2025 illustrates this pattern: before facts were verified, the media rushed to frame the incident through frontier tropes of violent tribals and the involvement of drug and arms cartels. Although the investigations ultimately identified it as a case of mariticide, the damage was already done—Northeast Indians were subjected to online trolling, racist abuse, and dehumanising commentary. This episode reveals how flawed media narratives operate less as neutral reporting and more as mechanisms of harm, sustaining the perception of the Northeast as a dangerous and alien borderland.

The broader implications are clear. The media's power to shape public opinion and influence individual thinking is well established, with numerous real-world instances substantiating this claim. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, acknowledge the mass media's potency in "inculcat[ing] individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society" (1). Crucially, they show how the media often operates as a "propaganda system" (1) capable of manipulating public consciousness. In the Northeast Indian context, the mainstream media's engagement with the territory echoes the historical frontier imagination and which has moulded the public perceptions of the area, including bureaucrats tasked with administering the region. Sanjib Baruah highlights that official government discourse often echoes media-driven stereotypes when speaking about the Northeast: "Phrases like 'ethnic insurgencies', 'cross-border terrorism', and 'proxy wars' are the staple of Indian official talk about the Northeast" (2). Such rhetoric frames the region as perpetually unstable and marginal. Conversely, Swikrita Dowerah and Debarshi Prasad Nath observe that biased media narratives foster "feelings of difference and distance" among many Northeast Indians in relation to the Indian mainstream (122). This psychological divide, long sedimented by frontier thinking, renders mainland Indians less attentive to the numerous inconsistencies in Amrit's reportage on the Northeast.

The persistence of the "frontier gaze" has fostered a parochial attitude towards Northeast Indians, a bias starkly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across several parts of India, Northeasters faced stigma and discrimination, as their Mongoloid physiognomy led some to ignorantly associate them with the so-called "Chinese" coronavirus. Thongkhohal Haokip attributes this racialised prejudice to the exclusion of the oriental-looking Northeast Indians from the dominant

conception of the “Indian face.” As he observes, “[T]he Northeast Indians, who are not physically associated with the place of origin of the virus [in Wuhan, China], but on the mere ground of racial affinity with those associated with the origin of the virus were negatively affiliated with the disease” (357). Ironically, certain journalists’ efforts to foster awareness about the Northeast are undermined by some of their peers. As Duncan McDuie-Ra argues, the media’s fixation on insurgency and political violence reinforces the constructed image of Northeasterners as “suspect citizens,” a narrative that not only marginalises but also corrodes national unity (94). The significance of *Surface* lies in its exposure of the mainstream media’s reproduction of the historical frontier imagination that continues to shape perceptions of Northeast India.

Discussion on Deb’s Surface

Through a third-person omniscient narration, the plot delves into Amrit’s deteriorating mental state and uses it as a lens to illuminate the historical notions that enable and legitimise his prejudiced portrayal of Northeast India. Amrit’s descent into depression stems from his professional stagnation, which has steadily eroded his sense of self-worth and has left him deeply insecure. As frustration mounts and his psychological stability falters, Amrit seeks to restore his damaged ego by tying his self-respect to career advancement. He becomes convinced that reporting on Northeast India will revive his fading reputation and thus pursues this subject with renewed determination. With his self-esteem now contingent upon professional success, Amrit becomes intolerant of obstacles that might slow his progress. This impatience leads him to fabricate stories. The ease with which these distortions are accepted as truth exposes the complicity of a media environment that readily accepts misinformation.

As part of his assignment, Amrit investigates the source of a photograph allegedly depicting armed militants parading a woman named Leela as punishment for her supposed involvement in pornography. Despite extensive efforts, he finds no eyewitness testimony to the incident, yet he uncritically accepts the photograph as authentic. This prompt endorsement betrays Amrit's desperation for professional validation: "Once I stopped believing in the story, I stopped believing in the possibility of a different life. The story would make me free" (39). Aware that his professional resurgence hinges upon the completion of the investigation, he reflects: "It was the first step in a journey towards my independence, finding out if I could emerge from the stupor of the past seven years to start a new life" (40). Although his initial lapse in journalistic integrity seems to stem from the intense pressure to reclaim his self-respect, the narrative gradually uncovers a troubling pattern of fabricated news reporting. The absence of institutional accountability or critical scrutiny in response to Amrit's fabrications highlights a conducive sociocultural environment for such ethically dubious journalistic practices in the context of the Northeast.

Amrit exploits a readership largely unequipped to recognise the subtleties of media manipulation. The credibility of his fabrications relies heavily on their alignment with historically entrenched misconceptions about Northeast India. He concocts a fictional backstory for the victim, Leela, which seamlessly fits into the dominant and flawed conception of the Northeast as a peripheral site of perpetual bloodshed, thereby pandering to those predisposed readers who already accept such distortions as fact. This conjecture is validated through Daisy Hasan's observation in which she vouches for the commercial appeal of exaggerating the Northeast's sporadic insurgencies: "In a region that remains marginal and rarely noteworthy in the national consciousness, terror is used as a way to 'sell' a story to commercial television channels which would not ordinarily be

interested in this region given its geographical and cultural remoteness from mainland India” (265). Hasan’s analysis underscores the existence of a sizable readership conditioned to consume sensationalised portrayals of Northeast India’s political volatility. Amrit deliberately caters to this demographic by prioritising shock value over accuracy. His framing of Leela’s story as a “portrait of the mystery and sorrow of India through the story of the woman in the photograph” illustrates how he reinforces dominant myths while commodifying Northeasterners’ lives, turning individual pain into a marketable spectacle (5). Ultimately, his professional success depends on affirming his audience’s biases, for only then can his elaborate fabrications gain credibility.

Amrit is only the most recent in a long line of journalists who have exploited Northeast India through fabricated reporting for personal gain. His confidence in spreading falsehoods stems from a journalistic tradition that has repeatedly sensationalised the region without facing repercussions. Particularly troubling is the mainstream media’s persistent insensitivity towards Northeastern women, a concern noted by Kh. Kabi and Ashes K. Nayak: “As it is observed, media in the Northeast lacks sensitivity in their reporting particularly towards women who are often the victims of violence and among the first to bear the brunt of armed conflicts” (324).

Leela’s life reflects the systemic vulnerability of women from the region who are subjected not only to physical violence but also to exploitative media portrayals. Instead of verifying the facts of Leela’s case, Amrit prioritises his career ambitions and thus weaves a narrative riddled with distortions. The unchecked dissemination of such lies is deeply harmful, as it normalises the continued victimisation of already marginalised individuals under the cover of journalism. This recurring pattern underscores the urgent need for media accountability. Had earlier cases of unethical reporting been met with meaningful

consequences, figures like Amrit might have been dissuaded from misrepresenting Northeast India in the press.

Decades of distorted portrayals have conditioned the public to not pay much attention to accounts that challenge stereotypical portraits of the Northeast. This persistence of prejudice is inseparable from the region's historical construction as a "frontier." The media's failings must be understood within this framework: Northeast India is positioned as a distant borderland rather than an integral part of the nation in the popular psyche, including those of the journalists. The media's long history of distortion has drawn sustained scholarly critique. As early as 2007, an online article carried condemnation of the national media's fixation "with news of violence and insurgency which emanates from the region" (Sengupta), which has tarnished the Northeast's image. Fourteen years later, Kalpana Sharma reiterated this critique, noting that despite extensive air, road, rail, and mobile connectivity, journalists continue to cite "[d]istance and inaccessibility" of the Northeast as justification for shallow reporting" ("Big Media's"). Sharma argues that "the real distance is not a physical one; it is a mental one. It is an inability to take the time to understand the multi-layered and complex history of a region that is lumped into one only because of its geographical location" ("Big Media's"). This "mental distance" is itself a product of the frontier imagination, which casts the Northeast as outside the cultural and political mainstream. Amrit capitalises on this inherited bias. Aware that his readers are predisposed to accept reductive stories about the Northeast, he fabricates and manipulates narratives that reinforce its frontier image. He deliberately suppresses evidence of Leela's innocence because it contradicts the widespread perceptions of the place as violent and alien. In this way, Amrit's actions epitomise how the media's ethical lapses are tied to the deeper historical processes that have relegated the Northeast to the margins of public consciousness. Thus, Amrit's actions are not aberrational but structurally enabled.

Amrit steps into a journalistic void created by the stark underrepresentation of Northeastern voices in national media. With few local scribes capable of providing authentic counternarratives, misrepresentations of the region often go unchallenged. Even when credible Northeastern reporters speak out, their perspectives are frequently overshadowed by the sensationalist coverage of non-local counterparts. This imbalance highlights a deeper issue rooted in the cultural politics of representation. In the introduction to *Stories of Resilience: Media Voices from India's North East*, Piyashi Dutta and Aditya Sharma express concern about the exclusion of Northeastern perspectives from national newsrooms:

Besides the pressures from state and non-state actors, diversity in the newsroom is also increasingly becoming a concern in the region as well as across the globe. This has raised questions about the composition of the newsrooms – in both print and electronic media. Do they mirror the diversity of the country in terms of caste, gender, ethnicity and creed, or are they largely dominated by people from the higher classes and castes? The lack of recognition of the diverse identities of journalists is certainly unhealthy for journalism. (13)

Without explicitly referencing it, Dutta and Sharma's critique resonates with the central tenet of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" – the structural silencing of marginalised voices. Whether or not the Northeasterners can be classified as subalterns, the problem remains the same: the absence of local journalists who can intuitively represent the region's lived realities. This void facilitates the entry of outsiders like Amrit, whose shallow understanding of the region undermines his credibility as a reporter. His disregard for journalistic ethics further exposes how the lack of local representation creates space for opportunists who prioritise ambition over accountability.

Amrit's actions mark a sharp break from journalistic integrity, as he unhesitatingly tarnishes the Northeast's reputation to salvage his fragile ego. When delays stall his professional ambition, he turns to fabricating a sequence of events that reproduces familiar stereotypes about the Northeast. Responsible journalism demands rigorous investigation and the careful cultivation of diverse and credible sources—an approach particularly vital in a region as heterogeneous as the Northeast. Subir Bhaumik, a former BBC correspondent with decades of experience in the area, stresses the importance of engaging with a wide spectrum of voices, from traditional leaders to modern activists, from community elites to grassroots members: “For a journalist reporting this region (or any other similar conflict zone of comparable diversity), it is important to have a wide range of sources in the various communities. It is important to know the community leaders, young and old, traditional and modern, interact with them and also reach out to the grassroots to get a varied perspective” (“Reporting”). Bhaumik's guidelines are essential for capturing the region's layered perspectives and resisting reductive portrayals. Amrit disregards these principles and instead pieces together a story of fabrications, exaggerations, and omissions: “There would be enough for me to create a coherent narrative, and the anticipation of an end to this long journey led me to think of what lay beyond” (168). He even admits to tailoring his portrayal of Leela to suit the preconceived biases of his target audience: “What I had to say about Leela to a distant foreign audience had been entered into my machine and processed as neat rows of typed words, whited out in places where I thought they verged too close to what I really felt about her” (214). These calculated distortions expose Amrit's dependence on a media ecosystem that incentivises sensationalism and thrives on simplified representations of the Northeast.

Amrit displays no guilt in exploiting the prevailing stereotypes about Northeast India. He appears indifferent while

reinforcing inaccurate clichés as a means to restore his fractured self-esteem, fully aware that few outside this “frontier” region care about its realities: “What satisfaction was there in knowing the woman was not really a porn film actress, or that she had suffered surface wounds rather than crippled? And what did it mean that nothing of this existed for those who lived beyond this circle of fear, as no doubt it would cease to exist for me upon my return to Calcutta?” (172). His concern lies not in uncovering the truth of Leela’s plight but in sustaining a story that secures his career goals. This motive explains Amrit’s reluctance to meet Leela as her real presence threatens to dismantle the fictional persona on which his story depends. Leela ceases to be a woman with a traumatic past and instead becomes a potential threat to his fragile sense of achievement: “I was afraid-afraid of new complications, afraid of losing what I’d gained, the knowledge of Leela that let me hold on to some semblance of achievement and success” (215). Amrit’s anxiety is exacerbated at the prospect of confronting the actual Leela, whose lived reality might expose the gulf between the person herself and the symbolic figure he has fabricated: “My sense of unease deepened as I considered the woman I would be talking to in Moreh, someone who had Leela’s name and personal history but was, for all practical purposes far removed from the character I had built up over the past month” (221). In seeking validation and recognition, Amrit reduces Leela’s pain to a tool for self-promotion. This act is not merely a personal failing but also reflects the profound ethical failures of sensationalist journalism in its treatment of underrepresented and historically misunderstood regions like Northeast India.

The recurrent misrepresentation of Northeast India in the national media remains a source of grievance among its people, exacerbated by their limited ability to hold journalists accountable for such distortions. Shipra Raj’s survey highlights this concern through testimonials from participants in Manipur, who voiced their near-unanimous consensus on both

misrepresentation and underrepresentation of the Northeast in the national media: “Most of the participants said that they don’t see themselves reflected in the mainstream media. Across all groups, participants expressed that they felt underrepresented as well as misrepresented in the mainstream media. When representation does occur, most feel that it is bracketed either into conflict and racial discrimination” (78). Amrit compounds this issue by generalising an isolated incident from a specific locale as indicative of entire Northeast India, thereby flattening its complex sociocultural and political diversity to fit narratives of “frontier” territory. If Northeasterners had been able to exert sustained and effective pressure on the media to follow ethical reporting standards, journalists like Amrit might have been discouraged from engaging in such biased and sensationalist practices.

Conclusion

Amrit’s determined pursuit of professional success and respectability initially appears admirable, yet the plot gradually exposes the ethical compromises that underlie his ambitions. His concern for self-respect outweighs any genuine commitment to the responsibilities of journalism. By framing Northeast India within the historical construction of a “frontier,” he reinforces reductive stereotypes instead of questioning them, tailoring his report to align with audience prejudices. In doing so, Amrit exemplifies a broader failure within sections of the media, where the pursuit of recognition eclipses the ethical imperatives of accuracy, accountability, and nuanced representation.

Amrit’s professional misconduct is not isolated but symptomatic of a wider sociocultural and professional climate that normalises and even rewards such practices. His reportage mirrors a familiar pattern in media portrayals, where Northeast India is persistently depicted through the narrow tropes of insurgency and violence. Deb’s novel incisively critiques this

reductive framing by exposing how historically entrenched stereotypes both inform and justify unscrupulous journalistic practices. Amrit's willingness to cater to audience prejudices underscores the complicity between market demands and media sensationalism, revealing how distorted representations gain both legitimacy and circulation. In foregrounding this dynamic, the novel situates Amrit's actions within the broader cultural politics of representation, where Northeast India continues to be discursively contained as a space of otherness. Ultimately, Deb's novel calls for a critical reassessment of these narratives and presses for more ethical, inclusive, and authentic modes of engaging with the region in national media discourses.

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Stories from a Quiet Corner: Human Tenderness in a Landscape of Fear in Temsüla Ao's "The Curfew Man"

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Abstract

This paper explores how tenderness is represented through emotions and family life in "The Curfew Man" from *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Rather than using political perspectives to analyse the story, this paper examines the domestic and emotional aspects of people's daily lives under the influence of curfews, insecurity and a social climate of fear. Through the characters of Satemba and Jemtila, Ao illustrates the vulnerability, moral unease, quiet concern and day-to-day resilience of individuals living in an environment dominated by military power. This paper asserts that it is a quiet companionship, self-reflection regarding ethics and continued household routines that give "The Curfew Man" its emotional strength, and not some dramatic forms of resistance. A great deal of emphasis is placed upon Jemtila's silent attentiveness, Satemba's internal conflict, and the symbolism of physical harm in the story. By focusing upon these small-scale, close-up experiences, Ao demonstrates the human consequences of violence while keeping her characters away from being defined by their ideologies. In summary, this paper interprets "The Curfew Man" as a profoundly humanistic account where tenderness exists as a fragile yet consistent form of ethical endurance in an atmosphere governed by fear.

Keywords: Domestic resilience, Human tenderness, Landscape of fear, Ordinary life, Temsüla Ao, Vulnerability

Introduction

In *These Hills Called Home: Stories from A War Zone*, Temsüla Ao's portrayal of people living through extended periods of fear

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and uncertainty is characterised by restraint and deep humanity. Rather than emphasising either political language or large-scale depictions of violence, Ao continues to focus on the individualised emotional experiences of families and persons struggling to create fragile daily routines. In addition to exploring silence, memory, family and relationship dynamics in each story of her collection, she illustrates how long-term difficult situations modify the texture of normalcy in the lives of those experiencing them. In the preface to the collection, Ao remarks that in such conflicts “there are no winners, only victims” and that their consequences can ultimately be understood only “in human terms” (Ao 9). Her emphasis on the lived experience of emotion over ideological position defines the narrative perspective of her collection throughout.

Among the stories in *These Hills Called Home*, “The Curfew Man” presents, perhaps, the most detailed exploration by Ao of the ordinary human vulnerabilities inherent within an environment of fear and uncertainty. The story centres around Satemba, a former police officer who serves as an informant while working under curfew, and his wife Jemtila. Through Jemtila’s steady emotional response, she maintains the fragile patterns of their household. Ao eschews sensationalist motion in her storytelling; rather, she focuses on waiting, physical harm, the silences created by both the absence and presence of others, and Satemba’s and Jemtila’s inner turmoil. For Satemba and Jemtila, curfew is not simply a restriction on movement. It is a state of being that affects Satemba’s daily emotional life. Ao establishes this atmosphere early on in the narrative by observing that “the night curfew was still on because these were troubled times for all in the land” (Ao 39). Although this statement may appear simplistic at first glance, it sets forth an environment where fear has permeated the ordinary routines of daily life so extensively that even basic actions, like going home after dark, waiting for Satemba’s return home at night or walking

through the town at night, have developed emotional significance.

The emotional intensity of “The Curfew Man” stems from neither courageous acts nor conflicts rooted in ideology. Rather, it arises from restraint and simple gestures toward companionship and concern. For example, Jemtila’s watchful, unspoken presence while Satemba is gone each evening represents one of the strongest examples of love and affection presented throughout the narrative: “Every time Satemba went out at night, she kept a lone vigil in the darkness of their small hut and worried until he appeared at the door” (Ao 43). Her quiet endurance reflects what Veena Das describes as a “descent into everyday life” through which ordinary routines become modes of survival and continuity amidst difficult circumstances (15). Furthermore, Ao portrays emotional restraint as a form of ethical strength in the context of family obligation and practical concern for others. Longkumer observes that many stories in the collection emerge from “the hearth in the kitchen place” and remain closely connected to “the everyday life of the Naga people” living amidst fear and uncertainty (122). Therefore, this point can be especially relevant to “The Curfew Man,” where the household develops increasingly into a meagre source of comfort against the mounting worry of the characters.

Satemba has become increasingly morally uncomfortable about his role as an informant. Ao skillfully redirects the reader’s attention from the outside world to Satemba’s internal turmoil. Eventually, Satemba realises that “the real trouble was in his heart” because he now questions both his actions and his profession (Ao 44). In this way, Ao emphasises the concept of vulnerability not simply as a physical threat to safety but both as a psychological and moral anxiety. According to Judith Butler, “loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies” exposed to others and dependent upon fragile human relationships (20). In Ao’s narrative, the fragility

of these connections is often illustrated by the relationship between Satemba and Jemtila. The two maintain a relationship based on companionship and mutual emotional dependency despite the extreme adversity they face together.

This paper demonstrates that “The Curfew Man” derives its impact from the portrayal of human compassion in a climate of apprehension and emotional pressure. Using stillness, waiting, bodily exposure and home-based continuity, Ao illustrates how ordinary people preserve thin lines of humanity under difficult situations. Bharti Arora notes that Ao’s fiction illuminates the “microhistorical textures of individual lives” shaped through everyday negotiations and emotional survival (Arora 3). Likewise, Suganya and Padmanabhan state that “micro experiences of people immensely influence their personal narratives” and reflect the larger emotional consequences of difficult historical conditions (Suganya & Padmanabhan 1). These viewpoints are especially important in “The Curfew Man” since the protagonists’ experiences of fear, care and self-doubt grow more emotionally rich over time. Ultimately, Ao presents tender emotions not as a bold method of protest but as a quiet, profoundly human way of enduring ethically.

Curfew, Silence, and the Emotional Structure of Everyday Life

If the introduction establishes tenderness as the emotional centre of “The Curfew Man,” the story itself gradually deepens this idea by showing how curfew reorganises not only public movement but also the psychological rhythm of ordinary life. Ao presents curfew less as an exceptional political condition and more as an atmosphere that enters domestic routine and alters everyday perception. Darkness, silence, waiting, and interrupted movement repeatedly structure the narrative, creating an emotional environment in which ordinary actions acquire unusual intensity. As the story remarks, “Of these, the night

curfew was the worst for people living in towns because soon after dark all social activities ceased..." (Ao 39). The significance of the observation lies not merely in restriction itself, but in the gradual narrowing of ordinary human interaction. Ao carefully reveals how fear transforms time, space, and movement into emotionally charged experiences.

The narrative pacing of the story reflects this condition of prolonged uncertainty. Satemba's nightly journeys through the town are described with caution and slowness, producing a sustained atmosphere of psychological tension rather than dramatic action. Ao repeatedly emphasises the sensory experience of movement under curfew, where silence intensifies bodily awareness and magnifies apprehension. Satemba moves through darkness with his "bad leg dragging slightly," while every sound appears amplified within the stillness of the curfewed night (Ao 42–43). Such moments are important because they transform the body into a visible register of emotional strain. His damaged knee is not merely a physical injury but a recurring reminder of vulnerability, exhaustion, and diminished security. Ao's attention to bodily discomfort gives the narrative much of its emotional realism, since fear in the story is experienced physically as well as psychologically.

At the same time, Ao avoids presenting Satemba as either a heroic or entirely condemnable figure. His role as an informer places him within morally uncomfortable circumstances, yet the narrative consistently resists rigid judgment. Instead, the story examines how prolonged insecurity gradually produces ethical ambiguity and emotional fatigue. Satemba's growing discomfort emerges slowly through hesitation, inward reflection, and increasing psychological unease rather than through dramatic confession. Ao notes that "never before in his new career as an informer had Satemba seriously questioned his own motives" because he had previously preferred not to think about "the rightness or wrongness" of his actions (Ao 44). The passage

becomes significant because it reveals how emotional exhaustion eventually unsettles moral certainty. Fear in the story, therefore, operates not only externally through danger and surveillance but internally through conscience, anxiety, and self-questioning.

This inward strain becomes especially visible in moments of silence between Satemba and Jemtila. Ao's treatment of domestic interaction remains remarkably restrained, yet this restraint itself becomes emotionally expressive. Jemtila does not interrogate Satemba directly about his nightly activities, nor does the narrative depend upon dramatic verbal confrontation. Instead, emotional understanding emerges through gestures, routine actions, and unspoken awareness. Ao observes that Jemtila "never asked him questions about where he went or what he did at night" and simply waited for his return before quietly serving him food (Ao 43). Such moments reveal how silence itself becomes a form of emotional communication within the story. Veena Das notes that people living amidst prolonged violence often withdraw speech while continuing to preserve forms of ordinary relational life through everyday practice and routine attention (8). Ao's narrative repeatedly captures this quiet emotional discipline through Jemtila's behaviour, where care survives not through emotional display but through repetition, patience, and restraint.

The story reaches one of its most psychologically charged moments during Satemba's encounter in the darkness with the unknown figure who warns him to abandon his work as an informer. Ao constructs the scene without sensational violence, relying instead upon uncertainty, hesitation, and suspended movement. Satemba remains "rooted to that dark space" afterwards, "like a person who had strayed into a minefield" (Ao 45). The simile is striking because it transforms fear into paralysis and inward shock rather than immediate physical conflict. More importantly, the encounter deepens Satemba's

growing awareness of his own emotional and moral vulnerability. The danger he experiences is no longer abstract or distant; it enters his consciousness directly and intensifies the psychological pressure already shaping his life.

Yet even within this atmosphere of fear and emotional fatigue, the story continues to preserve small spaces of human continuity. Jemtila's response to Satemba's eventual injury reveals this most clearly. When she discovers the condition of his wounded knees, she "dressed the wound as best as she could" without outward emotional display (Ao 46). The scene derives its power precisely from its restraint. Ao avoids sentimental excess and instead presents care through practical action and quiet attentiveness. The domestic space, therefore, emerges not as an ideal refuge untouched by fear, but as a fragile environment in which tenderness survives through ordinary acts of patience, labour, and emotional endurance.

Injury, Domestic Adjustment, and the Burden of Continuity

The atmosphere of psychological strain that shapes "The Curfew Man" does not disappear after Satemba's encounter in the darkness; rather, it gradually enters a different emotional phase marked by bodily injury, altered routine, and quiet domestic adjustment. Ao avoids transforming the later progression of the story into a dramatic resolution. Instead, the narrative remains attentive to the ordinary consequences of fear as they continue to affect the rhythms of household life. Satemba's injured knees become significant not only because they register physical damage, but because they interrupt the pattern of movement and secrecy that had governed his existence for so long. The emotional structure of the household consequently begins to change in subtle ways, and Ao carefully traces these changes through restrained gestures rather than overt declaration.

This transformation becomes visible most clearly through Jemtila's response to Satemba's condition. When she examines his injuries, Ao writes that she "saw that it was a peculiar wound" and "understood the significance of this but without saying anything or betraying her emotions" (Ao 46). The passage remains characteristic of Ao's larger narrative method, where silence frequently carries emotional complexity more effectively than dramatic speech. Jemtila's reaction simultaneously contains practical understanding, fatigue, apprehension, and restrained relief. Rather than celebrating Satemba's withdrawal from curfew work, the narrative focuses on the emotional adjustments required within ordinary domestic life after prolonged anxiety. Her care, therefore, emerges less as sentimental devotion and more as disciplined emotional labour shaped through difficult experience.

Ao further develops this dimension of care by emphasising the physical and practical realities surrounding the household. Earlier in the story, Jemtila had already sustained the family through work, patience, and emotional steadiness while Satemba moved through the dangerous uncertainty of curfew nights. In this later movement of the narrative, those responsibilities deepen further. Pou observes that women in Ao's fiction frequently bear "the burden of raising and feeding the family" while negotiating conditions of instability and fear (63). This insight becomes particularly relevant to Jemtila, whose role within the household extends beyond affection into the difficult maintenance of continuity itself. The story repeatedly suggests that survival within such circumstances depends not on dramatic heroism, but on the persistence of ordinary routines, labour, and emotional restraint.

At the same time, Satemba's injury gradually alters the emotional experience of time within the household. Earlier sections of the story were structured around anticipation, delayed return, and nightly uncertainty. With his movements

now restricted, the domestic environment begins to acquire a different rhythm shaped less by suspense than by physical limitation and adjustment. Ao quietly indicates this shift when she remarks that Jemtila “felt unusually light-hearted and free because now that both of Satemba’s knees were damaged, he would no longer be able to work for the S.D.O.” (Ao 46). The emotional force of the statement lies in its irony. Relief emerges not through triumph or security in any complete sense, but through the interruption of a pattern that had subjected the household to constant anxiety. Ao, therefore, reveals how ordinary individuals often negotiate difficult circumstances through partial, fragile, and morally complicated forms of survival.

Importantly, the story does not romanticise suffering or convert injury into symbolic redemption. Satemba’s physical condition remains painful and limiting, while the emotional changes within the household emerge gradually and unevenly. Sanjib Baruah remarks that the “hidden hurt that citizens quietly endure” often becomes part of “the texture of everyday life” within conditions shaped by prolonged insecurity (3). Ao’s portrayal of Satemba and Jemtila reflects precisely this movement of strain into ordinary existence. Fear in the story leaves behind bodily exhaustion, emotional fatigue, and altered domestic relationships rather than dramatic closure or ideological certainty. The narrative, therefore, remains grounded in the lived experience of ordinary people negotiating difficult realities at an intensely personal level.

The later progression of the story also deepens Ao’s interest in quiet forms of resilience that operate without public recognition. Nath observes that Ao’s characters often negotiate restrictive conditions by “carv[ing] out spaces for agency and empowerment” within everyday life itself (274). Jemtila’s conduct reflects this form of negotiated resilience. Her emotional restraint, practical labour, and continued attentiveness

allow the household to maintain a fragile continuity despite injury and uncertainty. Ao's representation of tenderness thus remains inseparable from work, patience, and adaptation rather than idealised emotional expression.

By this stage of the narrative, Ao increasingly shifts attention from immediate fear towards the lingering after-effects that fear leaves upon ordinary life and memory. Satemba's withdrawal from curfew work does not erase the emotional strain that has shaped the household; instead, it reveals how deeply such experiences become woven into everyday existence itself. The story consequently moves beyond the immediate atmosphere of danger and begins to explore how ordinary individuals continue to inhabit, remember, and emotionally negotiate lives marked by prolonged uncertainty.

Intimacy, Habit, and the Slow Reshaping of Emotional Life

As the atmosphere of curfew settles into everyday routine, "The Curfew Man" increasingly reveals how prolonged fear reshapes intimate emotional life itself. By this stage of the narrative, uncertainty no longer appears only through external danger or bodily injury; it becomes visible within habits of silence, emotional restraint, and the quiet adjustments through which Satemba and Jemtila continue living together. Ao's attention, therefore, shifts toward the subtle transformation of ordinary companionship under pressure.

One of the most striking aspects of the story is the way care survives without dramatic emotional expression. Satemba and Jemtila rarely speak openly about fear, yet the narrative repeatedly suggests a deep mutual understanding beneath their silence. Meals are prepared, wounds are dressed, absences are endured, and routines continue despite exhaustion and anxiety. Ao allows these ordinary gestures to acquire emotional

significance precisely because they occur within a world where direct emotional articulation has become increasingly difficult.

At the same time, the story gradually reveals how intimacy itself becomes inseparable from emotional dependence and vulnerability. Satemba's physical weakness and growing moral fatigue expose how deeply his life has become tied to Jemtila's steadiness and care. Butler remarks that "we are, from the start, given over to the other" and therefore vulnerable not only to violence but also to "another range of touch" (26). The observation becomes especially relevant to Ao's portrayal of Satemba and Jemtila, whose relationship continues through quiet dependence, care, and emotional responsibility within an atmosphere shaped by fear. In "The Curfew Man," companionship survives not through dramatic declarations, but through fragile forms of attentiveness sustained within intimate everyday experiences.

Importantly, Ao does not sentimentalise this companionship. Care within the story remains marked by fatigue, apprehension, and unspoken strain. Jemtila's relief after Satemba becomes incapable of continuing his informer work already reveals how deeply anxiety has entered the household. Through such restrained moments, Ao demonstrates how ordinary relationships gradually adapt to emotional pressure while still preserving fragile forms of tenderness and continuity.

Memory, Storytelling, and the Quiet Ethics of Survival

As the story moves beyond the immediate emotional adjustments within Satemba and Jemtila's relationship, Ao increasingly shifts attention toward the ways such fragile experiences are remembered, narrated, and preserved within ordinary life. "The Curfew Man", therefore, derives much of its significance from its careful transformation of intimate suffering and domestic endurance into forms of emotional memory that

resist disappearance beneath larger narratives of conflict. Ao consistently avoids spectacle and ideological rhetoric, choosing instead to focus upon intimate moments of waiting, exhaustion, domestic labour, and moral hesitation. Through this restrained narrative method, the story transforms fragile personal experiences into enduring emotional memory. This literary restraint reflects Ao's larger understanding of storytelling itself. In an interview with Longkumer and Jana, Ao remarks that storytelling for her involves "sharing glimpses of life with readers from different walks of life" so that they may "understand" the experiences being represented (10). The observation becomes especially significant in relation to "The Curfew Man," where emotional understanding consistently takes precedence over dramatic action or ideological positioning. Satemba and Jemtila are, therefore, presented not as symbolic representatives of political conflict, but as ordinary individuals attempting to preserve continuity and dignity during unstable circumstances.

Such emphasis upon intimate experience also explains why the story remains deeply concerned with memory and emotional transmission. Suganya and Padmanabhan observe that experiences shaped by difficult historical circumstances continue to influence "personal narratives" at the level of ordinary life (1). In "The Curfew Man," these experiences survive not through public commemoration but through altered habits, emotional restraint, bodily scars, and quiet domestic adjustments. Fear in the story does not disappear completely; instead, it becomes absorbed into the rhythms of memory and everyday existence. Ao's narrative method is, therefore, less concerned with documenting external events than with tracing the subtle emotional afterlives that such experiences produce within ordinary relationships. The story's quietness becomes especially significant in this regard. Ao repeatedly avoids excessive emotional explanation, allowing gestures and silences to communicate experiences that remain difficult to articulate

directly. Veena Das remarks that violence often enters ordinary life not only through visible events but through its gradual attachment to everyday existence itself (1). Ao's treatment of Satemba and Jemtila reflects precisely this process. Their lives continue through work, routine, injury, and companionship, yet the atmosphere of uncertainty leaves behind emotional traces that cannot be fully separated from daily life. Silence in the story, therefore, functions not as absence, but as a mode of carrying a difficult experience without converting it into a spectacle.

At the same time, Ao's storytelling remains deeply invested in preserving ordinary humanity within such conditions. Longkumer and Jana note that Ao sought to explore experiences that affected "the lives of the Naga people" beyond larger political narratives (3). This concern becomes visible throughout "The Curfew Man," where domestic life consistently remains at the emotional centre of the narrative. The household, however fragile, continues to function as a space where acts of care, labour, and attentiveness acquire moral significance. Ao's representation of tenderness consequently depends less upon emotional idealisation than upon sustained attention to small acts through which ordinary life persists. In this sense, Ao's treatment of conflict differs significantly from many conventional narratives associated with war and violence. Unlike works such as *A Farewell to Arms* or *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which frequently foreground large-scale wartime disillusionment and battlefield experience, "The Curfew Man" remains concentrated upon the emotional pressures of ordinary domestic existence. Ao shifts attention away from spectacle towards waiting, care, bodily exhaustion, and moral fatigue within intimate spaces of everyday life. The story's emotional intensity consequently emerges through understatement and proximity rather than dramatic confrontation. This restrained literary method ultimately allows Ao to preserve forms of human tenderness that remain easily

overlooked within narratives dominated by violence or ideological conflict.

Conclusion

“The Curfew Man” ultimately derives its emotional power from its restrained portrayal of ordinary life lived under prolonged fear and uncertainty. Throughout the story, Tamsüla Ao avoids dramatic spectacle and ideological excess, focusing instead upon the intimate emotional realities that shape the lives of Satemba and Jemtila. Curfew in the narrative functions not merely as an external restriction, but as a condition that gradually reshapes movement, silence, domestic routine, bodily experience, and moral consciousness. Jemtila’s silent vigilance, practical labour, and emotional restraint repeatedly preserve fragile stability within the household, while Satemba’s growing moral unease reveals the psychological burden created by prolonged insecurity. Ao’s treatment of bodily injury further deepens this emotional landscape by revealing how fear leaves lasting traces upon both body and memory. Nonetheless, the story consistently resists romanticising suffering or transforming vulnerability into heroic redemption. Instead, it remains grounded in familiar gestures of care, patience, adaptation, and companionship through which emotional continuity survives amidst uncertainty and strain.

The paper has argued that Ao’s representation of tenderness emerges precisely through this narrative discipline. Emotional restraint, disrupted routine, domestic adjustment, and emotional memory gradually become central expressive structures within the story. Rather than relying upon overt emotional declaration, Ao allows small acts of attentiveness to acquire ethical significance within ordinary domestic life. “The Curfew Man”, therefore, preserves the human dimension of a difficult historical experience without reducing individuals to political abstractions or symbolic figures. By concentrating upon micro-level

experiences of vulnerability, interdependence, and quiet endurance, Ao constructs a deeply humane narrative in which the persistence of shared human continuity becomes the story's most enduring emotional truth.

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Representing Alternative Masculinity through Insanity in Select Fiction from Anirudh Kala's *The Unsafe Asylum: Stories of Partition and Madness*

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Abstract

Partition of India has contributed to the proliferation of discursive practices regarding masculine and feminine roles in South Asian history through the enactment of communal violence on females by males of other communities. The psychological vulnerability resulting from partition has undermined the hegemonic notion of violent patriarchal men. Not only do women become the victims of physical and mental precarity, but men navigate psychological fragility marked by profound sorrow, reticence, and desolation, which Àngels Carabí and Josep M. Armengol identify as one of the markers of “alternative masculinities” and consequently collapsing what R.W. Connell defines “hegemonic masculinity”. Traditional male identities have been destabilised. Many male survivors of Partition suffered from mental illness. The present paper examines two alternate masculine figures — *Rulda* and *Fattu* — in select short stories such as “No Forgiveness Necessary,” “Partitioning Madness,” “The Mad Prophet,” and “*Rulda's Discharge*” from Anirudh Kala's *The Unsafe Asylum: Stories of Partition and Madness*. It explores how this alternative masculinity is exemplified through insanity, which undermines the socio-cultural and political ethos of gendered subjectivity. Mental asylums become spaces of otherness where every identity destabilises to emerge continuously. It also analyses the representation of mad lunatics and their emotional lives showing how Partition narratives of madness disrupt conventional masculine norms through the evolving, contingent selves of men traumatised by Partition.

Keywords: Alternative Masculinity, Gendered Subjectivity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Madness, Partition

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Introduction

The Partition of India disseminated the traditional idea of masculinity through the production of dominant, powerful, hegemonic and privileged males defined by religious markers. But these discourses are debunked by the fragile, emotional, vulnerable males who act against these nationalistic discourses of powerful regimes. The asylum's "insane" inmates subvert hegemonic masculinity through their articulation of emotional vulnerability, privileging empathy over revenge, vengeance and hatred. The present paper seeks to explore these alternate emotional lives of men within the asylums affected by Partition. The asylum thus becomes what Michel Foucault calls an "enacted utopia" (3) — a space where every powerful discourse is destabilised. This type of utopia exists beyond conventional structures and disrupts the discursive framework and hierarchy. Anirudh Kala, a psychiatrist grounded in Ludhiana, has visited mental asylums in Pakistan and communicated with many psychiatrists across the border to explore the psychological effects of the Partition of India. His *The Unsafe Asylum: Stories of Partition and Madness* is a product of his experiences of visiting these asylums. It constitutes 13 interlinked short stories focusing on characters classified as insane, such as Fattu, a Muslim and Rulda, a Sikh. He has created these two mad fictional characters who have turned upside down the nationalistic myths pertaining to violence, religion and country. Although the collection comprises various mad lunatics such as women, children and even doctors who share their traumatic memories of Partition, Rulda and Fattu have shattered the hegemonic discourses of masculinity and patriarchy. For the present analysis, four stories are chosen from this collection, such as "No Forgiveness Necessary," "Partitioning Madness," "The Mad Prophet," and "Rulda's Discharge," focusing on these two characters. Whereas Partition separates people of different religions, the asylum becomes a utopia for Rulda and Fattu, giving an unconditional bond of love despite their belonging to opposing religious communities. Inside the Lahore Mental Hospital, they critique the act of partition and the separation of people. In contrast to the revengeful masculine

qualities, they manifest as alternative masculine figures owing to their rejection of hatred and vengeance. They are termed as insane persons as they fail to conform to the norms of the outside violent world. Their insanity gives them a gateway to deconstruct hegemonic masculine roles.

Masculinity, Madness and Partition

The socio-political regime reproduces the patriarchal ideology that elevates masculinity which has been conventionally associated with power, control and the privileging of gender differences within the discourses of culture and civilisation. This alignment culminates in a hierarchy of gender binaries, granting agency to the hegemonic male subject. Nonetheless, this notion of men as a generally empowered subject has been simultaneously deconstructed and reconstructed through the emergence and consolidation of attributes like emotional attachment, vulnerability and fragility. Traditionally, female subjects have been associated with love, care, sympathy and emotions. This notion has been refuted by the approach of fluid male subjectivity. R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt underscore that masculinity is “not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals” and masculine traits are “configurations of practice that are accomplished in social relation” as they “can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (836). Therefore, it is the act of performance that defines gender roles and identities. Rudra and Fattu, two psychiatric patients in the Lahore Mental Hospital amidst the violent tragedy of the Partition, deconstruct the hegemonic patriarchal gender roles. They dissect the idea of publicly authoritative men during the Partition without exhibiting animosity toward each other, in spite of belonging to two different religions. Their madness metaphorically represents the annihilation of culturally produced patriarchal virility. Men, therefore, lose the stereotypical image of control and power. In this way, repressed vulnerable emotions become visible through the manifestation of their madness. This paves the way for alternative male identities and subjectivities disintegrating hegemonic masculinities. In the story, “Rudra’s Discharge”, Rudra is in an emotionally conflicted state of mind as he lacks

the ability to perform the expected roles associated with dominant forms of masculinity. Instead of feeling proud, confident and independent, he is dependent on Fattu for his happiness:

As he sat cross-legged with a glass of tea in his cupped hands, the train crossed the Sutlej bridge. Rulda was angry at himself for not feeling exhilarated. He remembered Fattu, who would have chided him, 'How many people do you know Ruldia, who have lived in a mental hospital for forty years and then found a family, a real family of one's own relatives? None. It's a miracle. If I were you, I would be very happy and grateful to Khuda. You should be too. (Kala 240)

He exemplifies feelings of feminine tenderness as if it is "the illness which blunted the edge of his feelings" (Kala 239). Insanity seems to undermine the logic of masculinity. In the story, "No Forgiveness Necessary", instead of being engaged in a communal riot, they were "huddled together under a ragged umbrella" (Kala 2) and even they "have speculated amongst themselves that a mental hospital was a safer place than the world outside in that summer of 1947" (Kala 3). It is through their repudiation of getting involved in the Partition Riot that they mark a departure from traditional male archetypes like the acts of revenge and violence during the Partition. This enactment of masculine roles is escorted by the super-ego, which incorporates cultural prescriptions and restrictions. The super-ego is the supervisory, commanding inner dialogue that controls the norms of essential masculinity. Rulda and Fattu's personality traits disrupt this restrictive mechanism of the super-ego and thus dismantle the hegemonic masculinity. The Women's Liberation Movement, the Gay Liberation Movement, and other movements espousing for the emancipation of human beings from rigid sexual or gender roles have stimulated a changing ethos that critiques the patriarchal notions of male and female domestic and sexual roles. Additionally, even the notions of essential femininity and masculinity have been interrogated by psychoanalysts. Sigmund Freud, to illustrate, scrutinised the concepts of "masculine" and "feminine." According to him, they

“are among the most confused that occur in science” (219-220). Utilising concepts such as the Oedipus Complex and case studies like “Little Hans” and “Rat Man,” Sigmund Freud postulates that social identities or roles are formulated by means of social performance incorporated into the psychological domain through the regulating mechanism of the super-ego: “The super-ego is formed in the aftermath of the Oedipus complex, by internalised prohibitions from the parents” (Connell 10). Freud was one of the pioneering theorists who initiated the modern conception of gender as not fixed but constructed through internal psychic conflict. Through his psychoanalytic theories of id (unconscious mind), ego (conscious mind) and super-ego (subconscious mind), he exhibits that identity, especially gender identity, is not just an essentialised or predetermined quality but appears through complex repressed mental processes and desires in the realm of the unconscious mind. So, these alternative masculine traits have been stifled in the unconscious domain of *Rulda* and *Fattu* and find their gateway through acts of insanity, rejecting specific gender norms. They demonstrate the feminine traits, like *Dilshad Khan*, who is running out of fear during the Partition violence for shelter in “No Forgiveness Necessary.” The fear and weakness are culturally associated with feminine qualities and women were actually the biggest sufferers during the Partition, as communal violence was inflicted on their bodies. A series of Partition texts, such as *Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan*, *Amrita Pritam’s Pinjar*, *Bapsi Sidhwa’s Ice-Candy Man*, *Bhisham Sahni’s Tamas*, *Rajendar Singh Bedi’s* short story “*Lajwanti*,” and *Manto’s* short story “*Khol Do*,” among others, vividly portray the manifestations of violence perpetrated not only on women but also on men by the males who perfectly conform to the ideologies of hegemonic masculinity of gender and nation. In *Black Marginalia*, Manto has explored “the gendered vulnerability of male bodies in the communal riot” (Misri 26). Not only does a woman’s body represent the honour of the community, but the male body also represents the religious identity of a particular community. For example, during the Partition, Sikh males were identified by their turban. Even their genitals and hair were the markers of their religious identity. In “*Islah*,” one of the short stories from

Manto's collection, genitals are "good proof" of religion (Misri 42). The Partition of India gave rise to communal violence, abduction and the rape of women. Women were abducted by men from rival communities and, in many cases, killed by their own male relatives in the name of preserving family honour. They called this killing martyrdom. Scholars such as Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin and Urvashi Butalia have brought attention to this spectrum and perpetrations of violence. They have presented the testimonies of the survivors of this violence. Urvashi Butalia interviewed many survivors. One such survivor is Trilok Singh. He was nine years old during this violent unrest and his father and uncle tried to kill him and their daughters. In Thoa Khalsa, many women jumped into wells as a result of fear of assault by males from other communities. This sheer brutality is representative of patriarchal constructions of masculinity. Rudra and Fattouh dismantle this patriarchal framework. They also think that asylum is a safe shelter for them. Psychologically, precarious emotions exist in everyone. In discussing Freud's psychoanalytical theories, R.W. Connell, one of the propagators of the concept of masculinities, detects that "Freud offered the hypothesis that humans were constitutionally bisexual, that masculine and feminine currents coexisted in everyone" and "adult masculinity had to be a complex, and in some ways precarious, construction" (9). Besides Freud, Carl Jung also focused on the existence of feminine traits in males. He differentiated between "persona" (socially constructed behaviours) and "anima" (the repressed desires) and asserted that "the repression of feminine traits and inclinations causes these contrasexual demands to accumulate in the unconscious" (187). Alfred Adler, a radical psychoanalyst, highlights the cultural and social contributions to the advancement of psychological difficulties, indicating that the gender binary in society can foster conflicts in both childhood and adulthood. According to Connell:

Adler's argument started from the familiar polarity between masculinity and femininity, but immediately emphasized the feminist point that one side of the polarity is devalued in culture and associated with

weakness. Children of both sexes, being weak vis-à-vis adults, are thus forced to inhabit the feminine position. They develop a sense of femininity and doubts about their ability to achieve masculinity. The ‘childish value judgements’ about the masculine/feminine polarity persist as a motive in later life. (16)

These indistinct states of feminine and masculine binary traits are critically represented by Kala through the two emotionally fragile men. In “No Forgiveness Necessary,” Rulda and Fattu critically confront the violent act of masculinity, seeing the violence outside. Rulda asks Fattu, “Have the outsiders gone mad...”, and Fattu sniggers, “...Yes, they have” (Kala 17). The conversation between these two lunatics throws a critical light on the very definition of insanity or madness. The question arises whether femininity is rendered as vulnerable and associated with weakness, victimisation, and submissiveness or masculinity is articulated through a different form of vulnerability displayed in revenge and violence.

In his book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Michel Foucault argues that madness is not only a cognitive disorder but the process of a culturally embedded paradigm. He advocates that “madness and non-madness, reason and non-reason are inextricably interwoven: inseparable at the moment when they do not yet exist, and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange which separates them” (x). Men who fail to perpetrate violence are usually recognised as mad. Their qualities no longer fall within the discursive regimes and norms of patriarchy. They seem to have lost their reason and intellect, which are marked as masculine characteristics. Their anxiety, sense of guilt and fear become the symbol of alternative masculinity. The Partition dissolves this sense of rupture within men. Fattu, in the story “The Mad Prophet,” predicts the future. His unrealistic accounts even attract politicians. Dr Prakash Kohli tells Fattu that he met Rulda in Amritsar and that Rulda had spoken comprehensively about him. Fattu also tells him that he knew it was only Rulda who had taken his name. He further tells Prakash that they are collaborating on the project of building a tunnel that

would reach the Wagah border, and “the rest is up” to him but Rulda “cannot dig further because he does not have a visa” (Kala 143). According to Foucault:

We must try to return, in history, to that zero point in the course of madness at which madness is an undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself. We must describe, from the start of its trajectory, that ‘other form’ which relegates Reason and Madness to one side or the other of its action as things henceforth external, deaf to all exchange, and as though dead to one another. (ix)

This “zero point” of madness is important for understanding how the liminal space of the asylum has given rise to alternative masculinity marked by “undifferentiated experiences” (Foucault ix). The irrational, vulnerable and emotional behaviours of men blur the demarcating line between reason and insanity, prior to their systematic categorisation as mad. This madness modifies their masculinity. Discursive practices generate the difference between reason and madness. Are Rulda and Fattu really mad? Or are the people outside mad? In “No Forgiveness Necessary”, Fattu tells Rulda: “Well, we are unpredictably unpredictable. Outsiders are unpredictably unpredictable. That makes us more predictable. They should be inside and us outside” (Kala 17). But Rulda objects to this, saying, “if most people were insane, the world would come crashing down” and “all of them cannot fit in here” (Kala 17). They long for the unity of people. Society shows numbness to these emotional qualities and often classifies men inhibiting those emotions as insane. These mental institutions, after partition, create this binary. The asylum operates as a superstructure that “accounts for the transition from the medieval and humanist experience of madness to our own experience, which confines insanity within mental illness” (Foucault xii). He states: “Error is the other element always present with the dream, in the classical definition of insanity” (104). Insanity is propagated through such legal institutions, akin to asylums that designate persons as insane. These two mad persons are contradictorily reasonable. Whereas men and women were killed and abducted on the basis of religious

difference, Rulda, in the story "Partitioning Madness," feels sad that Fattu didn't come to say goodbye to him. Rulda thinks that "he would have cried so much" if he had remembered the electric shock. They were discharged, but no one came to receive them. Finally, in "Rulda's Discharge," Rulda asks, "Is there a mental hospital in this city?" (Kala 245). If this is a world regulated through violence and revenge, Rulda embodies an alternate masculine figure who wants to reside in the asylum again. Alternative masculinity finds its place only in insanity within the asylum.

There were no mental asylums in East Punjab. Even so, mental patient exchanges took place, and many Punjabis were recommended for transfer to hospitals in Lahore, Hyderabad and Peshawar. But the scenario changed after Partition. In "Partitioning Madness," Rulda's accounts of the transfer of lunatics reflect the communal tension after the partition of India, and he is one of the "four hundred and fifty 'non-Muslim lunatics' being shifted from Pakistan to India more than three years after the actual Partition of 1947" (Kala 53). These non-Muslim patients "have been collected from Hyderabad, Peshawar and Lahore - the three mental hospitals of Pakistan" (Kala 53). Saadat Hasan Manto's one of the remarkable short stories on Partition, "Toba Tek Singh," presents such a Sikh mental patient, Bishan Singh, who refuses to transfer to India and dies in a liminal space between India and Pakistan. According to Sanjeev Jain and Alok Sarin, "The division of a major South Asian nation state into two separate ones on 15 August 1947 was as much a partitioning of minds as that of geography" (1). Kala begins his story "No Forgiveness Necessary" in the June of 1947 in Lahore Mental Hospital in order to depict both the asylum and communal violence. The asylum accommodated "twelve hundred seriously disturbed mentally ill patients" (Kala 1). This division resulted in trauma, dislocation, and psychological suffering. Moreover, it gave rise to intense collective trauma that remains unhealed. Jain and Sarin question this nature of madness due to partition: "For a person with mental illness or 'insanity', does insanity divest the individual of personal, collective and national identity? Did the

Partition unleash an insanity which persists in day-to-day life, attitude and ideology?” (11). After this act of division there were two main institutions - prison houses and mental hospitals and the persons, or “inmates of these represented the marginalised and forgotten segment of the population” (Kala and Sarin 13). Partition of India denotes cultural trauma explained as a “horrendous effect that leaves indelible marks” upon the identity of men and masculinity (Alexander 1). Rulda and Fattu become “the voice of the other” (Caruth 8), the voice of excluded and victimised men. This “other” symbolises an alternative masculinity which represents the subdued emotional voice crushed under the powerful nationalistic logic of reason and conscience.

Alternative Ways of Being a Man in Partition

Àngels Carabí and Josep M. Armengol have brought a paradigm shift in the study of masculinities by introducing the principles of “alternative” or “counterhegemonic” masculinities (2), intending to “propose ‘alternative’ ways of being a man in culture and society” (1). They recognise numerous selves of men instead of a homogeneous or unified category of man, emphasising the emergence of multiple masculinities. The behaviours of Rulda and Fattu resemble these ideologies of unconventional male figures. In “Partitioning Madness,” they consider the world outside the asylum as insecure with political turmoil. They critique the logic of the national territory and reinforce the asylum as secure and uncontaminated. After rebounding from illness following five ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), Fattu tells Rulda to sleep well, as this is his “last night in the land of the pure” and that the next day he would sleep “in the country of the impure” (Kala 61). They are pondering how they will live after getting discharged. Fattu says, “They are sending you to where my home is and keeping me where your home is. Could we have matched that...” (Kala 61). He also views the moon, which has relocated to Rulda’s country and Rulda “will see it tomorrow” (Kala 61). They annihilate the myths of masculine strength and supremacy. They critique these assumptions.

James D. Riemer also highlights that “there also must be a recognition and reinforcement of positive alternatives to traditional masculine ideals and behaviours” (298). The concept of masculinity has been extensively criticised for its dynamic interplay of power and dominance. It “represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (Connell and Messerschmidt 841). Subsequently, it is generally acknowledged as a socially constructed array of practices that propagate inequality and facilitate the fragmentation of social cohesion. Jeff Hearn states, “Men and gender are produced in the conflicts and struggles of history and politics” (9). He moreover posits that these kinds are also “subject to great historical transformations” (9). According to Michael Kimmel:

As the structural bases of gender relations had shifted and were thrown into disarray, the meaning of masculinity itself was brought into question, debated, and in part redefined. Women’s assertion of sexual agency, of an equality of desire, and of equal rights within marriage, inspired men to abandon traditional roles within the family, just as changes in the organization of work and political changes eroded their economic autonomy and the traditional system of fixed political statuses in pre-capitalist society. (134)

In “Partitioning Madness,” Rulda and Fattu question the cultural construction of marginalised beings. As they are labelled as mad, they become marginalised groups without any authority. They further interrogate the political nuances. Rulda asks, “Then why were we not asked about our preference? Everybody else was. Government employees were asked which country they wanted to be allotted to. Even the prisoners in jails were asked to choose the country where they wanted to be imprisoned” (Kala 62). Fattu replies, “Raumish says we were not asked because we have no legal capacity. We don’t understand implications” (Kala 62). People outside the asylum understand these implications and that is why they are different, even though they are killing people: “They knew the implications, weighed the pros and cons and decided in a cool, detached manner and went ahead” (Kala

63). Rulda comments: "The ones who stabbed and shot men, women and children must also have weighed the pros and cons, and coolly turned around 'implications' in their minds, before they killed or raped" (Kala 63). As an underrepresented group, they are now outside the discourse of logic and reason to understand all the implications of the societal regimes.

Not only women but "male bodies too are rendered vulnerable to symbolic forms of violence" and "vulnerability of male bodies troubles the naturalised association between victimhood and femininity" (Misri 12). Kavita Daiya states that "a new look at the narration of violence against men in the postcolonial Indian public sphere reveals that masculinity and men [and not women alone] as gendered subjects can also become critical sites for the symbolization of nationality and belonging" (41). In "The Mad Prophet," Fattu is in a hospital in Lahore, and Rulda is in a mental hospital in Amritsar. Fattu wants to send a letter to Rulda, as he misses him intensely. Fattu is now so famous that even political persons come to him for his prophecies, and he is "supposed to have prophesied the breaking away of East Pakistan, two years before it happened" (Kala 145). In "Rulda's Discharge," Rulda only remembers Fattu's words and his voice. The riot takes place due to the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, and Rulda jumped "as a snake quietly slithered across his path into the grass" out of sudden, intense terror (Kala 244). He speculates whether these are acts of madness or whether the people in the asylum are indeed insane.

In contrast to the predominant and potentially harmful models, alternative masculinity centres on "nondominant ways of being a man" and "masculinities that embody gender equity in profeminist ways" (Carabi and Armengol 4-5). In "Rulda's Discharge," while witnessing communal violence in 1984, Rulda becomes frightened: "A dreadful panic started to build up in Rulda's chest. His mind conjured up images: he was drowning in swirling waters, trying to catch his suitcase floating away from him. Then, suddenly, it was all real" (Kala 241). Therefore, they destabilise the myth of patriarchy and become non-dominant men. Groes-Green proclaims that "it is difficult to

ignore the urgency of exploring and developing pro-female notions of manhood, in empirical and theoretical terms, if we wish to include men in the struggles against gender inequality, violence against women, and male control” (107).

Emotional Lives of Men: Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity during Partition

Connell discerns various types of masculinities. According to him, there are “multiple masculinities” such as complicit, subordinate, marginalised, and hegemonic masculinities (76). He has brought a notable shift in the study of men and masculinities by introducing the concept of “hegemonic masculinity”: “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). It is the configuration of societal customs that provides the circumstances for the marginalisation of women, blacks, and other non-conforming individualities. So, authority and control are at the heart of this type of masculinity. It is different from other forms of masculinities as, “it was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men”, and males “who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). It is through the consent of cultural dominance that this type of masculinity comes into existence. Those who don’t succumb to these qualities become marginalised or subordinated masculine figures, like homosexual men or males who convey deep emotions. Rulda and Fattu share an intense emotional bond. In “The Mad Prophet,” Fattu misses Rulda so much that he writes a letter for him and gives it to Prakash. He says, “Please give this letter to Rulda. Tell him that I had received his letter thirty-three years ago but being busy with this and that could not

reply earlier” (Kala 144). His care and love for Rulda is expressed further when he says that he wants to build a tunnel between the two countries only “to touch him” and he brings “the tips of his index fingers together, in front of his chest” (Kala 144). The bond between them is so intense that even Fattu could hear the voices of Rulda in “Partitioning Madness.”

Hegemonic masculinity operates like a cultural super-ego assimilating conventions that repress men’s emotional, loving and caring traits analogous to Freud’s idea of the super-ego that represses intuitive impulses. On the other hand, the alternative masculine traits emerge through madness. This conspicuous insanity embodies the inhibited desire. The Partition violence and the myth of nationalistic honour have created the idea of strong men who initiate communal revenge and perpetrate violence. It enhances hegemonic masculinity. It rejects the sympathetic traits of men. The so-called mad people in the asylum have disrupted this mythical framework of gender traits and have manifested acts of kindness and togetherness. The insane are capable of aspects of human nature that the discourse of normalcy cannot encompass. Madness becomes a domain where the confines of culturally dominant masculinity are fragmented. Eventually, there is nothing called pure masculinity. In “Partitioning Madness,” Fattu says that mental patients are “the rear end of mankind”, and Rulda asks, “Are we mankind? Do we count as the rear end?” (Kala 62). Fattu says, “Of course we count. Even the tables and chairs count. The horses count. Everything that can be counted counts and has to be meticulously counted and fairly divided between the two countries. Even us” (Kala 62). They bear testimony to the pain of others, encompassing Shoshana Felman’s concept of “witnessing.” Felman states that “the appointment to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for others and to others” (3).

Sara Ahmed points out that “some emotions are ‘elevated’ as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain ‘lower’ as signs of weakness” (3). She argues that political and cultural discourses mould the logic and rationality of emotions. She emphasises a hierarchy of emotions where specific emotions get allied with intelligence and “how emotions are bound up with the securing

of social hierarchy” (4). Those who do not adhere to this type of emotional awareness are accordingly situated as weak or frail. In “No Forgiveness Necessary”, being traumatised by the division of lands, Rulda wails for his house near Rawalpindi and Fattu for his home near “Hoshiarpur in Hindustan” (Kala 18). Fattu paradoxically remarks, “Don’t worry! They will shift the houses too. They will send your house there and bring mine here. Outside people are very smart” (Kala 18). Rulda says, “They are killing people faster than you can kill mosquitoes. They need electric shocks” (Kala 18). They want to drop the name of the mental hospital and “put it up inside, so that everybody is clear which side of the gate is the actual mental hospital” (Kala 18). In “Rulda’s Discharge”, Rulda is discharged from the hospital after 40 years. He decides to move to Delhi, but “he didn’t think he was capable of living anywhere else” (Kala 239). Through the externalisation of emotional behaviours, Rulda and Fattu disorient the hierarchy of emotions.

The emotions of care and love are typically considered as the emotions connected with feminine quality and the patriarchal notion of gender generally exhibits these emotions as irreconcilable with masculine norms. In “Rulda’s Discharge,” Rulda shows emotional vulnerability because instead of confronting violence bravely, he “jumped out, left the road and ran into the dark” (Kala 244) and even his “legs were shaking as he found himself on a wide road full of lights, with traffic zipping past mere feet from where he stood” (Kala 245). Alternative masculinity shatters this disparity of emotions and destabilises hegemonic masculinity. Emotions modify human selves. In this context, the appearance of insanity is a type of emotional rupture that psychologically moulds the subjectivity of men enclosed in the asylum. The internal ambience of the asylum contrasts abruptly with the violent world outside. This blurs the border between sanity and insanity. Emotional vulnerability is imprinted on bodies, yielding significant psychological disturbances. This type of vulnerability reveals the violent tragedy of partition and its persistent aftermath. Within this framework, madness paves the way for the circulation

of these alternative masculine emotions, as “emotions circulate between bodies” (Ahmed 4).

bell hooks, in her book *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and love*, focuses on the emotional lives of men and their inhibited loving nature in contrast to the authoritative power and rationality of man. She throws a critical light on patriarchy: “Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (30). The social norms dishearten boys from revealing their soft feelings and there is “only one emotion that patriarchy values when expressed by men; that emotion is anger” (hooks 22). According to her, “We construct a culture where male pain can have no voice, where male hurt cannot be named or healed. It is not just men who do not take their pain seriously” (hooks 21). These mad lunatics in the asylum have been provided with the space to share their emotions, whereas the outside violent world expects men to take revenge rather than exhibit emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

Insanity provides an apparatus for the manifestation of precarious masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a cultural injury. Psychological injuries of *Rulda* and *Fattu* exhibit the unclaimed experiences of alternative masculine figures. *Rulda* and *Fattu*, as the insane, bear witness to the testimony of this traumatic event of Partition. They become the voices of the voiceless victims. Through the representation of these characters, *Kala* questions discursive regimes of masculinity, displaying how this collapse of the hegemonic man gives rise to the alternate discourses of men and masculinities in the study of Partition Fiction. These emerging males exemplify an ethos of continuity in a globalised world, subverting the rigid notion of gender roles. Besides, the asylum operates as what Foucault conveys as a “heterotopia” (4) or “counter-sites” (3), facilitating space for otherness in the form of vulnerable masculine emotions.

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Watan, Mulk and Qaum – Understanding the Question of Home, Homelessness and Indian Muslims in Garm Hava and Mammo

Vivek Sachdeva*

Abstract

The Partition of British India in 1947 created multifaceted problems for the people of the subcontinent. While it forced people to leave their homeland and migrate to a new country given to them on the basis of religion, it complicated the situation of those Muslims who chose to remain in India. Partition Studies has generally focused on critiquing the two-nation theory, trauma, violence, migration, memory and identity politics, mainly from the point of view of Hindus and Sikhs, who migrated during the Partition. Even though identity politics in post-colonial India is the legacy of colonialism and Partition, the concerns of those Muslims who chose to remain in India have been comparatively less discussed. Focusing on *Garm Hava* (M.S. Sathya 1974) and *Mammo* (Shyam Benegal 1994), this paper understands the alienation of Muslims in a Hindu-majoritarian India. Instead of understanding the challenges of the Partition within the framework of Western theory of the nation, this paper argues that the Partition caused a schism among watan, mulk and qaum, which is crucial to comprehend the dynamics of identities in post-Partition India. Through historicisation and narrative analysis of the films under study, the paper critiques colonial policies, delineates how Partition complicated the relationship among watan, mulk and qaum, and discusses the question of home to understand Muslims' state of 'homelessness at home' in post-Partition India.

Keywords: Home, Indian Muslims, Mulk, Partition, Qaum, Watan

Yeh fasile teri galion ke hamse tay na hue
Hazar baar chale ham,
hazaar bar rukey (The road to home, I could not take

I stumbled every time I took a step.^[1]

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The Partition of 1947 changed the map, created new nations, gave people new national identities and also resulted in “murders, arson, looting, abduction of women and mass migration” (Harrington 3). Partition caused one of the largest migrations of the twentieth century. According to Urvashi Butalia, around twelve million people crossed the border of “the newly created Pakistan” (Butalia 3). Partition Studies in India has focused on the trauma of migration, displacement, dislocation, questioning the two-nation theory and the clash of identities. The above-given couplet from a ghazal used in *Mammo*, a film by Shyam Benegal, encapsulates the untraversable gap and the feeling of homelessness experienced by the victims of the Partition of 1947. However, there is another dimension of the Partition that also deserves equal critical attention, which has been comparatively less explored. Besides understanding the pain, trauma and memory of Hindus and Sikhs who migrated during the Partition, it is equally important to understand the status of those Muslims who remained in India after the Partition.

The Partition not only changed borders and created new nations, but it also affected the status of Muslims in India. As a concomitant of the Partition and ideologies associated with it, Indian Muslims became the ‘Other’ of India as a Hindu nation(state) and outsiders in their home(land). Distrust and contempt against Muslims in a Hindu-majoritarian India can be seen as the legacy of the identity politics of British colonial rule and the communal violence during the Partition. The rise of Hindutva ideology has further widened the gulf that Nehruvian secular politics was trying to bridge. Treating Muslims as outsiders in India makes home and homeland contested categories in post-Partition India. This paper examines the question of ‘home’ vis-à-vis Indian Muslims with reference to *Garm Hava* (M. S. Sathya 1974) and *Mammo* (Shyam Benegal 1994), to understand the effects of the Partition on India as a nation-state.

The question of the Muslim minority in contemporary India is still an unresolved issue, and it continues to cast its influence in Indian society and politics even today. Thus, it becomes pertinent to engage with the question of the status of Muslims in post-Partition India. The rationale for working on these two films is that these films were made in two different historical contexts. *Garm Hava* was made immediately after the 1971 Indo-Pak War, when the Nehruvian vision of secular India existed in the popular imagination, even though Nehru had passed away by the time the film was made. The second film, *Mammo*, was made immediately after the Bombay riots following the demolition of the Babri mosque, an incident that coincides with the rise of Hindutva ideology in Indian politics. Working on these two films allows the author to understand how the concerns of Muslims in post-Partition India have been represented by two filmmakers in two different historical contexts.

Identities in the Indian subcontinent are fluid, and their intersectionality makes them a complex phenomenon. During the British colonial period, a fundamental change took place in Indian society. The colonial period witnessed the collision between the society and history of the subcontinent and the European imagination. Different communities or ethnic groups, which shared fuzzy borders with other groups, were reimagined as independent groups, each group with its narrow nationalist interests. Re-organisation of the world (Europe), drawing maps, having fixed borders, and bringing people together based on a common religion, language or ethnicity gave them a homogeneous national identity. Consequently, the nation as a new political entity emerged. Linda Layne opines that human societies were understood as homogeneous and indestructible particles, which constitute the basis of the system of identities. The Western model was incompatible with the social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the subcontinent. Identities in the subcontinent are formed by region, language, culture and

religion, intersecting and overlapping with each other. The colonial enterprise of dividing Indian society into small, homogenous and absolute units clashed with fluid identities and people's earlier imaginations. The identitarian model fostered the imagination of a nation with such limited, finite and rigid boundaries that beyond these boundaries "lie other nations" (Anderson 16). With every new imagination of a nation, new Others were also imagined.

Playing upon the existing fault lines, the British policies succeeded in widening the gulf. As identities were crystallised and became rigid, it paved the way for communal politics in the region. The British policies, demand for separate electorates, and nationalistic imagination emerging during the colonial period changed the way identities used to operate in the region. The British (mis)understanding of religion and Indian society clashed with the local social systems. "British rule, through the identification of Brahmanical Hinduism and Islam as the two patriarchal orders with nation-wide validity, inaugurated" (Prasad 193-194) a process of construction of identity reconfiguration. The composite Indian society was reimagined and segregated into different identities and (sub)national groups. Using the divide and rule policy, "the British had manipulated and exacerbated ethnic, religious, and the tribal differences in most of their colonies to ensure their own survival in the face of resistance from emerging freedom movements" (Amritjit Singh, Iyer and Gairola xvi).

As a social and political construct, the idea of the nation became more influential as other imaginaries waned. Indian thinkers, such as Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha, have disagreed with the European model of the nation. As understood by Benedict Anderson, the idea of a nation is finite with boundaries and sovereign. However, India as a country challenges the definition given by Benedict Anderson. The argument is that the Western theory of the nation does not

sufficiently capture the nuances of the Indian subcontinent for two reasons. One, India is understood as a nation with many sub-nations, and two, people's imagination in the region is not necessarily shaped by an overarching idea of the nation. Along with religion, language, culture, region and heritage also give people their identity. Identities in the subcontinent have their contact zones with other groups and many groups of people exist on the cusp of identities that challenge the rigid identitarian grid. The way society operates in the subcontinent, it cannot be understood within the homogenous frame of the nation. For example, different communities in Punjab, such as Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, share a common linguistic, literary and cultural heritage. Despite their different religious identities, these three dominant communities of Punjab have a common linguistic, cultural and geographical identity, i.e., Punjabi. Despite a common umbrella identity of Punjabi, Sikhs and Muslims imagine themselves as different qaums, which is not exactly similar to the concept of the nation. While a nation is more of a political entity, qaum is more of a cultural concept. While sharing a few common points, they are highly distinct categories. To understand the dynamics of identities in the Indian subcontinent and their relationship with the homeland and country in the wake of Partition, it is important to engage with concepts such as watan, mulk and qaum. In the subcontinent, the concepts of watan and qaum have existed in the collective historical consciousness, which clashed with the modern national imagination during the colonial period. Thus, theorising the relationship between watan and mulk vis-à-vis qaum is important to understand the dynamics of identity in India.

Partition, Identity Politics and the Schism between Watan, MulK and Qaum

The term watan refers to one's homeland or birthplace. However, the idea of watan is broader than that of home. The

relationship between home and homeland traverses from a palpable geographical territory to its emotional and cultural connotations. The polysemic word ‘home’ refers to the place of dwelling, homeland and its heritage. Home evokes the idea of a secure dwelling, whereas the meaning of homeland is wider. Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2022) are of the view that home can be a place or a set of feelings and cultural value ascribed to it, and the relationship between the two. The idea of homeland resonates with a deeper and emotional relationship with its culture, history and heritage associated with a geographical territory, contributing to one’s ethnic, cultural and national identity. In German, three different words - heim, zuhause and heimat – are used for home. “Heim more often refers to the specific location or building and heimat is often translated as homeland, connotes more affective qualities of belonging, and is often associated with a particular region” (Kunz 62). Similarly, in Punjabi and Hindustani, the word ghar and in Hindi, des are used to indicate home, the dwelling place, and at times, also the homeland. Its cultural connotations bring it closer to one’s land of birth, which is central to one’s imagination of a nation as well. Ismail Alatas discusses how the connotations of watan changed over a period of time. “Traditionally, watan was a term used to denote one’s birthplace or place of residence without any formal political connotations” (Alatas 258); but, under the influence of French ideologies, the narrow and personal concept of watan was transformed “into a concept of fatherland imbued with patriotism” (260). Thus, the idea of watan sprouts from a place of birth, and it grows wider in scope to include the land where one is born, the memory of family and ancestors, the geography associated with it and the heritage of the land.

Mulk, on the other hand, is more of an administrative term. It has connotations of country, which can also refer to a sovereign state or control. In Islamic thought, the word mulk is associated with dominion, power and control, either of God, an

emperor or a modern state. Mulk stands very close to the concept of the modern State, exercising its power over a territory and people. If one's place of birth is also the country one is a citizen of, this makes the relationship between watan and mulk organic. The concepts of watan (homeland) and mulk (country) overlap and can be used interchangeably. Sometimes, a person may become a citizen of a country different from his/her homeland, which hints towards the gap between one's watan and mulk. During the Partition, those who migrated from one country to another were separated from their watan and given a new mulk.

The concept of qaum, as understood in the subcontinent, is a complicated phenomenon. The word qaum is Arabic for tribe, people, community with a shared culture, history and heritage, and also for a nation. Muslim identity has generally been understood with reference to ummah, qaum and millat. In addition to religion and theology, culture and language have also been important components of identity in the subcontinent, and should be included in the ambit of understanding the Muslim identity. Ali Khan Mahmudabad's (2020) and Carimo Mohamed's (2021) ideas revolve around qaum, millat and watan, while Tanweer Fazal (2022) focuses on ummah, qaum and watan. Sir Mohammad Iqbal, the famous poet, contributed to political thought during the colonial rule. His ideas were crucial in giving Muslims a sense of identity. He was in favour of a collective Muslim identity based on the millat over territorial nationalism. He imagined a society based on the "Islamic principles of brotherhood and equality," which became the fulcrum of the idea of Muslim qaum.^[ii] However, Zahack Tanvir understands qaum as a constitutional category, not religious, unlike Iqbal, who used religion as the central point to define the concept of qaum.^[iii]

During the colonial rule, the demand for a separate country for Muslims and non-Muslims defined qaum primarily on the basis of religion. Ali Khan Mahmudabad is critical of Iqbal for

making religion central while linking the concept of qaum to the nation. While the concept of the nation captured people's imagination, religious identity took precedence over other factors. Commenting on the crisis perpetrated by the Partition, Andaleeb Rehman opines that during the Partition, "People had to make a choice (either by force or voluntarily) between their watan, qaum and mulk." Andaleeb Rehman's usage of qaum here differs from Zahack Tanvir's argument. The latter understands the concept of qaum in relation to modern nation-states, whereas Andaleeb Rehman's usage brings to the surface the dominance of religion while imagining qaum and demanding a separate country for a qaum. The idea of qaum based on religion became a crucial factor which fostered nationalist imagination during the colonial period and the demand for a separate country for Muslims. Thus, the term qaum is understood as a group of people or a community or a nation, watan stands for homeland and mulk is used for country and state.

The idea of the nation imagined during the colonial period changed the earlier relationship between people and their homeland. In the Indian subcontinent, people from different communities, such as Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, have been living together, sharing the same culture, language and heritage. Partition severed people's centuries-old ties to their homeland (watan) and gave them a new country (mulk), a manifestation of the new imagination of the nation (qaum). Ham-watan people, who belonged to the same land and shared a common language, culture and heritage, were separated from one another as the new idea of qaum (nation), based on their religion, took precedence over earlier imaginings. The consequent rupture among watan, mulk and qaum made home, homeland and nation contested categories. The schism between watan and mulk caused by the Partition complicated the relationship of people (qaum) with the land they belong to, which became an important factor in changing the status of Muslims in post-Partition India.

Hindustani Cinema, Partition and the Indian Muslim

Immediately after independence, Hindustani cinema carried out the agenda of nation-building. The narrative patterns, the cinematic image, and the mass appeal of cinema played a significant role in giving people the visual imagery of the new nation. Despite narrating the nation, the mainstream cinema maintained silence over narrating the trauma of Partition. But for Lahore (M. L. Anand 1949) and Apna Desh (V. Shantaram 1949), there is no other major known film on Partition made immediately after the Partition. However, there are a few films made in the 1960s, such as Chhalia (Manmohan Desai 1960), Amar Rahe Yeh Pyar (Prabhu Dyal 1961) and Dharmputra (Yash Chopra 1961), but they failed to make a major impact. The first significant film that raised a debate in the public domain vis-à-vis Partition was M. S. Sathyu's Garm Hava (1973).

Based on a story written by Ismat Chughtai, Garm Hava is the most critically acclaimed film on Partition in Hindustani cinema for its nuanced representation. Without showing many visuals of violence, the film depicts the human cost of the Partition. The film does not show what happened during the Partition; rather, it narrates what followed it. While narrating the aftermath of Partition, it deals with the pain and strife of Muslims in post-Partition India and the challenges before India as a young nation-state. The screenplay of the film was written by Shama Zaidi and Kaifi Azmi. Ismat Chughtai, Shama Zaidi and Kaifi Azmi give the film its ideological complexion. Ismat Chughtai is a famous feminist Urdu writer, who is known for writing on the themes of femininity, female sexuality and challenging established social norms. Shama Zaidi is a famous screenplay writer and costume designer whose mother was closely associated with Habib Tanvir, the famous theatre personality in India. Her parents were part of the progressive movement of India. Kaifi Azmi is a renowned Urdu progressive

poet. According to Somdatta Mandal, while the original story by Ismat Chughtai focuses on the station master, Kaifi Azmi:

brought in his own experiences as a union leader, for the workers of a shoe manufacturing factory, to the film. He not just changed the profession of the film's protagonist, but also placed him right in the middle of the film's emotional cauldron, as he watches his livelihood [...] making the trauma of the Partition personal, compared to the original story, where the protagonist is a mere observer. (Mandal 62)

Set in Agra, the film tells the story of Salim Mirza (Balraj Sahni), the owner of a shoe factory, who decides to stay back in India after Partition. His elder brother, Halim Mirza, a member of the All India Muslim League, had quietly shifted to Pakistan. Salim Mirza has to bear the brunt of his brother's furtively going to Pakistan. In light of the changing social, economic and political environment, he faces numerous hardships. He loses his ancestral house and also his business, his younger son is not able to find a job, his daughter commits suicide as her prospective husband betrays her, and Salim Mirza is accused of spying against India. From the personal to the social and political, the layered narrative reveals the tragic circumstances that Salim Mirza undergoes, triggered by the Partition. Forced by his circumstances, Salim Mirza is left with no other choice but to leave India for good. Accepting Pakistan as his new country (mulk) and severing ties with India, his watan, is a difficult choice for Salim Mirza to make. He is tormented when forced to choose a new country (mulk) over his homeland (watan).

The opening scene of the film is a series of still frames of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and other leaders, followed by the celebration of India's freedom and people migrating during the Partition. The montage of still

frames ends with Mahatma Gandhi being shot dead, followed by Kaifi Azmi's rendition of a poem on Partition.

“Taqseem hua mulk to dil ho gaye tukde

Har seene mein toofan wahan bhi tha, yahn bhi

Har ghar mein chita jalti thi, lehrate they sholay Har
ghar mein shamshan wahan bhi tha, yahan bhi

Geeta ki koi suntan, na Quran ki sunta Hairan sa imaan,
wahan bhi tha, yahan hi”

(As the country was divided, many hearts were broken
A storm shook every heart on both sides of the border.

Every home became a picture of flying ambers and
burning pyres Hearth became a cremation ground on
both sides of the border.

No one heeds the message of the Geeta or the Quran
Human conscience is baffled on both sides of the
border.)^[iv]

As the rendition ends, Salim Mirza (Balraj Sahni) is at the railway station to see off his elder sister, who is moving to Karachi, Pakistan, with her family. His conversation with the Tonga driver reveals that different members of his family are leaving India one by one. Amidst such testing circumstances, he delivers a message of hope and communal harmony to his workers at the shoe factory. Looking directly into the camera, Salim Mirza says that Mahatma Gandhi's martyrdom shall not go to waste. He hopes that Muslims and Hindus will live peacefully in independent India. Salim Mirza addresses the audience by looking directly into the camera on a couple of occasions in the film. In another scene, Salim Mirza wishes to raise a loan to boost his business. The bank officer, who is not shown in the frame, refuses to grant him a loan. The bank

manager is of the opinion that many Muslims have left India and the shoe industry is severely hit by the Partition. Salim Mirza looks directly into the camera and says – “Jo bhaagen hain, unki saza unhe kyon di jaye jo na bhaage hain, na bhaagna chahte hain?” (Why should they be punished who have neither fled nor do they wish to flee?).^[v] M. S. Sathyu’s use of the Brechtian technique of alienation effect in the film is a way of establishing a dialectical relationship with the audience: “Marxist dialectics that becomes vital for Brecht’s use of dialectics as both characteristic of the social relations in which he lives and as a dramaturgical strategy for turning spectators into dialecticians” (Stevens 25). As Brecht himself preferred the term dialectical theatre over epic theatre, the term dialectical was useful in highlighting the contradictions to understand imperfections in a society. It became the filmmaker’s way and method of engaging with society and socio-political reality, which subtly destabilises the formalistic realism in the film and brings the audience’s attention to the then social and political situation of India. The technique helps to shake the audience out of complacency to make them think about the consequences of the Partition and the status of Muslims in independent India. M.S. Sathyu’s use of the Brechtian technique includes the audience in the narrative. Making the audience a participant stirs their conscience and prompts the nation to reflect on the inherent contradictions of the Partition, its consequences, and the challenges it poses vis-à-vis the status of Muslims in post-Partition India. The film also debunks the popular notion that all Muslims were in favour of Partition and also that they moved to Pakistan conveniently, as Pakistan was conceived as a land for Muslims.^[vi]

Changing social, political and economic circumstances force Salim Mirza’s family to consider leaving India. Before Salim Mirza announces that he has decided to leave India, he goes out for a walk. The camera shows the Taj in the background while Salim Mirza wipes off his tears. Extreme long shots, showing the architectural beauty of Sikri and the Taj Mahal, bring forth the shared history

and culture of Hindustan. The tangible sites of memory and common heritage become the pivot of the collective memory of characters in the film and viewers watching the film alike. Besides narrating Salim Mirza's pain, the film also reminds the viewers that this land had been a home or watan to Muslims, who had contributed to the economy and culture of the land. In the last scene, on the way to the railway station, Salim Mirza and his family get caught up in a protest. The protestors are demanding secular politics and jobs in the country, carrying placards with the insignia of the communist party. After deciding against going to Pakistan, Salim Mirza's son joins the protest, and Salim Mirza also follows him, signifying their choosing the homeland (watan) over the new country (mulk), with all its problems and challenges. Making a statement against communalism, the film ends on the note of suggesting the vision of a secular India where the questions of jobs and employment are more important than religion-based divisive politics.

Home, nation, and migration are the pillars of the architectonics of the narrative. The film plays on the categories of watan and mulk vis-à-vis qaum through the metaphorical question of home. Made after the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war and the formation of Bangladesh, there were apprehensions that a film based on Partition might result in generating anti-Muslim sentiment or riots in India.^[vii] But *Garm Hava* is neither an anti-Pakistan nor is it an anti-Muslim film. It depicts the series of tragic events in the lives of a Muslim family triggered by the Partition and the pain of losing one's home, both literal and metaphorical. Salim Mirza struggles to keep his dying business alive after the Partition and to save his ancestral house. His ancestral haveli has been classified as 'evacuee property' because Salim Mirza's brother, Halim Mirza, did not transfer the ownership of the house to Salim Mirza before going to Pakistan. After losing the ancestral house or haveli, the homeless Salim Mirza has no other option but to look for a new dwelling in his hometown. Salim Mirza's mother's refusal to leave the ancestral

haveli, her dying in the ancestral house, and Salim Mirza's search for a new house on rent bring the idea of losing the home to the fore. Salim Mirza's becoming homeless in his hometown is symbolic of Indian Muslims losing their homes in their homeland in the wake of the Partition and increasing communal sentiment after the Partition. The film narrates the situation of all those Muslims who chose to stay back in India after the Partition. Having become estranged citizens in their own homeland, they have become homeless at home. "In September 1948, *Filmindia* magazine described Muslims who remained in post-Partition India as 'the living dead': they were 'orphans in their own land', who were paying 'for the sins of others' (i.e. the sins of separatist Muslims). *Garm Hava* represents the predicament of one such Muslim family of Agra" (Sarkar 149). The film does not even portray the tragic events of the Partition in a melodramatic fashion, nor does it digress into jingoistic nationalism; rather, the film raises a sensitive question about the status of Muslims in post-partition India in a nuanced manner. It is a narrative of displacement, alienation and homelessness in post-Partition India. It narrates the question of the Muslim minority in India, which remains unresolved even today.

Mammo (1994) by Shyam Benegal is the story of a Muslim woman's search for a home in post-Partition India. Made in the times of changing socio-political atmosphere of India, the film seams the history of Partition with the infamous Bombay (now Mumbai) riots, which had taken place immediately before the film was made. Written by Khaled Mohammed, Shama Zaidi, and Javed Siddiqui, the film tells the story of a Muslim woman, Mahmooda Begum aka Mammo (Farida Jalal), who was born in Panipat in British India. Consequent upon her marriage and the Partition of India, she became a Pakistani national. As she has been abandoned by her in-laws and has no home of her own, she hopes to find a home for herself in Mumbai, India, where her sister lives. But her hopes are thwarted by the Indian bureaucracy on account of her Pakistani national identity.

She struggles against her odd fate to find a home in a world complicated by her national identity and Partition, and as a woman, she struggles in a patriarchal world after being thrown out by her in-laws. She is a victim of patriarchy, borders and identities. The dual identity given to her by the Partition creates an unbridgeable gulf between her watan (India), where she was born, and the new national identity she was given after her marriage. While talking to the young Riyaaz, her sister's grandson, she often talks about the pull of watan ki mitti (the homeland). The song, "Yeh faasle teri galion ke hamse tai na hue" (The long road to home I could not take) aptly expresses the pain of a homeless woman caught between identities and borders. "Yeh kaisi sarhadein uljhi hui hain pairon mein,/ Hum apne ghar ki taraf *uth ke baar baar chale*" (What web of borders is entwined around my feet? Every step I take, I walk back to my home.)^[viii] encapsulates her journey, circumscribed by the desire to go back to her home and the challenges therein. Her relationship with her homeland has been made complicated by the tragic turn of history and the bureaucracy of two newly formed nation-states.

While narrating the situation of a homeless woman, cutting across history, culture and politics, the film touches on the issue of the Muslim minority in India. The decade of the 1980s laid down the foundation for the new political narrative, which gained popularity in the 1990s. Privatisation of economy, beginning of consumerist culture, TV sets becoming a part of every household, telecast of serials like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Tamas, Buniyaad; political controversies like Shah Bano Case and Babri Masjid during the period of Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as the Prime Minister of India, accompanied by unstable coalition governments prepared the ground for the BJP to emerge as an alternative in Indian politics, which the people of India willingly embraced. Indian masses gradually started accepting the new political discourse emerging in the country

(Sachdeva 2015). However, the immediate cause behind making Mammo was not only the changing political complexion of the country, but also the infamous Bombay blasts.

On December 6, 1992, the demolition of the Babri Masjid was broadcasted on the BBC. As Menon describes, later at night, riots erupted in different areas of Bombay. Shyam Benegal responded to the new political situation and an emergent crisis in India by making a Muslim trilogy.^[ix] Mammo is the first film in the series. Made immediately after the Bombay riots with Partition running in the backdrop and intertextuality with Garm Hava, the film comments on the then socio-political crisis of India, caused by the changing political environment of the country. The use of Garm Hava, Gulzar's story on Partition,^[x] and by invoking Manto and Faiz, the film "raises the issue of identity politics, communal violence, two-nation theory" (Sachdeva 70) and its legacy. The film underlines the cost paid by ordinary men and women during the Partition by highlighting the "anguish of forced migration and displacement from "home/nation"" (Needham 95). It is a "narrative of dislocation and dispossession" (Datta 193) which "unobtrusively confronts the question of a land and its people torn apart by artificial borders" (Datta 191). Mammo, as a film, establishes an ideological and thematic connection with Garm Hava, hinting at the unresolved questions posed by the Partition. While watching Garm Hava with Riyaz, Mammo is reminded of her trauma of being uprooted from her homeland. She tells the young Riyaz the stories of the Partition, people's migration and the loss of human lives. In her stories, the trauma of the Partition surfaces. The film establishes an artistic connection with history and politics to initiate an ideological debate around the new idea of India gaining popularity in the wake of liberalisation, the rise of Hindutva ideology and the bomb blasts.

Conclusion

These films narrate two situations in which the question of home acquires the central position. The Partition in these two films is not seen from the point of view of those who migrated from Pakistan to India, but from the point of view of those who decided to stay in India. The film highlights the ruptures in the composite society of India. There is a conflict between their relationship with their homeland, and people's changing attitudes and the state bureaucracy. Both films narrate the challenges faced by Muslims in post-Partition India. The tension between watan and mulk caused by the two-nation theory, identity politics and Partition runs in the undercurrents of these narratives. These films narrate the stories of people who were rendered homeless at home. Instead of narrating the trauma of being uprooted from the homeland, these films narrate situations in which Muslims are alienated in their own homeland. Salim Mirza loses the ancestral haveli. He looks for a new home in the city where he was born. Mammo, who was born in India, is given a new national identity and becomes an outsider in her own homeland or watan. After being rendered homeless, both Salim Mirza and Mammo struggle to claim a home in post-Partition India. Salim Mirza and his son claim their home by joining the protest; Mammo claims her home by subverting bureaucracy and producing a fake death certificate. Their condition becomes analogous to the state of homelessness, a state of exile at home, experienced by Indian Muslims. Generally, exile in the context of the Partition is understood in terms of homelessness, displacement and alienation experienced by those who migrated during the Partition; these films narrate the state of homelessness and alienation experienced by people at home. In this context, the state of exile is understood more in social and psychological terms than in territorial terms, which gives people a sense of being undesired, unwanted and alienated. It is more about denying people their 'home' and the subsequent feeling of alienation at the hands of power structures or groups. The concept is not absolute; it is relative and context-specific.

These two films critically engage with national debates and unresolved question of the Muslim minority in two different social, historical and political contexts. M.S. Sathyu's *Garam Hava* begins with the hope of communal harmony in independent India, an idea central to the Nehruvian vision of India; whereas Shyam Benegal's *Mammo* responds to the failure of the Nehruvian vision. Under the consolidation of the right-wing ideology, the Bombay riots were seen as the "beginning of the end of the Nehruvian vision of a modern, secular, welfare state" (Pandey 6). *Mammo*'s problematic relationship with the modern nation-state and her state of homelessness is rooted in the history of the Partition. The issue of the Muslim minority in India became an important question to reflect on in the wake of the riots. Moving away from the 'historian's histories,'^[xi] *Garam Hava* and *Mammo* narrate the Partition from the point of view of ordinary people. These films remind the audience that, along with international borders that divide two nations, there are internal borders along communal lines that continue to divide people along communal lines in independent India. "*Mammo* is a film that demonstrates how the Partition is not yet over. The survivors are still dealing with its fall-out as the two nation-states, India and Pakistan, play out their political tensions in a manner that heartlessly ignores the lives of individuals caught in the literal and metaphorical crossfire" (Bhaskar and Allen 311).

The communal tension running in the undercurrents of Indian politics, civic life and complicated identities is the legacy of the Partition, which asserts itself time and again in the political rhetoric of the country, in the performance of nationalism on streets, during communal riots and while displaying hatred against Muslims, in subtle and blatant forms. The Partition cannot be understood as an episode that happened once and got over; rather, it is an incessant narrative with its corollaries in the history, culture and politics of contemporary India. It becomes an ongoing event which acquires different forms at different moments.

Instead of solving the problems, the Partition created a new set of challenges that continue to bother India even today. Partition “did not resolve questions of citizenship, identity, language, culture, and belonging for diverse groups” (Amritjit Singh, Iyer and Gairola xiv); rather, it has made the relationship of Muslims in a Hindu-majoritarian India ambivalent. The “national ideologies of perceiving Pakistan as an enemy state and supported by a state-sanctioned selective memory” (Mohanram 7) facilitate associating all Indian Muslims with Pakistan, an enemy state. Those who were uprooted from their homeland (watan) and migrated to India during the Partition were given a new country (mulk). No doubt, they were called sharnarths and refugees by people, but they were accepted by the State and became its citizens through the principle of domicile.^[xiii] Whereas those who were born in India and chose to stay in India, thinking that India was their homeland (watan), became estranged citizens and the perpetual Other of a Hindu-majoritarian country. The migrants lost their watan, but they were given a new mulk; while the Otherized Muslims in India did not lose their watan, yet they are denied their mulk. They become easy targets of hatred and anger, reducing them to disenfranchised citizens of India. Thus, making watan, mulk and qaum as contested categories in post-Partition India at multiple levels. “Post-Partition, the political context for Muslims had completely inversed. Amidst allegations of vivisectioning the country and suspected on account of their loyalty” (Fazal 5), they become easy targets of hatred. Their loyalty to the country is easily doubted. Salim Mirza in *Garm Hava* exemplifies this tendency.

The attempt in this paper has been to understand the status of Muslims in India, their state of homelessness and their struggle to find a home for themselves. The rupture between the categories of watan and mulk is the result of the conceptual and epistemic violence during the Partition. In light of the above, both films are narratives of alienation, ostracisation and resistance. It is the chasm between home and homeland, and the state of homelessness that these films negotiate with. The

questions raised in these two films are relevant even to contemporary India. These films sensitise the audience about the constant Otherisation of Muslims, the human cost of the Partition and bring to the surface the challenges posed by the two-nation theory and identity politics. The divisive politics over religious identities, communal riots, and hatred for the Other constitute the legacy of the Partition, which continues to haunt India even today. As they are alienated in their homeland and their relationship with their watan is estranged, their condition of homelessness and its pain are aptly expressed in another couplet (sheyar) of the same ghazal used in Mammo.

“Na jaane kaun si matti watan ki matti thi Nazar mein
dhool jigar mein liye gubar chaley” (How strange the love
for homeland is!

A speck of dust in the eye, a cloud in my heart I carry)^[xiii]

End Notes

- i. Translated by the author
- ii. Pan-Islamism and National Identity During the Colonial Period: Mohammad Iqbal • PolSci Institute
- iii. Opinion | Qaum Is A National Identity, Not A Religious One | Opinion News - News18
- iv. Author’s Translation
- v. Author’s Translation
- vi. Shamsul Islam builds an argument that there was support for an undivided India among Muslims during the British times. Shamsul Islam, *Muslims Against Partition of India* (New Delhi: Pharos, 2018).
- vii. For details, please visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RCpz7MKN-4>
- viii. Author’s translation
- ix. The trilogy includes Mammo, Sardari Begum and Zubeidaa.
- x. It is a story that Mammo tells Riyaz a story of Partition to share her experiences of Partition. This story is originally written by Gulzar and has been used in the film.
- xi. It refers to Gyanendra Pandey’s use of the phrase in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*.

- xii. Radhika Mohanram argues in her chapter that domicile became a criterion to give citizenship in India after independence. Radhika Mohanram, 'Specters of Democracy/The Gender of Specters: Cultural Memory and the Indian Partition', in *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul K. Gairola (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2016): 3–20.
- xiii. Author's Translation

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Beyond the Period Hut: A Theoretical Reflection of Menstrual Seclusion and Gender Inequality in Gaokor: A Period House

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Abstract

The short film *Gaokor: A Period House* (2018), set in a rural village in Maharashtra, depicts the sufferings of menstruating women in small, isolated huts implicating their physical separation, restricted mobility and social exclusion. These visual narratives reveal how menstruation is culturally constructed as a matter of impurity, reinforcing silence and shame around women's bodies. Using Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, the *Gaokor* can be understood as the true reflection of menstruation where social norms regulate women's bodies through internalised control and community surveillance. Goffman's theory of stigma explores how these practices present menstruating women as socially "other", creating psychological distress, frustrations and reinforcing gendered understandings. The film demonstrates the intersection of power, stigma and health; isolation in *Gaokor* forces women to stay in unhygienic conditions, emotional stress and limited participation in public life. Analysed from the perspectives of community health, *Gaokor* illustrates how socio-cultural norms operate as structural determinants of health, shaping women's lived experiences and access to well-being. This theoretical analysis underscores that menstrual seclusion is not merely a tradition, but a manifestation of power and stigma.

Keywords: Disciplinary Power, *Gaokor*, Gender Inequality, Menstrual Seclusion, Stigma Theory, Women's Health

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Introduction

Although menstruation is a natural biological process, it is heavily regulated and stigmatised in many parts of India, where cultural norms continue to shape how menstruating bodies are controlled and monitored. The short film *Gaokor: A Period House* (2018), set in rural Maharashtra, visualises menstruating women being confined to small, isolated huts, excluded from kitchens, temples, and public spaces, and often made to sleep on bare floors, reflecting deep-rooted beliefs that construct menstruation as impure. This is visually evident in the scene where a young girl, at the onset of menstruation, is quietly instructed to leave the household and move towards the Gaokor without protest. The absence of dialogue in this moment proves how seclusion is normalised and internalised in our everyday life. Such spatial and social segregation exemplifies how menstrual stigma is embedded in everyday life, legitimising cultural practices that restrict mobility and regulate women's bodies. From a post-structuralist perspective, Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power provides an analytical foundation for understanding how such practices function as mechanisms of bodily regulation (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 137–38). Power, in this sense, operates not only through formal institutions but through subtle, internalised norms that shape behaviour. In *Gaokor*, the logic of seclusion becomes a disciplinary practice where women internalise expectations of withdrawal, and their movements are monitored by family and community members (Bobel 281). For instance, the girl's silent acceptance and immediate withdrawal from domestic space demonstrate how control operates through internalised expectations rather than coercion. Her actions reflect what Foucault describes as the production of "docile bodies," where individuals regulate themselves in anticipation of social judgement (*Discipline and Punish* 93). The hut, thus, becomes a micro-site of power where docile bodies are produced through culturally sanctioned surveillance. Simultaneously, Goffman's

theory of stigma explains the psychosocial consequences of menstrual seclusion (Goffman 3). Women confined to Gaokor are socially “othered,” marked as impure, and excluded from communal life, resulting in shame, emotional distress, and diminished social identity. This is further illustrated in scenes where food is provided separately to the menstruating woman, often without direct contact, reinforcing her temporary status as “impure.” Such practices transform menstruation into a socially discrediting condition, aligning with Goffman’s understanding of stigma (Goffman 3). This stigma is not an isolated experience but a social process maintained through collective reinforcement of menstrual taboos (Hennegan et al.7).

Cinematic representations also play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of menstruation. Scholars argue that film and media often reproduce cultural anxieties around menstruation, reinforcing silence, stigma, and bodily regulation (Rosewarne, ch.1; Kissling 5-12). Gaokor becomes part of this cinematic lineage, visually capturing how spatial confinement and social exclusion intersect with gendered norms. Integrating these frameworks within the Social Determinants of Health model of the World Health Organisation highlights how menstrual seclusion affects both physical and mental well-being. Exposure to unhygienic conditions, lack of rest, restricted diet, social isolation, and psychological stress all emerge as direct consequences of stigma-driven practices (Sumpter and Torondel 8). The film shows these conditions through the visual portrayal of women resting on bare floors inside the Gaokor, without adequate bedding or sanitation, highlighting the material consequences of culturally sanctioned isolation. These practices further reinforce gendered inequalities by limiting access to education, labour, and community participation. Understanding menstrual seclusion through these theoretical, sociocultural, and cinematic lenses highlights the need for interventions that address not only hygiene-related challenges but also the broader cultural, structural, and symbolic forces that shape menstrual

experiences. Promoting gender equality must therefore involve dismantling the disciplinary and stigmatising practices that undermine women's dignity, agency, and overall well-being.

The main objective of this paper is to critically examine how menstrual seclusion practices depicted in the short film *Gaokor: A Period House* function as mechanisms of disciplinary power and social stigma, and how these practices collectively shape women's physical, psychological and social well-being. This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, using the short film *Gaokor* as a primary cultural text to explore the intersections of gender, health and stigma. This analysis is theoretical and discursive, seeking to interpret how menstrual seclusion is represented, normalised and internalised within the socio-cultural context depicted in the film.

Power, Stigma and the Regulation of the Menstruating Body: A Theoretical Analysis

The short film *Gaokor* unfolds as a stark representation of how menstrual seclusion continues to shape women's lived realities in many rural settings in India. Beyond a mere depiction of custom, the film exposes how menstruation is conceptualised as impure and how such impurity is systemically institutionalised through everyday spaces, attitudes, gestures and silences. The discussion interprets this practice through the theoretical perspective of Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Goffman's stigma theory connecting both to the wider discourse of gendered inequality in health and social participation.

Foucault claims that modern societies operate through "micro-physics of power," where bodies are regulated not by overt coercion but by subtle systems of observation, normalisation, and internalisation (Discipline and Punish 26–27). The *Gaokor*—the hut where menstruating women are secluded acts as one such disciplinary space. It reflects what

Foucault calls a panoptic structure, where women are not directly forced but learn to regulate their own behaviour through the expectation of social scrutiny and moral judgement. The isolation of women during menstruation is presented as voluntary adherence to menstrual expectations, yet it reflects how power is embedded within social consent. The hut becomes both a symbol and a mechanism of control; it separates, classifies and contains. Women's bodies are considered as "polluting" and spatially excluded, reinforcing what Foucault described as the "docile body"—a body made compliant through repetition and moral obligation (*Discipline and Punish* 135–69). In this sense, menstrual seclusion in *Gaokor* functions as a disciplinary technology that reproduces gender hierarchy under the guise of cultural sacredness.

Goffman defined stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting," reducing individuals "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 3). In the film, menstruation is constructed precisely as a temporary yet deeply stigmatised identity. The practice of isolating menstruating women transforms a natural biological process into a moral deviation, and the *Gaokor* becomes both the site and symbol of this practice. The women in the film do not resist seclusion but perform it as a social expectation. Their silence and compliance reveal what Goffman calls "normative adjustment to a spoiled identity" (Goffman 31). Shame becomes internalised; stigma is no longer an external mark but a psychological condition. Through the ritual of exclusion, menstruation becomes both invisible and hyper-visible; erased from conversation yet constantly marked through behavioural restrictions. This stigma is reinforced by community validation and expectation. Elders, often women themselves, act as custodians of purity codes, demonstrating how the cycle of exclusion is perpetuated by intergenerational socialisation. Thus, *Gaokor* illustrates Goffman's observation that stigma is "not a property of a person but a relationship between attribute and stereotype"—a cultural

construct that maintains social cohesion at the expense of individual dignity (Goffman 3).

The Gaokor is not only a social construct but also a determinant of health. Restricted access to sanitation, nutrition and safe shelter during seclusion creates tangible health risks, including infection, malnutrition and exposure to harsh conditions. Psychologically, isolation deepens feelings of inferiority and emotional distress, contributing to a sense of embodied shame and insult of womanhood. These health inequities are inseparable from the gendered power relations that sustain them. As Foucault suggests, power “produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (*Discipline and Punish* 194). Menstruation, as seen in Gaokor, is rendered an object of impurity, and the truth of womanhood becomes defined through compliance with that belief. Health, therefore, cannot be addressed merely as a medical issue—it is connected to society and politics. Achieving well-being requires dismantling the structures of stigma and surveillance that control women’s bodies. The film’s silences, its minimal dialogue and intense focus on space and expression, function as what Foucault would term a “discursive silence” (*History of Sexuality* 27). This silence speaks of the power to define what can be said and what must remain unspoken. In community contexts, such silences reproduce ignorance and prevent health education from addressing menstruation openly. The near absence of open conversation about menstruation throughout the film reinforces this silence, where the subject remains unspoken yet strictly regulated within social practice.

Resistance, though subtle, is present in Gaokor through the visual language of discomfort, gaze and emotion. The film attracts the viewer to question the legitimacy of inherited norms. Subtle moments, such as hesitant movements, lowered gazes, or visible discomfort, suggest an underlying tension between compliance and personal experience, indicating that adherence

to the practice does not necessarily imply acceptance. According to Foucault, “where there is power, there is resistance,” and that resistance emerges from the margins of silence (*History of Sexuality* 95). Recognising menstrual seclusion as a public health concern rather than a cultural inevitability is an act of counter-discourse; an effort to reclaim menstruation as a dignified and natural experience. By reframing menstruation through the lens of health equity and human dignity, Gaokor contributes to the discourse of gender equality. It implicitly aligns with the vision of creating inclusive societies where gender does not determine access to safety, hygiene, or emotional well-being. Challenging menstrual stigma, therefore, is not merely about hygiene education—it is about transforming power relations and reconstituting womanhood beyond purity and pollution.

In essence, the Gaokor stands as both a literal structure and a metaphor for the architecture of gendered control. From a Foucauldian perspective, the Gaokor operates as a space of exercising disciplinary power. As Foucault asserts: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (*History of Sexuality* 93). The film shows women confined to small huts, separated from household and community spaces and constantly monitored by family and society. This spatial isolation exemplifies Foucault’s concept of micro-practices of power, where control is internalised, women regulate their own behaviour and movements in anticipation of social expectations. The Gaokor, hence, functions as a space of surveillance and self-discipline producing conformity to social norms around menstruation. Goffman’s theory of stigma further explores the psychosocial understanding of menstrual seclusion. He notes: “Stigma is an attribute that is deeply discrediting... reducing the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 3).

From a community health perspective, these practices bring physical risks. Physical health is compromised through exposure to unhygienic conditions, malnutrition and deficient rest, while psychological health suffers through emotional stress and social isolation. Moreover, the intersection of disciplinary power and stigma perpetuates structural gender inequalities, limiting women's access to education, work and social engagement. By linking visual evidence from the short film to these theories, it is evident that Gaokor is not merely a cultural practice but a complex social institution where power and stigma intersect, shaping both bodily and social experiences. Understanding menstrual seclusion in this way emphasises the need for culturally sensitive interventions that address harmful traditions while promoting women's dignity, autonomy, worth, and health.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of *Gaokor: A Period House* reveals several interconnected forms of disciplinary power, social stigma, and gendered exclusion that regulate menstruating women's lives. The spatial isolation imposed through the Gaokor operates as a disciplinary mechanism that normalises women's bodily regulation. Women internalise expectations of withdrawal and purity, demonstrating the micro-practices of surveillance that Foucault describes as essential to producing compliant bodies. The hut's spatial separation—from household activities, food preparation, religious spaces, and social interaction—functions as an everyday technology of power. This is evident in the film when the girl is physically separated from the household and directed toward the isolated hut, reinforcing how spatial segregation is normalised within everyday practice.

The findings show that social labelling plays a crucial role in sustaining menstrual stigma. Women confined to the Gaokor are repeatedly marked as “impure,” reducing their social identity and reinforcing emotional distress. This reflects Goffman's

argument that stigma transforms a natural attribute into a socially discrediting condition. Shame, embarrassment, and silence become internalised, sustaining cultural myths surrounding menstruation. The visual depiction of separate food arrangements and lack of physical interaction further emphasises how this conception of impurity is enacted in daily life. It also reveals that power and stigma intersect to produce significant health impacts. Restrictions on diet, mobility, and hygiene expose women to physical risk, while psychological effects such as anxiety, loneliness, and diminished self-worth become visible in their lived experiences. These health risks align with global research demonstrating that menstrual stigma undermines well-being, educational continuity, and social participation.

The film demonstrates how menstrual seclusion diminishes agency. The practice restricts participation in decision-making, community events, and labour, reinforcing structural gender inequities that frame women as subordinate to cultural doctrines of purity. The Gaokor, therefore, operates as both a literal and metaphorical structure of gendered control. The findings highlight the urgency of culturally sensitive community health interventions. Challenging menstrual seclusion requires dialogic engagement with communities, health workers, and educators, along with efforts to dismantle silence and misinformation. The film creates an opening for counter-discourse by visually exposing restrictive norms and encouraging viewers to critically evaluate the cultural logic that underpins menstrual seclusion.

The discussion on Gaokor: A Period House can be organised under following interconnected thematic dimensions that reveal how menstrual seclusion operates as a system of disciplinary power, stigma, and structural inequality:

Disciplinary Power and Spatial Control

Beyond functioning as a physical space of confinement, the Gaokor operates as what Foucault conceptualises as a disciplinary architecture, a structure designed to regulate behaviour through spatial arrangement and symbolic exclusion. The hut's location at the margins of the village reinforces its association with impurity, restricting women's movements not only through physical separation but through the anticipation of moral surveillance. This is evident in the scene where the young girl, immediately after menarche, is directed to leave the household and walk alone toward the isolated hut without resistance or questioning. The absence of overt enforcement in this moment highlights how discipline is internalised. Women regulate how they sit, sleep, eat, and interact, becoming agents of their own control within a micro-regime of discipline.

This spatial regulation is further intensified by the cyclical nature of menstruation. Unlike one-time rituals, menstrual seclusion recurs monthly, embedding discipline within the rhythms of everyday life. Each cycle reinforces women's subordinate relationship to space, mobility, and social roles, as subtly suggested through the film's repeated visual return to the hut. In this sense, menstruation becomes a recurring moment where power relations are re-established and normalised. Moreover, the physical separation between the household and the Gaokor reflects a broader gendered division of space, where "pure" and "impure" domains are socially constructed and enforced. By confining women to the margins, menstruation becomes a mechanism for policing where women can and cannot exist.

Stigma, Silence, and Social Identity

The regulation of menstruating bodies is sustained not only through spatial discipline but also through processes of stigma and silence. Drawing on Goffman's framework, menstruating

women in the film are constructed as temporarily “impure,” transforming a natural biological condition into a socially discrediting identity. This is reflected in scenes where food is placed at a distance for the menstruating woman, avoiding direct contact and reinforcing her exclusion from everyday interaction. Such practices illustrate how stigma operates as a mechanism of social order, maintaining hierarchical distinctions related to purity and pollution. This stigmatisation is deeply internalised, shaping women’s emotional experiences and behaviour. The film captures silent suffering, where women rarely question or resist seclusion. Their compliance reflects what Goffman describes as “normative adjustment,” as individuals manage their conduct to align with social expectations. Feelings of shame, fear of moral judgement, and the desire to preserve family honour become part of this emotional labour. The absence of verbal resistance, particularly in moments of visible discomfort or hesitation, highlights how stigma is lived psychologically as well as socially.

Silence plays a crucial role in sustaining this system. The near absence of dialogue in the film reflects a form of discursive silence, where menstruation remains unspoken yet strictly regulated. This silence prevents open discussion and reinforces ignorance, allowing stigma to persist across generations. Indeed, the role of elder women as custodians of menstrual norms demonstrates how these practices are transmitted intergenerationally. Mothers, grandmothers, and aunts normalise seclusion as a duty rather than a constraint, reinforcing Foucault’s argument that power circulates through familial and social institutions. In this context, menstrual seclusion may also be understood as a form of symbolic violence, where women accept restrictive practices as natural, masking underlying gendered oppression.

Health, Agency, and Structural Inequality

The implications of menstrual seclusion extend beyond symbolic regulation to significantly impact women's health and agency. From the perspective of the Social Determinants of Health, the Gaokor illustrates how material and social conditions interact to shape well-being. The depiction of women resting on bare floors without proper bedding or sanitation highlights the physical risks associated with seclusion, including exposure to unhygienic conditions, malnutrition, and fatigue. At the same time, social isolation contributes to psychological distress, reinforcing feelings of inferiority and exclusion.

These conditions also restrict women's autonomy and participation in everyday life. The enforced separation from household activities, particularly cooking and caregiving roles, limits women's decision-making power and reinforces their subordinate status. For adolescent girls, menstrual seclusion disrupts school attendance and social interaction, with long-term consequences for educational attainment and social mobility. These effects are further intensified by structural inequalities such as poverty and rural marginalisation, where limited access to sanitation and healthcare exacerbates the challenges faced by women. In this sense, menstrual seclusion emerges not merely as a cultural practice but as a structural determinant of gender inequality and health disparity.

Representation, Resistance, and the Need for Intervention

The film's cinematic language plays a critical role in exposing these structures of power and inequality. Through long, static shots, confined spaces, and minimal dialogue, Gaokor visually amplifies the isolation and silence experienced by menstruating women. The use of empty landscapes and shadowed interiors highlights their detachment from community life, transforming the film into a form of social critique that challenges normalised

practices. At the same time, the film reveals subtle moments of resistance. Gestures such as hesitation, discomfort, and reflective gazes suggest an underlying tension between compliance and personal experience. For instance, the young girl's pause before entering the hut or her backward glance toward the household indicates that adherence does not necessarily imply acceptance. These moments align with the idea that resistance exists within structures of power, even if it remains muted and symbolic.

The persistence of menstrual seclusion also highlights the need for culturally grounded interventions. The film suggests that material solutions alone, such as the provision of sanitary products, are insufficient to challenge deeply embedded norms. Effective interventions must engage with community beliefs, involve local stakeholders, and promote dialogue that redefines menstruation as a natural and dignified process. Addressing menstrual stigma therefore requires both structural and cultural transformation.

The analysis indicates that menstrual seclusion in Gaokor: A Period House functions as a complex system where disciplinary power, stigma, and structural inequality intersect. Spatial isolation emerges as a key mechanism of control, with the Gaokor operating as a site of surveillance that produces self-regulation and conformity to norms of purity. At the same time, social labelling reinforces stigma, marking menstruating women as "impure" and generating both psychological distress and social exclusion. The intersection of these processes produces significant health risks, including exposure to unhygienic conditions and emotional isolation, while also limiting women's agency and participation in education, labour, and community life.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that menstrual seclusion is sustained through intergenerational transmission and cultural

normalisation, making it resistant to change through material interventions alone. Addressing this practice therefore requires culturally sensitive approaches that challenge stigmatising beliefs, promote open dialogue, and involve community actors in reshaping norms. Theoretically, the integration of Foucauldian and Goffmanian perspectives demonstrates how power and stigma operate together to construct menstruation as a site of control, reinforcing broader structures of gender inequality.

Conclusion: Towards Dignity, Health and Social Inclusion

The short film *Gaokor* offers a powerful visual narrative of menstrual seclusion, revealing it not as an isolated cultural custom but as a deeply structured practice that shapes women's health, dignity, and social participation. The film's depiction of confinement, surveillance, and exclusion underscores how menstrual practices continue to operate as mechanisms of social control. As Foucault asserts, power circulates through everyday rituals that regulate bodies and normalise compliance (*Discipline and Punish* 135–69). In the context of *Gaokor*, disciplinary power is enacted through the spatial segregation of menstruating women, the moral policing performed by families and communities, and the internalisation of purity norms that dictate acceptable behaviour. The *Gaokor* becomes a disciplinary institution, a site where women learn to monitor their own movements, emotions, and interactions in anticipation of judgement. This normalisation of restriction demonstrates how power embeds itself in cultural expectations, subtly shaping bodily experiences and gendered identities.

Goffman's theory of stigma further illuminates how menstruating women in *Gaokor* are socially marked as "impure" and treated as outsiders within their own households and communities (Goffman 3). This labelling transforms a natural biological process into a socially discrediting condition,

producing emotions of shame, embarrassment, and psychological distress. Stigma, as Goffman argues, is relational, upheld through collective beliefs and social enforcement. In Gaokor, stigma not only isolates women physically but also symbolically delegitimises their social identity. Such marginalisation restricts their access to emotional support, education, labour, and community life, reinforcing entrenched gender hierarchies. Addressing the persistence of Gaokor practices therefore requires more than hygiene distribution or awareness programs; it demands a structural transformation of the socio-cultural systems that sustain menstrual stigma and bodily regulation. Policy and health interventions must simultaneously tackle material challenges—such as sanitation, nutrition, safety, and menstrual products—and symbolic challenges, including gendered myths, silence around menstruation, and the moral frameworks that define purity and pollution. Community-based dialogues, participatory health education, and culturally sensitive engagement with elders, religious leaders, and women’s groups are essential for reshaping attitudes and dismantling inherited norms.

Promoting menstrual dignity requires a shift from viewing menstruation as a contaminating condition to recognising it as a natural component of women’s health. Interventions informed by the Social Determinants of Health framework must therefore incorporate gender justice, bodily autonomy, and social inclusion. By integrating Foucauldian and Goffmanian lenses, this analysis shows that menstrual seclusion is not merely a tradition, but a socially embedded practice where power, stigma, and health intersect. Meaningful change must address both the structural mechanisms that discipline women’s bodies and the psychosocial processes that stigmatise them. Ultimately, dismantling the Gaokor as a physical and symbolic space is crucial for ensuring women’s dignity, agency, and well-being. A future directed toward gender equality must reject practices that confine, silence, and “other” menstruating women, and instead

cultivate a society where bodily processes are understood without shame and where women can participate freely, safely, and fully in community life. Discrimination only because of menstruation not only restricts women's right over their own bodies but also leads to continuation of gender inequality implicating women as inferior because of their biological difference. Hence, normalisation of menstruation as impure should be stopped and issues related to menstruation health and hygiene must be openly discussed to make people aware about the consequences which can arise from it.

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Representation of Disability and Goddess Manasa: A Comparative Study of Two Texts of Manasa Mangal

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Abstract

The medieval long narrative poems of Manasa Mangal[i] were and still are widely read and sung across rural Bengal; however, it is rarely taken into account that the goddess Manasa is presented as ‘disabled’ in the texts known as Mangal Kavyas. Various versions by different poets in medieval Bengal focused on different aspects of disability and ‘defects’ in her body. Interestingly, she is a goddess, a daughter of Lord Shiv, and the patron goddess of snakes. In the texts, she is worshipped as well as hated for several reasons, one of which is her disability and a lack of ‘goddessly beauty.’ Disability in these texts has rarely been studied using a systematic methodology and theoretical frameworks. This research intends to look at how the disability of goddess Manasa is represented in two major versions of Manasa Mangal, i.e. Manasamangal of Ketkadas Khemananada (17th Century) and Bijoy Gupta’s Manasamangal (1484-86), by utilising Disability Studies, feminist and caste discourses. The study provides an insight into the precolonial Indian/Bengali representation of disability in literary texts/mythology.

Keywords: Caste, Disability Studies, Feminist Disability Studies, Gender, Manasa Mangal, Medieval Bengali Literature, Snake Goddess

Introduction

Disability Studies have allowed us to re-read and re-examine texts, folklore, and myths with which we are very much familiar, yet we have not been able to distinguish the ‘disability’ or ‘impairment’ or the treatment of the same within that particular context of myth and folklore or other media of creative expressions. It is only in recent years that, through Disability

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Studies, we can look at individuals with ‘disability’ with a completely new perspective and a new set of understanding and one such text, rather a myth, is that of the goddess Manasa, the patron goddess of snakes. Each year, during the Bengali month of Srabon, corresponding to the English months of July-August, prayers are offered to her accompanied by performative rituals of acting and singing known as pala-gaan or mangal gaan or ‘auspicious songs’ sung in series in Bengali. These pala-gaans are usually based on the texts of Manasa Mangal, written by various poets in medieval Bengal between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the precolonial times. These long narrative poems in Bengali are known as ‘akhyan kavya’ and are based on myths^[iii] associated with the origin of different gods and goddesses—their birth and then subsequent establishment of their cult by the mortals. Chandi Mangal and Dharma Mangal are among others to mention. These texts are written in various regional and colloquial dialects of Bengal, before the so-called ‘standardisation’ of the Bangla language set by the European colonisers.

From medieval times to the present day, the myth of Manasa has been the subject of many literary and cinematic adaptations. Although the cult of Manasa had a Puranic origin, as Wendy Doniger^[iii] points out in her introduction to the book by Kaiser Haq titled *The Triumph of Snake Goddess Manasa* (2015), in the Bengali version of her myth, she is much indigenised, immensely influenced by local traditions rather than the Aryan or Sanskrit^[iv] traditions. Modern adaptations of Manasa in cinema and TV serials, such as in the cinema “মনসাকন্যা”^[v] or *Manasa Kanya* released in 1997, starring Tapas Paul, Sabitri Chatterji, Antara Sinha, and others, where she is depicted as a beautiful young goddess, more like a fair Aryan goddess such as Annapurna and Chandi^[vi], the two other goddesses of the Mangal Kavya tradition in medieval Bengal. But Manasa, in the versions of medieval Bengali writers, is ‘disabled’ as she is blind

in one eye i.e. she is a physically and visually impaired goddess. In different versions by different writers, her appearance is depicted in various ways — neither a good-looking goddess nor elegant — with a head like a fish or a snake. Perhaps it was because of her ‘disability’, apart from not being ‘fair’ as a goddess, that she had to fight her way into the Aryan (or Brahminic) pantheon. Although in the contemporary cinematic adaptations and or popular representations, Manasa’s disability is often overlooked, without them, Manasa’s being as a goddess is unimaginable. This research seeks to understand the representation of goddess Manasa’s disability and the treatment of it in two popular versions of *Manasa Mangal*—one by Ketkadas Khemananda titled *Manasa Mangal* and other one by Bijoy Gupta known as *Padmavati Kavya*.

Gender, Disability and the Goddess: A Multidimensional Approach

It is pertinent to chart some relevant theoretical propositions already laid down by noted scholars of Disability Studies before we undertake a critical analysis of the two select texts of *Manasa Mangal* to understand the representation of the goddess Manasa’s disability. At the outset of this study, it must be acknowledged that Manasa’s disability has to do more with her gender than the impairment she carries in her body. Gender and disability are both power relationships expressed through social structures and institutions, argues Nandini Ghosh in her article “Bhalo Meye: Cultural Construction of Gender and Disability in Bengal”^[vii]. She goes on to argue that gender has been conceptualised in human society through various power relationships expressed through social structures and institutions. She writes, “Gender uses culturally given and accepted ideologies to distinguish between activities, behaviour, norms, and representations accorded to the socially constructed genders, and to legitimise the sexual distinction between men and women in the society” (201). Dan Goodley, in his article

“Dis/entangling Critical Disability Studies” (2013), suggests that disability in certain contexts can be a form of social oppression, such as race or sex (632). In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson draws a parallel between female and disabled bodies, arguing that American society and literature construct and hierarchise certain body types as “monstrous,” “deformed,” or “disabled,” thereby distributing power, privilege, and social value unequally. Persons with disabilities stand at the receiving end of society and are thus defined by race, gender, patriarchy, and other parameters of hierarchy. Interestingly, Manasa in the selected texts becomes subject to oppression not only owing to her physical defect, but also to social and gendered exclusion.

Thomas J. Gerschik argues in his article “Toward a Theory of Disability and Gender” (2002) that disability plays an important role in processing and experiencing gender and persons with disabilities suffer discrimination and social exclusion and thus, “stigmatization is embedded in the daily interactions between people with disabilities and the temporarily able-bodied” (1264). Apart from the aforementioned discourses on politics and power, this too is relevant in this context. Among others, Abby Wilkerson, in her article “Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency” (2002), argues that this gendered treatment of individuals with disabilities is often seen not just as incompetent or incapable but also politically powerless. Similar is the case of Manasa; her disability is treated with a gendered approach, and she is considered a politically powerless opponent, one that a mortal human being can challenge and humiliate. Although the narrative ends with Manasa triumph, the treatment she has received leaves a permanent impression not only in her mind but also in the reader’s mind.

Disability and Gods/Goddesses: West and the East

There are several disabled gods in various mythologies across the world, and a sufficient amount of research has been done on these figures. Hephaestus is one disabled god in Greek mythology who has been subjected to endless discrimination despite the fact that he excelled in his skills otherwise. Interestingly, in Greek mythology, disability is treated as an incurable disease, something unnatural that cannot be lived with. In her article “Encountering the Disabled God” (2005), Nancy Eiesland talks about how the people (or gods) with disabilities have been subjected to prejudice and mistreatment in the major world religions like Judaism and Christianity (584). She suggests that there is a link between sin and disability; disability is the result of a sin (584), which is the most common assumption. Several scholars, such as Wendy Doniger, Edward C. Dimmock, A. K. Ramanujan, Roma Chatterji, Pranabandana Jash, and others have consistently worked on Indian mythologies, gods and mortals in various texts, particularly on that of the goddess Manasa and her cult. As mentioned before, Wendy Doniger in *The Triumph of Snake Goddess* traces the Puranic origin of Manasa. Whereas Dimmock, Ramanujan and Jash are interested in the figure of Manasa of an indigenous cult and how she is worshipped in various parts of Bengal and elsewhere, Chatterji is interested in the theatrical aspects of Manasa Mangal kavya. Little attempt is made to understand the fact that the goddess of snakes appears as a ‘disabled’ and thus she is (mis)treated in the texts. Thus, this paper also explores how this special case of the goddess Manasa intersects and engages with feminist and caste discourses.

Manasa Mangal: The Central Plotline

With some variations and local influences in different parts of Bengal, the central plotline of various Manasa Mangals remains the same. In the long narrative poem, a fierce fight breaks out

between goddess Manasa and her mortal counterpart, Chand Saodagor, a rich merchant. Manasa wants her cult to be established and worshipped continuously by the mortals. However, the main obstacle is Chand — a stubborn patriarch. As a rich merchant and a devotee of Shiv, he not only refuses to offer puja or worship Manasa but stops others from doing the same by using his financial and social influence. This enrages Manasa and she kills six of his sons. She even submerges the seven merchant ships in the water and destroys all his properties. Years later, Manasa even killed his youngest son, Lakindar, in his bridal chamber. But on the insistence of Behula (the newlywed wife of Lakhindar) and other gods in the court of the King of Gods, Indra, Manasa finally restores the lives of the seven sons of Chand at the end of the narrative poem. She also returns the seven canoes filled with merchandise by doubling them up, and finally, Chand, although reluctantly, starts worshipping Manasa. Her cult is finally established in the martya or the mundane humane world.

Disability/Impairment and Goddess Manasa

As it is stated earlier, the present study compares and analyses two different versions of Manasa Mangal to argue how Manasa's bodily 'defects' work as an agent that ensures her further marginalisation not just as a goddess but as a 'lower caste' ordinary woman. In short, the goddess is triply marginalised. The essence of purity, which is often associated with Vedic/Brahminic gods/goddesses, is subverted and often negotiated with her so-called low-caste identity and bodily defect. She remains a victim for most of the long narrative poem. She often becomes a sorrowful figure in the existing power structure, only waiting to be approved or graced by the (male Aryan/Brahminic) gods. In short, there are multiple patterns through which she is marginalised and a close study of the same might reveal a few.

Goddess Manasa is introduced as ‘loghujaati Kanee’^[viii] or ‘a low caste blind woman in one eye’ in Bijoy Gupta (66-67) and ‘Changmudi kani,’ ‘a fish-headed goddess’ in Ketkadas Khemananda (16). In the Bengali folklore/folk beliefs, she is popularly known as a goddess with one blind eye, sometimes toothless, old and vengeful. At the same time, she is venerated and worshipped for her generosity and her ability to bring back life from deaths caused by snakebites. In the two select texts, she is deeply despised, hated, and abused, both verbally and physically, especially by Chand, not only for being a patron goddess of snakes—an animal, abhorred by man—but also for being a disabled goddess. Thus, the select texts at this juncture pose certain questions about disability and Manasa’s identity as a goddess: How do we look here at the questions of disability of a goddess who is despised and venerated at the same time? How do we look at the questions of impairment and disability when she is on her own, trying to fight out a position for herself in the mainstream Aryan pantheon? The following paragraphs shall explore these relevant questions.

Both Ketkadas Khemananda and Gupta begin their texts in *medias res*, where we see Chand and Manasa appear as fierce antagonists engaged in a violent discord. The fight is between two individuals of completely contrasting and unequal positions. Manasa is the divine one, a daughter of Lord Shiv^[ix]. She is powerful. On the other side, Chand is a devotee of Shiv. He is proud of his Brahmin Aryan origin, and above all, he is a mortal human being. Then, can a mortal being engage in a fight against Manasa, a goddess? Is it just because she is disabled? Is her disability portrayed in such a way that she is lowered to the state of a mortal man? Is it because she does not look like one of the beautiful goddesses of the Aryan pantheon? In both texts, we see Manasa harm Chand by destroying his property or harming him physically. But in return, Chand abuses her severely, for being blind in one eye, for having a head shaped like a fish—narrow and shallow—and for being of low birth as she does not have a

biological mother and was born directly on a lotus leaf. In this instance, her divinity is compromised, and she is treated/marginalised like any other lower caste woman. In fact, she lost her divinity owing to her bodily defect, and she fights to regain it. Through this act of fighting or resistance, she frantically attempts to regain control over her bodily narratives. However, in the end, she is made to compromise.

In the selected texts, we see Manasa bringing attention to the fact that she felt insulted and pained by the abuses hurled at her by Chand. She says, “Chanoder bhotsone amar mone lage batha/ loghur opomane amar shorir bikol” translated as: “Chand’s insults strike me painfully/ He abuses me for my disabled body” (Gupta 80). The fight of ego has now shifted to a fight of dignity for Manasa, not just as a goddess but also as a disabled woman—a very gendered approach. Here, she loses control over her bodily narrative. Her disability and her lowly origin strip off her divine modesty and purity. Gradually, she appears to be rude and offensive, which might as well be seen as an act of resistance, particularly in the text of Bijoy Gupta, which is quite unlikely to be seen in a goddess of her stature. Bijoy Gupta describes: “Shuni Kop barlek debi Manasa”—Manasa is the one who gets angry quite easily (Gupta 45-46). As a result, more than a goddess who maintains her divine dignity, Manasa appears more like a bad-tempered woman—a stereotypical projection of a (lower caste/class) woman. Even though insults and humiliations often unsettle, belittle and anger her, she tries her best to maintain her ‘goddess-ly’ modesty and dignity. But in the end, she had to submit herself to vengeance. The negative connotation of her portrayal cannot escape a mindful reader. Eventually, Manasa’s sense of humiliation and alienation compelled her to kill the six sons of Chand, but as soon as she does that, she is overcome with regret and empathy. Poet Bijoy Gupta describes the state of mind of Manasa this way: “Ovmane podda bole ki kori upay./ loghur bhotsona aar sohon na jay” (Gupta 65), translated as “What could I do now, says Manasa in

dejection/ I cannot bear abuses by Chand any longer”^[x]. In such a way, Mansa is seen as alienated primarily based on her bodily impairment, which may have compelled her to take tough actions. Manasa is out of the norms of an ideal body. The need for an ideal or perfect body is urgent, as she is a goddess and is to be worshipped by the masses. To Chand, she becomes unacceptable because of her deformed body; she does not possess the ideal form of body-- she does not qualify to be a goddess. Her gender and low birth are mere additions to this. Therefore, Chand resents worshipping Manasa.

Manasa’s disability is easily associated with her low birth or her being from a lower caste, although it is a matter of a separate debate which caste she could possibly belong to, whether she is really low in caste owing to her extraordinary nature of birth. Chand addresses her in anger as “Laghujati” (Gupta 66, 67), or lower-caste; it seems in the text, disability not only extends to physical impairment but also to her low caste, an abnormal birth of Manasa. Whereas Manasa is addressed as the “Kanee” (26, 33) or a woman blind in one eye, Chand in Bijoy Gupta is addressed as “Dwij” or “twice-born,” a word used to show respect to Brahmins. Although she is the daughter of the most powerful god, Lord Shiv and possesses the power to kill and restore life, she is somehow subdued in the texts selected. She becomes a secondary character who is cowered down in front of a dominant and hyper-masculine upper-caste Aryan male. It is simply because of her disability that Manasa loses her quality of being a perfect goddess to be venerated and worshipped. The treatment of the disability of the goddess Manasa is completely indigenous and the issue concerning her physical impairment needs a more nuanced and indigenised approach.

The origin of the impairment of Manasa is different from each other in the two selected poets. In Bijoy Gupta, she is blinded by her stepmother, Chandi, when she gouges out one of her eyes in a fit of anger. In Ketkadas, there is no specific reason

or source given to indicate the origin of her blindness in one eye; however, we see, apart from being blind in one eye, Manasa is Changmudi or has a head that resembles a chang^[xi] fish, very common in Bengal and usually not preferred to be eaten. There is no mention of her disability in the myth that Wendy Doniger, A. K. Ramanujan, and W. L. Smith talk about in their studies. However, Manasa is always imagined as a disabled goddess who is both fierce and compassionate. It must be added here that she does not fit into the category of ‘monstrosity’ that Shilpaa Anand talks about in her essay “Historicizing Disability in India” (2013). She is not seen/imagined as a monster in the selected text; however, it is evident that she does not fit into the category of normalcy of a woman or a goddess. Yet she remains, doubly (even triply, as it is argued elsewhere) marginalised for defying bodily norms and gender.

While trying to understand the disability in the selected texts, one needs to understand how Manasa transcends the barrier between the divine and the mortal in the process of social treatment she received for her physical impairment. In the course of the text, one understands that Manasa is not a goddess with much valour and dignity; rather, she has lost her dignity. To Chand, she is an ordinary, foolish, eccentric woman with a disabled body and appearance who causes him unnecessary harm. Interestingly, Manasa fears Chand. She feels threatened by Chand, not just by verbal abuse, but by physical thrashing too. Perhaps there is a gap in the narrative where we need to discover a thin line between the divine and the mortal---a power play between Chand, a devotee of Shiv and Manasa, Shiv’s ignored daughter. Manasa’s political power or legitimacy is denied. She is made to appear powerless and marginalised.

It is noteworthy that both Ketkadas Khemananda and Bijoy Gupta began their work with a benediction to the goddess and throughout the narrative poem claim themselves to be devout servants of the goddess Manasa, who is also addressed as

“Bishohori” or the one who consumes away the poison, the kind and benevolent goddess. But in the course of the text, the rude characteristics and whimsical mind of Manasa are linked with the impairment she has in her body and the social treatment of it. It seems Manasa, as a goddess, draws more sympathy from Khemananda and Gupta than devotion. Although in the bhonita or benediction, the two poets appear to be devoted to the goddess, a substantial portion of the text later shifts their focus to the masculine prowess of Chand, the merchant. This remains the central focus of both texts. In this sense, the reception of Manasa with her disability remains ambiguous. When six sons of Chand are killed by Manasa, Chand laments:

More shok dilo Loghujati Kani.

Chando kande chokkhur pade pani.

Mui obhagiyar char doshe.

Nati Beshe ashilek pase

tokhone Janitam Jodi tui kanee

matha bhangitam tutto jani

(Gupta 155)

Translated^[xiii] as:

‘You have caused me woe, o low-caste blind in one-eyed woman’

Cries Chand.

You have deceived me much

By assuming the shape of Neti, your sister;

Had I known it was you, o blind in one eye woman

I would have smashed your head.

In this long lamentation in Bijoy Gupta's text, apart from blaming Manasa for the mis-happenings, Chand time and again reinforces Manasa's disability and abuses her on that account. He goes so far as to imagine smashing her skull. The following quotation from Bijoy Gupta, though a bit long, reveals the extent of abusive language Chand uses against Manasa:

Mor putro mar bish diy
kanee deshe deshe berao paliya
je din paibo nirbondher bhage.
jeno horin loraiya dhore bhage
Tore debkonya bole kon chare
Kankuli tor bhangitm ekbare
dhamna bhatari to hitahit nai
ami tor debkule bhangibo borai.

(Gupta 155)

In translation^[xiv], it reads:

"Killing my sons with poison
You, one-eyed, run around from one place to
another?
The day I get you by the fate
I will catch you by the neck like a tiger jaws a
hare!
Damn, who calls you the daughter of a god?

I will just break your back in one stroke.

You have no sense of caste,

And I will smash your divine pride!”

Here, we can rarely imagine that a mortal could threaten a divine goddess in such a language. This long paragraph raises concerns not only about the treatment of Manasa by Chand but also about the poet. Perhaps a mortal could dare so much against a divine being simply because the goddess here is disabled? Chand continues to abuse Manasa when he sees her being worshipped by Kalketu, his friend. Chand feels helpless. He charges at Manasa with fierce language: “How my friend worships you I don’t know /And you, O blind goddess, have your fill here?” In such a way, Chand continues to shame Manasa for accepting puja and offerings from Kalketu (ll. 47-48). Gender simply becomes a tool of oppression here, along with disability and caste. This is perhaps one of the few examples from a set of vernacular texts close to the Puranic texts in which a goddess is made to appear inferior to a Brahmin, a man. As disability, gender and caste are used as tools of social oppression, even divinity does not rescue her^[xiii].

In the text of Ketkadas Khemananda, we see similar kinds of abuses hurled at Manasa. When Chand’s all seven ships are submerged by Manasa, and the crewmen and Chand himself are struggling to get out of Kalidoho or the deep water, Chand does not forget to blame Manasa for all the accidents. He says, “Chukkhu ranga bhore pet khaiya chuboni/ Tubu bole dukkho dili chang mudi kani,” translated as: “Even after getting several plunges in the water with red eyes/ Still, Chand says ‘you have caused me all woes, o fish-headed blind in one eye goddess’” (Khemananda ll. 13-14, 5)^[xv]. Chand’s aghast hatred for Manasa is noteworthy. Chand hates Manasa so much that he refuses to take the support of a lotus that Manasa had sent to rescue him in

the water (Khemananda 5). Although there is no mention of the caste of lotus here, the lotus is associated with the lower caste and by touching it one may lose one's religious purity, as Chand says, "If I touch, it will make me impure"^[xv] (Khemananda 21-22).

Again, being a deity of the snakes, an animal which is feared by people because of a high number of deaths each year due to snake bites, Manasa is not afraid of anybody except Chand Saodagor. Time and again, Chand invokes Manasa to confront him in a duel, but Manasa avoids it. Whatever action Manasa took, she did it through some medium or mediator where she did not have to appear in person. Here, the main question that haunts the readers is why Manasa fears Chand. Is it because of his masculine and angry appearance or because of the long wooden stick *henthal*, a strong stick made of a large perennial tree, he carries? It is not clear. The poets do not tell us. However, this fear of Manasa is another point of introspection for scholars of Disability Studies, whether it stems from her impairment and the social treatment of it. It may well be noted here that the two narrative poems aim to establish the goddess and her supremacy, but somehow, they lose their balance in their diabolical portrayal of the one-eyed goddess. Although the goddess resists here, her resistance is more inclined to be depicted as moral depravity than a (social/personal) rebellion.

Manasa is abused by different means associated with her body and impairment. When she complains to Lord Ganesh, whom she asks to eat away all the rice that Chand had collected by begging, she says:

Chand Saodagor calls me again and again
a fish-headed one-eyed goddess!

(Gupta 240)

“Tomar soshur bole more Chengmudi Kani” translates as, “Your father-in-law calls me fish-headed goddess blind in one eye,” she complains to Behula, wife of the last son of Chand, Lakhindar and beloved daughter-in-law of Chand. Here, at a point in the text, we come to realise that Manasa’s fight in the texts is more of fighting for her dignity as a disabled woman (goddess) than establishing her cult among men in the world, the poets would profess in the beginning of the texts. Manasa is suffering from a physical disorder where her head is like a fish available in Bengal, popularly known as chang mach. According to a footnote in the book of *Manasa Mangal* edited by Bijanbihari Bhattacharya, Chand termed Manasa as Changmudi not only because her head looked like that of a chang fish, but the head of the chang fish looked like a snake’s head. Nonetheless, it is to be agreed that Manasa’s physical disorder becomes an easy tool for Chand to mock and humiliate her. Needless to mention, it becomes a tool for oppression.

At a point in the text, when the clash between Chand and Manasa reaches the highest peak, Manasa is trying to find a dignified life, like a goddess. Strangely, in the narration of selected poets--- Ketkadas Khemananda and Bijoy Gupta, we see Manasa is more like a woman with a disability than a goddess. Manasa has lost her dignity as a goddess, and she is reduced to the level of a human being owing to her physical impairment. In her conversations with her friend or sister-cum-confidante—as depicted in two different versions—Neta, her daily interactions with her serpent followers and with her devotees, there is a thin line of separation between the divine and the mortal that gradually disappears. Does disability in the text become a tool for oppression that paves the way for more oppression with her gender and a supposed low birth? To find answers to such questions, contemporary readers and scholars of *Manasa Mangal* must re-evaluate the theoretical frameworks used to understand characters with disabilities in literary texts.

Conclusion

The disability of goddess Manasa somehow compromised her dignity as a divine being, and it is certain now that her marginalisation cannot be understood by looking at disability alone. While studying a text like the *Manasamangal*, one cannot simply overlook the complex power structure politics that intersect with gender, caste and bodily defects, and the selected narratives undoubtedly challenge the common disability narratives. The present study, through a detailed and comparative analysis of two Bengali precolonial texts and by taking into account multiple allied fields of study, not only underscores multiple layers of subjugation and dominance but also interrogates the existing theories on Disability Studies that need an intersectional approach. Further research is required to build upon the findings of the present study. As scholars have sought to decolonise Disability Studies in the South Asian context, increasing attention has been paid to texts from the colonial and postcolonial periods. This scholarship has, in turn, foregrounded the intersections between coloniser–colonised binaries and feminist discourses. As Shaun Grech argues in his article “Decolonising Eurocentric disability studies: why colonialism matters in the disability and global South debate” (2015), there has been a tendency to simplify and generalise disabled individuals by the dominant Western theorists, and now more shifts are taking place in recent years (Grech 7). The *Mansamangal* and the case of goddess Manasa are one of these texts which have been ignored or minimised for a long period of time, and it not only demands an innovative and more nuanced theoretical approach, but there is a legitimate demand to go beyond the colonised and coloniser discourses. In short, Manasa’s vernacular or localised form of resistance needs further scholarly exploration that finds new avenues which intersect with various markers of social hierarchies and dominance.

Endnotes

- i. Otherwise spelt as “Manasamangal”
- ii. Rather mythical retelling of a Puranic origin
- iii. Reference to Manasa could be found in Padma Puran, Devi Bhagavat Puran and Brahmapurana.
- iv. Or Brahminic
- v. YouTube link of the cinema: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yj7ffKOGIPY>
- vi. They, too, are subject to two different subgenres of Mangal Kavya, such as Annada Mangal and Chandi Mangal.
- vii. In the book Disability Studies in India: Global Discourses, Local Realities by Renu Adarkha. New Delhi: Taylor and Francis, 2013. P. 201.
- viii. We are spelling it differently here, indicating the difference between the two select Bangla texts.
- ix. This spelling of Shiv or Shib is one of the indigenised Shiva in Bengali, not only phonetically but mythologically. There are certain differences between the two.
- x. Authors’ translation
- xi. (চণা মাছ), scientifically known as Channa punctata, otherwise known as spotted head fish. One can think of a medical condition, “microcephalic”, that Shilpaa Anand talks about in her essay “Historicizing Disability Studies in India” (2013) (in reference to the refuge for the disabled persons in the shrine of Shah Daula in Punjab before and during the early colonial times).
- xii. Authors’ translation
- xiii. In another instance, when Jomraj or Yamraj, the god of death, fights with Manasa, he too indulges in abusive words like “Kanee” or ‘blind in one eye’ or “loghujaati kanee” or ‘low caste blind in one eye’ (Bijoy Gupta 117).
- xiv. Authors’ translation
- xv. Authors’ translation
- xvi. Ibid.

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Women, Crime and Power: A Postfeminist Study of Delhi Crime Season 3

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of gender, crime, and institutional power in Delhi Crime (Season 3) within the context of contemporary Indian OTT culture. Drawing on the concept of ‘Postfeminist sensibility’ by Rosalind Gill, the study aims to examine how Delhi Crime Season 3 constructs a postfeminist imaginary of female authority in law enforcement by placing women simultaneously in positions of institutional power (police) and criminal power (antagonist), while still measuring their success against patriarchal benchmarks. Through close readings of the six episodes, including dialogues and visual mis-en-scene, the paper explores themes of gendered authority, motherhood, trafficking, and patriarchal control, while also attending to moments of agency, professional competence, and everyday resistance. The paper argues that the series reflects contemporary tensions surrounding gender and power, and reflects on how Indian crime narratives negotiate women’s lived realities in a changing media landscape.

Keywords: Cinematography, Delhi Crime, Feminist Imaginaries, Indian OTT, Postfeminism, Transgressive Femininity

Introduction

India’s streaming platforms have become central cultural sites where crime, gender and authority are reimagined. Respondents in a study by Koravi reported watching internet series for three to six hours daily, with many viewers judging the depictions of crime and violence on screen to be influential in shaping their

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perceptions of real-world criminality (29). Scholars also note that the relative freedom of over-the-top (OTT) platforms has enabled more direct engagement with taboo or previously marginalised women's issues, thereby producing new representational possibilities compared to traditional television or mainstream cinema (Rashmi and Sood 2116).

In modern India, roles of women are changing due to new social and economic conditions. This is slowly transforming the idea of femininity. While women have always been very visible in Indian films and media, today's OTT series present new perspectives on gender. These may not completely dismantle dominant structures, yet their coexistence with conventional portrayals signals that hegemonic gender norms remain contested rather than being absolute (Bose and Mishra 904).

To understand these shifts, the paper draws on the distinction between normative and transgressive femininity. Normative femininity refers to the dominant, culturally idealised, and socially rewarded form of femininity that aligns with and helps sustain existing power structures, particularly hegemonic masculinity (Connell 836). Women are expected to perform femininity in ways that accommodate men's interests and desires while reinforcing women's subordination. In contrast, transgressive femininity describes performances or expressions of femininity that consciously or unconsciously violate, challenge, or cross the boundaries of normative femininity. This can include behaviours that are predominantly perceived as "masculine", such as assertiveness, independence, ambition, or leadership, without softening it to appear palatable and rejection of domestic or passive roles (Schippers 87).

Delhi Crime series celebrates its global acclaim, including its 2020 International Emmy Award for Best Drama Series, and further extends the franchise's long-standing postfeminist orientation in its recent season. Across all seasons, the series has

been carried forward by a woman protagonist, DCP Vartika Chaturvedi, whose leadership within a male-dominated policing structure has been depicted with definite institutional legitimacy. However, Season 3 marks a significant narrative shift with the show positioning a female antagonist for the first time. This makes the season particularly relevant for an inquiry into postfeminist articulations of female authority and deviance. The season also frames its postfeminist sensibility by featuring women across different institutional spaces like police officers (DIG, ACP, SI), medical officers, judges, journalists, and others, thereby suggesting a system that appears, at least narratively, to accommodate women's competence and mobility. Additionally, subtle *mise-en-scene* like a brief filler shot of two young girls playing football in a public park (Delhi Crime 3.1 00:33:42), though only a few seconds long, symbolically reorients the space as one where girls exercise agency and freedom. Similarly, one of the trafficking clients, John-ji, is shown living with his wife and 'two daughters' (Delhi Crime 3.2 00:16:16), a minute but significant detail that complicates his moral positioning and reflects how patriarchal structures simultaneously shelter and endanger women.

This paper examines how Delhi Crime Season 3 (hereafter Delhi Crime S3) constructs postfeminist female authority by positioning women simultaneously within institutional power (policing) and criminal power (antagonism), while continuing to evaluate them through patriarchal benchmarks. Reading Delhi Crime S3 through a postfeminist lens helps to expose how contemporary media can stage women's empowerment while retaining underlying constraints. Rosalind Gill's influential work on postfeminist media culture self-management, and the appearance of agency, even where normative demands on women position it as a "sensibility" characterised by discourses of individual choice, persist (147). In accordance with this paradigm, women's visible authority can coexist with, and even

depend upon, an intensified expectation of self-regulation, emotional labour, and domestic competence.

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis of all six episodes of the season. The thematic analysis approach is used to identify recurring narrative and visual motifs like authority, aspiration, domestic responsibility, and gendered vulnerability. By doing so, the article posits an argument that postfeminist sensibilities in contemporary Indian OTT crime series do not simply mark a break from earlier, more patriarchal narratives; rather, they reconfigure gendered power in ways that make female authority visible while still subjecting it to moral and domestic discipline.

Power Negotiation and Aspirations

Foucault argues that power circulates through all social relationships rather than residing in any single institution or subject (94). Extreme physical violence produces fear and horror, making people conscious of the authority of the supreme sovereign. This framework becomes crucial for reading Meena, the main antagonist of the series, who is also the head of the human trafficking racket, where her apparent empowerment often emerges from the same violent logics that oppressed her. Her powerful monologue (Delhi Crime 3.6 00:38:39- 00:41:04): “Tu pehli naa hai jo mujhe marna chahti hai,” (You are not the first person who wants to kill me), followed by the story of how her grandmother tried to drown her and her twin sister in a giant milk container. “. . . Meri dadi, manne aur meri jurwa behen ne paida hotehi dudh ke bade patile me dubana chahti thi . . . Phir aaya husband. Vyah karke sochi mei, mei uski har hawas ki sikar banungi, choti si thi mei, bohot choti. Isliye mujhe jo thik laga maine kya. Dharti ka boj kam ho gaya” (When we were born, my grandmother wanted to drown me and my twin sister in a big container of milk . . . Then came my husband. I become a victim of his every lust. I was little, so little. So, I did whatever felt right

to me. One burden on the earth was reduced at least . . .). After subtly hinting at the murder of her husband, she further claims, “Tanne beda hai, mere kaaran kitni chodiya apne narak se nikalke bohot badiya jiban jeene lageya hai . . . Puch Rohtak mei kisi se bhi puch . . . pariwar basaye maine, nayi nasal paida hui mere karan . . . maine un chodiyone wohi hathiyar di jo zindagi ne mere te di, khud ki value ki samajh aur iss kutti behenchod duniya se ladne ki takkat.” (You know how many girls, because of me, came out of their hell and began living better lives... Ask anyone in Rohtak. I helped establish families; new generations were born because of me. . . I gave those girls what life had given me, an awareness of my own value and the strength to fight this bastard world). Even when she encountered the truth that she is not a saviour but has destroyed girls’ lives by forcing marriages and trafficking them, her reply, “Sab dhanda kare he, sab dhanda hi kare he, is desh ke har kone me chori bechi ja rahi hai. Kabhi dahej tayi, kabhi bachcha paida karan tayi, aur kabhi marda ki hawas shant karan tayi. Dhanda ho raha hai. Bas tarike nyare nyare se. . . ” (Everyone is doing business, everything is business. In every corner of this country, girls are being sold. Sometimes it is for dowry, sometimes for producing children, and sometimes to satisfy men’s lust. The transaction remains the same; only the forms change. . .) reveals her psychological negotiations in a patriarchal world and how she chose to deal with it. She has learned to weaponise the male gaze and turn it into business capital, even at the cost of other women. Her claim that “Mardo ne kaabu karna ek kalaa che” (Controlling men is also an art) (Delhi Crime 3.6 00:10:37), signals a strategic mastery of patriarchal techniques, but her rising anger, culminating in stuffing a cloth into a coughing girl’s mouth, also reveals how trauma has eroded her empathy. Here, power does not liberate; it mutates into cruelty.

Villains are powerful narrative figures who cross moral and social boundaries. They are often portrayed as equally strong and intelligent as the hero, but lack moral values. Their actions

are driven by greed and manipulation (Cohen 4). Although Meena challenges traditional gender norms through her agency and authority, her violent and inhuman actions place her within the moral universe of the villain or antagonist sphere, reinforcing anxieties about deviant femininity.

“ . . . Ye duniya aisa hai madam, koi aurat apna bal bute pe koi tarraki kar le naa, toh sab jal bhun jata hai. Ab aap ko dekh lo, aap ladies honeke bawajud itna bada police officer hai, toh inko toh jalan hota hoga naa, kyu bhaiya? Arrey thoda toh hota hoga” (. . . This world is like this only, madam, if a woman progresses through her self-determination and inner strength, everyone starts burning with jealousy. Just look at yourself! Despite being a woman, you are such a senior police officer. Of course, they must feel jealous, right brother? At least a little) (Delhi Crime 3.2 00:39:44 - 00:39:57), even though this statement by Kalyani, one of the players of the human trafficking racket about DIG Vartika Chaturvedi, wasn't accepted by the male police officer standing there as he defied it with his expressions, but this highlights the dominant narrative that exists for female police officers, as it is predominantly considered to be a male job; violent crime has relations with masculinity not feminine roles. She was trying to capitalise on the dominant narrative of male ego being bruised by females in higher posts than them in traditionally accepted male-centric fields, like in the police. These negotiations occur not only at the level of formal responsibility but also through subtle, often symbolic acts in which gendered expectations and male ego become part of the organisational landscape of power (Connell 834).

Scholars have long shown that power in institutions is neither neutral nor evenly distributed but is enacted through everyday interactions that discipline bodies, regulate behaviour, and mark certain subjects as more legitimate than others (Foucault 84). Policing, in particular, has been theorised as a paradigmatically gendered organisation, one whose norms,

hierarchies, and occupational identities are built around historically masculine ideals of toughness, aggression, and command (Acker 139; Rabe-Hemp 426).

The scene where Vicky, another member of the human trafficking racket, is rubbing oil on Meena, aka Badi Didi's feet (Delhi Crime 3.3 00: 26:01), shows how power dynamics change gender roles. Men do not touch women's feet; on one hand, women are being bought for marriages, sold for money, etc, but the power shift makes Badi Didi sit in a superior position in the entire system where a man is rubbing oil on her feet. Reading these moments with Foucault's idea of power as relational helps us see that authority is produced in interactions, not only by formal rank; the gestures are produced as effects of Meena's position within the syndicate, and they reconstitute what counts as dominance in that micro-field (94). In the very same scene, the series also employs romance as a strategic tool. In mainstream films and series, men frequently use romantic gestures to persuade women during moments of disagreement. Here, due to the power reversal, Badi Didi reverses this pattern. When Vicky is not fully convinced about their next plan of action, she gently moves closer, rubs the oil off his hands, and kisses them while softly saying, "Sab ho jayega, tu saath hai naa" (Everything will work out, since you are with me).

The use of close-up shots and extreme close-ups in the above-mentioned scene highlights the nuanced intimacy between them. Moreover, the cinematography uses a subtle camera angle tilt in accordance with the power dynamic. A low angle emphasises Badi Didi's dominance, while a slightly high angle is employed as the camera focuses on Vicky (Delhi Crime 3.3, 26:01). She maintains a superior position in their business dynamics, yet her gendered identity comes into play as she offers him emotional assurance that things will succeed if he stays by her side.

Additionally, Meena's masculine sitting posture (Delhi Crime 3.5 00:18:05) and the blunt, angry language she uses, "Mei apne pyaar te bol rahi and aap kaanpe charh ke muut raho" (I'm talking to you nicely, and here you are pissing in my ears?) (Delhi Crime 3.5 00:24:04), depicts a refusal of normative feminine softness. At the same time, her behaviour reads as a strategic response to past abuses. Butler's insight that gender is performed through repeated acts explains that Meena's authority is not a stable essence but an enacted position; her posture, commands, and the men's servility together create the spectacle of power. In Episode 1 (00:23:35), one of the goons stands to the left, seeking permission to leave from Kalyani, a member of the trafficking syndicate, who is seated comfortably in a chair. This reversal of expected power dynamics defies traditional notions of feminine comportment and authority. The use of a long shot brings the entire scene into focus, highlighting the spatial relationship between the characters and reinforcing Kalyani's position of power.

A long shot is used to bring the entire frame into light. This acts as a minute signifier of how feminism in the present time is changing from the dear old traditions in an agnostic setting of crime.

The series also takes an interesting stand, as in one of the scenes, the goons are shown serving food to the victims, a reversal of the gendered role of serving; yet in that very scene, one of the men blinks a side eye, signalling a vulgar sexual expression. "Khaa le nahi toh Kalyani Didi tujhe kha jayegi" (Eat it up otherwise Kalyani Didi will eat you up), coupled with a roaring expression (Delhi Crime 3.1 00:21:01-00:21:08), thereby demonstrates that role-reversal in power does not automatically erase the sexualised gaze that underwrites gendered power on screen (Mulvey 6). Close-up shots and a slight camera tilt are used to underline the power dynamics at play. Every time the girls, the victims, appear in this sequence,

the camera adopts a high angle, subtly exposing their underlying vulnerability. This demonstrates that even when women occupy superior positions in the criminal hierarchy, role reversal in power does not erase the sexualised male gaze directed at the girls below them.

Also, Meena's dressing and especially her use of a pallu (veil) in public settings of her village, marking her as "a respectable woman" reveals the subtle internalisation of patriarchal expectations even by a woman like her who commands an organised crime syndicate. In these public moments, she strategically negotiates social expectations by performing normative femininity through markers of modesty and respectability. Meena's authority is thus deeply postfeminist in its individualism; her rise is not a feminist transformation of structures but a personal survival strategy that mirrors the very brutality of the world that shaped her.

The series also stages the embodied politics of aspiration through motifs of appearance and the body. Women's bodies are presented as powerful, yet always needing control, correction, and constant work to meet narrow ideas of attractiveness (Gill 149). The dialogue in Ep 3 "yeh makeup hai naa, yeh hathiyar hai. *Kis cheez ka? Admiyo ko kaboo mei rakhne ka...*" (This makeup... this is a weapon. A weapon for what? To keep men under control...) dramatises the postfeminist paradox (00:12:53-00:13:03). Red lighting dominates the scene, with a touch of yellow light adding a sensuous feel. In this dimly lit atmosphere, close-up shots of bright lipstick, make-up and low-cut dresses with plunging necklines, visually frame the female body as an object of display and evoke the aesthetic of commodified sexuality.

Bodily presentation is framed as an autonomous choice and a tactical technology of power; yet, its social meaning is always mediated by a gendered economy in which "beauty" operates as

a modality of social control. Furthermore, it overlooks crucial questions about how representation works on subjectivity, particularly the internalisation of socially produced and media-driven beauty ideals (Gill 151).

Nevertheless, Delhi Crime S3 frames these power dynamics within a largely postfeminist logic where women can claim agency and occupy positions of power, but their authority is presented as an individual achievement rather than as evidence of institutional transformation. The series highlights women's capacity to command, yet it rarely points to broader structural shifts that would make such authority stable or equitable. In short, the season stages powerful female figures and role reversals, yet it does so within a frame that makes empowerment look like an individual tactic rather than a structural reordering.

Domestic Responsibility and Family Life

The series frames domestic conflict not as structural inequality but as a failure of emotional adjustment, a hallmark of postfeminist discourse. Research has long documented that the family and household remain deeply gendered sites of labour allocation, emotional expectation, and structural inequality, even as women enter public sphere jobs (Davies and Carrier 35). The scene where Devinder's new partner comments on the work of officer Neeti, "*kafi suna hai unse tumhare bare me... it is brilliant, the work you are doing*" (Heard a lot about you from him... It's brilliant, the work that you are doing!) (Delhi Crime 3.1 00:12:31-00:12:34). This admiration of Neeti's work contrasts with his (her ex-husband's) unmet expectations of a 'normal family', which was apparently not possible because of her nature of work. The concept of a normal family is a tricky one. In a normal family, the answer to how much devotion is expected from a woman in her household and in her professional work remains blurry. His repeated insistence on "tumhe pata hai mei humesha se ek proper family chahta tha, woh bhi tumhare

sath” (You know right, I always wanted a proper family, that too with you) (Delhi Crime 3.2 00:12:04-00:12:10) lays bare a latent expectation that, despite formal equality in career choice, the emotional and temporal costs of her policing work are still to be borne by her alone. Although both partners accepted each other’s demanding professions: his in the army, hers in the police, the series invites viewers to scrutinise the unspoken question of how much work commitment is tolerable for a woman without jeopardising domestic intimacy.

In another instance, during a tense moment between Vartika and her husband, Vartika asks, “Who’s saying this, the additional commissioner or my husband?” He replied, “The additional commissioner believes that you have behaved irresponsibly, and the husband frankly is just fed up” (Delhi Crime 3.4 00:32:38-00:32:53). The scene uses dim yellow-brown lighting and a muted colour palette that creates a heavy and tense mood. Although the sequence is structured as a conversation through close-up shots, the couple is intentionally not placed within the same frame. This visual separation signifies how professional pressures slowly disrupt family relations and shared domestic harmony.

In postfeminist media cultures, gendered work-family conflict is often framed as a matter of choice and self-management rather than as a reflection of structural inequalities in labour division; women, in this framing, must both care and perform, even as institutional support for such balancing is absent. Against this backdrop, Neeti’s response to Devinder, “Akeli hoon but lonely nahi” (I’m alone, but not lonely) (Delhi Crime 3.2 00:12:28), asserts her emotional self-possession while foregrounding the self-sufficiency expected of her. Moreover, the visual framing of Devinder’s sadness humanises the male character’s vulnerability and subtly challenges traditional notions of masculinity. In the court canteen scene after the divorce (Delhi Crime 3.2 00:14:55), a wide shot shows him

seated alone on the right side wearing a blue sweater. The table occupies the centre space in the frame, while the empty chair on the left creates a visible void. The lighting is dim and dull, and the entire colour palette is desaturated and muted. This visual language communicates the grief of divorce, using blue as a traditional cinematic signifier of melancholy. Additionally, his soft expression of melancholy was enough to destroy the age-old expectation of masculinity, where men show no emotion. Similarly, when Devinder visits his wife's flat to collect his belongings (Delhi Crime 3.4 00:29:50), the sequence is captured in warm yellow lighting and earthy tones of brown and white, with only faint maroon accents on the bedsheet and lamp. These warmer colours initially suggest a lingering sense of intimacy and domesticity. However, the light blue window, framing the background of the close-up and mid-shot of them bidding a final farewell, intensifies the emotions of separation. These instances reinforce the quiet cost of the work-family divide for both partners.

In Ep 4 (00:22:30-00:22:43), a man shouts, “Tu apne bachchedani ko muh bandh karo hai? Apno muh bandh rakh. 4 lakh rupeye deo Kusum ko. Apne hisse ko khet becho. Puro paiso thare se wasoolungo” (You have had your tubes tied, right? Now keep your mouth shut. I paid 4 lakhs rupees to Kusum. Sold my share of the field. I’m going to make you pay for it now), this reflects what Kandiyoti terms the patriarchal bargain, in which rural women remain bound to systems that treat them as reproducers of lineage rather than autonomous individuals (285). Moreover, in many rural parts of India, brides are frequently treated as economic liabilities, expected to ‘repay’ through fertility, obedience, and silence. The series mirrors this lived reality, showing how the rural patriarchal order persists unchanged, even as urban women in the same narrative universe negotiate postfeminist forms of agency.

Postfeminist discourse cultivates particular maternal femininities, making maternity highly visible, public, and incoherent. Despite varied identities, these representations share beliefs that 'good' mothers are empowered, self-responsible, and solely in charge of managing work and family (Delaney and Sullivan 1699). Often, cultivating a life that takes the professional and domestic spheres into account is referred to as creating balance, but it can also be read more nefariously as urging women to chase after an illusion of control. Contemporary media often show motherhood as a personal responsibility rather than a social or structural issue. Women are expected to handle the challenges between caregiving and professional life through their own emotional strength, adjustment, and individual choices (Gill 153). This critical take on motherhood becomes sharper with the significant dialogue of Vartika Chaturvedi, "This is the most selfless and selfish thing you'll ever do" (Delhi Crime 3.6 00:8:38), spoken as she sees the adoption papers lying in front of Neeti. The entire scene is dominated by a black and grey colour palette. Both women are wearing black clothes, and the scene is lit with cool white lighting that feels low and subdued rather than bright. In a close-up shot, Neeti's face clearly reveals her inner emotional turmoil. The question of taking responsibility for a child is not a joke in a society like this, but the nature of her job raises questions about whether she will be able to provide not just monetarily but also emotionally, in terms of time and care, for what the child needs. In the postfeminist realm, mothers who work are often given the message that they are responsible for attaining balance between embracing the feminine while seeking success in the masculine world of work (Delaney and Sullivan 1697).

Anger expressed by women is often coded as deviant or morally dangerous, reinforcing the belief that 'good women' maintain composure to preserve family honour (Chakravarti 581). When Kalyani tells Neeti, "Arrey itna ghussa kaheko naak me rakhti ho? Grihasti kharab ho jata hai. . . shaadi waadi ho

gayi tumhara ya khubsurat jawani vardi me hi gawa doge?” (Why are you so angry? Your married life will be spoiled like this. . . Are you married or not? Or are you wasting your youth in this uniform only?) (Delhi Crime 3.2 01:24:30), the anger here is not treated as a basic human emotion but as a gendered violation that threatens domestic order. This reflects the expectations of normative femininity, where emotional control, patience, and domestic harmony are treated as essential feminine virtues. The subsequent remark on wasting her youth on work echoes patriarchal norms that evaluate women primarily through marriageability and domestic performance.

Contemporary postfeminist cultures often frame women’s aspirations around balance, mutuality, and personal fulfilment within intimate life (McRobbie 5) rather than outright rejection of domesticity. Many Indian professional women imagine ‘shared domestic responsibility as the marker of a good marriage.’ This is evident in Ep 3 (00:22:14 - 00:22:22), on being asked what kind of life SI Simran wants, she tells, “mereko toh simple life chahiye. Apna kaam karo, sabki maddad karo. Ghar pe jake mera pati mere liye kulche banaye aur mei uske liye rotiya seku’. (I want a simple life. Do my own work. Help others. Come back home where my husband has cooked kulche for me, and I’ll make roti for him). They both work and make dinner together ; he makes one dish and she also makes another. Proper work division, an ideal life expected by a working woman with a sense of equality.

Gendered Authority and Vulnerability

The gendered vulnerability of the women is depicted in the brothel raid scene through intelligent cinematography (Delhi Crime 3.2 00:08:11). The sequence uses blurry, desaturated flashback visuals combined with red and yellow lighting to create a tense, unsettling atmosphere of fear and exploitation. God rays or crepuscular rays, falling dramatically on DIG

Vartika Chaturvedi, heighten the sense of vulnerability surrounding the girls and the helplessness embedded in the system.

Foucauldian accounts of power show that domination becomes embedded in ordinary social relations and routines; extreme force and the routine threat of violence normalise a sovereign order in which some bodies are more exposed and less protected (37). Delhi Crime S3 repeatedly stages this structure at the intimate level, showing how gendered vulnerability is lived, internalised, and contested. In Episode 1, Rahul is dragging Khushi into the car; out of anger she slaps him and immediately says “sorry,” but his reaction to the slap is to pull her hair and drag her to the car while saying, “Saali dimag kharab ho gaya hai” (Bitch, have you lost your mind) (00:43:01). The difference in immediate reflexes of both of them shows how gendered norms are internalised. Her apology versus his abusive retort speaks volumes about asymmetric gendered entitlement to anger. Women’s anger is disciplined and apologised for, whereas men’s anger is enacted and justified. Literature also shows a similar pattern, where social expectations train women to control their emotions to maintain domestic calm, while men’s violent reactions are often naturalised or excused (Kandiyoti 274).

Kalyani’s lines, “Waah madam, aap toh humko aisa ghabrai diye. Aisa ankh bada bada karke, emotion le aaye chehre pe. Chehra bhi bohot khubsurat hai, aap hindi film ka heroine ban sakte hai...” (Madam, you really gave me quite a scare. With those big, big eyes and all that emotion on your face. Your face is also so pretty, you can easily be a heroine in the Hindi film industry...) (Delhi Crime 3.2 00:41:37-00:41:48). Here, a woman weaponises gendered expectations, invoking beauty and fear, to manipulate the investigating officer. This complexity shows that vulnerability can be both imposed and performed.

In one scene, the following line, “Sania kuch time pehle humare sath hi thi. . . Woh bhikhari gang ko baich diye. . . subah subah Sania ko le jate the aur shyam ko commission ke sath humko de jate the. . . Humko laga sania ko wohi bech deti hoon, roz roz ka kaun tension palega madam” (Sania was with us until some time ago . . . She was sold to the beggar gang... Every morning they would take Sania away and return her to us in the evening with their commission... I thought I might as well sell Sania to them myself — who can bear this daily tension, madam”) (Delhi Crime 3.5 00:10:10-00:10:40) reveals how caregiving roles can be subverted within criminal economies. The traditional caregiver becomes an exploiter. This breaks the age-old idea that women are naturally nurturing. Instead, it reveals that social pressures and survival needs can lead to morally ambiguous choices.

Many sequences document how rural patriarchy institutionalises abuse as normal. At a public gathering, a woman recounts being married at fifteen and beaten, “Jante hai, 15 saal ki chodi thi, jab vyaay kiya yare aayi. Sidha Raxal te Rohtak. Ekli, par us wakhat lugayiya thi kaha gaon mei? Naa. Aur apke Tau, bahar de pathar and bhitari te maum. Pehli lathi te maar maar ke chodi se aurat banagi. Woh kehte, teri ungli me takat na hai chodi kaisi bhuni roti banawe. Lekin unki sakhti ne *majboot bana di bohot...*” (You know, I was a 15-year-old bride when I first came here. Straight from Raxal to Rohtak. Alone. But at that time, were there any women in the village? None. And your uncle, strict from the outside and soft from the inside. His daily beatings eventually turned me from a girl into a woman. He would say that my arms had no strength to make even a simple roti. But this cruelty made me tough...) and the crowd offered no opposition (Delhi Crime 3.3, 1:05 - 2:01). Such acceptance matches ethnographic accounts of rural areas where early marriage, corporal punishment of wives, and the social sanctioning of male violence are part of the lived environment (Kandiyoti 289). Scenes where men assert gatekeeping like

“Mujhe kaho, Sunita aurat hai mari” (Tell me, Sunita is my wife) (Delhi Crime 3.4 00:08:32) demonstrate that women’s public presence is mediated through male authority; to speak to a woman, one must obtain a man’s permission.

In Episode 2, the line “no one misses missing girls” (Delhi Crime 3.2 00:07:02) becomes an important statement to be noted. It reflects the social normalisation of girls’ disappearance as insignificant. This disregard is echoed later when a 14-year-old young girl says, “choti bachchiyoko chod hi toh dete hai, ya phék dete hai kahi marne ko. Paida hote hi boj jo ho jati hai” (The little girls are left alone, or thrown away to die. They become a burden to the family the moment they are born) (Delhi Crime 3.200:27:30). This one statement reveals the condition of the girl child in many parts of India, and how even the young girl in the scene has internalised it as a universal truth.

Episode 4 continues the theme when a man says, “Hukum, hum aurat ki bohot jyada izzat kare hai, bohot jyada, bas woh apni daire me rahe” (Sir, we respect women a lot, a lot, as long as they don’t cross their boundary) (Delhi Crime 3.4 00:10:25). This demonstrates how men decide the boundaries for women. They call it respect only when women stay within the limits set by them. Soon after the aforementioned scene, the men of the family declare, “*Suno pure gaon ki izzat ka sawal hai... agar e baat ne eyai jane diya toh gaon ki baki auroto ki bhi himmat ho jayegi. Sunita maro tractor jalake gayi hai...*” (Listen, this is about the entire village’s honour... if we let her go this time then the other women of the village will also dare to do the same. Sunita burned my tractor and left...) (Delhi Crime 3.400:11:01-00:11:15). This shows how important it is for patriarchy that women remain quiet and under the control of men. If one woman takes a courageous step, others may be inspired. They attach the “honour of the village” to the obedience of women. Postfeminist critiques show that ideas of culture and honour are often used to control women while being presented as tradition.

Another form of patriarchy is shown through saviour behaviour in Episode 3: “Mei kyu jail jayunga? Gandh se nikala hai maine, sambhla hai. Shaadi karke family di usko maine. Uske baap ne kya kiya pata hai apko? 10 saal ki thi tab bech diya tha. Aur uska chacha behenchod, Kumar, shadi ke liye lata tha aur uske sath ganda kaam karta tha. . .” (Why will I go to jail? I have saved her from that shit. I married her and gave her a family. You know what her father did? She was 10 years old when he sold her. Her fucking uncle Kumar. He brought her here to marry her off, and then molested her. . .) (Delhi Crime 3.3 00:05:38-00:05:53). This shows how patriarchy functions in everyday life, and how “saving” a girl often means marrying her young instead of educating her. Fathers and uncles take the role of guardians while selling the girls to sexual predators. This highlights the gendered vulnerability of young girls in society and how the language used with reference to protecting them is actually used to justify control.

The series shows how normalised domestic violence produces both resignation and occasional revolt. Women internalise the logic that silence protects them. “Madam mere admiko mat batana ki humlog *baat kiye... pata lag gaya toh maar maar ke kapal phod dega*” (Madam, please do not tell my husband about this conversation. If he gets to know, then he will beat me to death) (Delhi Crime 3.3 00:30:09-00:30:20) says Janki. Additionally, “kiska report likhaye madam? Maa baap ka jo humko yaha bech diye? Ya sasural waloka jo beta ke intezaar me humko rakha hua hai?.... Nahi madam, hum yaha jeena sikh liye... *aap bas inlogo ko pakad lo*” (Who will we report about? Our parents who sold us here? Our in-laws who are keeping us in the hope of a son? No madam, we have learned to survive here... You please catch these culprits) indicating accommodation to constrained lives (Delhi Crime 3.3 00:30:25-00:30:35). The visual language in this scene further supports the above argument. She (Janki) is framed on the left side of the screen in a side profile, with half her face hidden behind her hair.

This deliberate framing creates a sense of concealment and half-visibility, visually signifying her hidden existence and the quiet way she has learned to survive within her constrained life.

Conclusion

The analysis of Delhi Crime S3 reveals how crime narratives on Indian OTT platforms have shifted in the post-COVID viewing culture, in which audiences increasingly turn to realistic, socially grounded stories. Within a male-dominated society where issues such as women's safety, harassment, and structural inequality persist, the series offers a layered portrayal of gendered vulnerability, authority, and resistance. While Indian entertainment has evolved from objectifying women to placing them at the centre of narratives, crime genres continue to expose the tensions between renewed representation and persistent patriarchal expectations (Rashmi and Sood 2122). Rather than presenting fixed identities, the series shows women constantly negotiating between normative expectations of care, restraint, and respectability and transgressive assertions of authority, anger, and autonomy. The web series format, with its regional grounding and middle-class focus, contributes to this shift by moving away from traditional melodrama and adopting a more realistic and socially conscious tone.

Across the episodes, the depiction of missing girls, trafficking networks, gendered violence, and the burden of "honour" illustrates how patriarchy continues to shape the lives and choices of women and young girls. Scenes of emotional vulnerability, such as police officers like Neeti momentarily losing composure (Delhi Crime 3.100:37:24), underline the human cost of these systems. Conversely, moments like a young girl saluting a woman officer, Neeti Singh (Delhi Crime 3.4 00:04:23) signal the quiet optimism that change is possible, revealing how representation can inspire future imaginaries. The series also complicates moral binaries through characters who

blur the lines between victimhood, survival, and crime, reflecting broader scholarly arguments about trafficking as a socio-political issue rather than a simple victim-rescuer narrative.

At the same time, the portrayal of women in positions of authority, like police officers, inspectors, and even antagonists, pushes against the traditional representation of women as emotionally driven, weak, or merely passive victims in the crime genre. Even when their emotional responses surface in subtle ways, these women navigate professional demands with competence and resilience. In contrast, the female antagonist's coldness disrupts the stereotype of women as inherently nurturing, reminding viewers that gendered expectations shape our reading of both heroism and villainy.

Overall, Delhi Crime S3 maintains a clear postfeminist stance by foregrounding women's experiences within systems of power and by giving visibility to female agency across different social positions. No character remains entirely normative or transgressive; instead, femininity appears fluid, negotiated through circumstance, institutional constraints, and survival strategies. Yet it also reflects post-feminist tensions, where women carry heavy expectations to be professional yet empathetic, strong yet restrained, survivors yet moral guides. The series does not resolve these contradictions but presents them as part of contemporary womanhood in India. By doing so, it not only mirrors the socio-cultural realities of gendered lives but also opens space for new conversations about justice, autonomy, and representation in Indian crime narratives.

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Navigating Non-Monogamy: An Exploratory Study of Media Representation and Personal Perspectives among Indian Women

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Abstract

This study examines and explores the intersection of media representation and individual perspectives regarding women in non-monogamous relationships. The paper compares traditional monogamous relationships with various non-monogamous structures, including hierarchical and non-hierarchical polyamory, open relationships, and swinging. This study examines how globalisation and the growing popularity of films and television series set in developed countries have influenced the perception of selected individuals in the Urban Indian context regarding non-monogamous relationships. The study also analyses how media portrayals challenge gender stereotypes and promotes women's sexual freedom and empowerment. The study uses a qualitative framework, including in depth case studies, literature review, and media analysis, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Through an examination of media portrayal, this study sheds light on potential for transformative social change. It further examines how cultural nationalism and the judiciary's normative adjudication collaboratively govern women's intimate lives, resulting in what can be termed a biopolitics of fidelity. By promoting more realistic portrayals, the media can nurture inclusive and empathetic perspectives on non-monogamous relationships and contribute to a more equitable social discourse.

Keywords: Gender Norms, Inclusivity, Media Representation, Non-Monogamy, Women

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Introduction

The linguistic parameters of non-monogamy, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, explains the term as “not of, relating to, or practicing monogamy” (“Non-monogamous”). While “monogamy” prescribes a relational framework restricted to a singular romantic or sexual partner, “non-monogamy” serves as an expansive umbrella term for various consensual frameworks, including polyamory, open relationships, swinging and more (Sheff 252-54). It is essential to distinguish these structures from the deceptive nature of infidelity. Non-monogamous arrangements fundamentally exist on informed consent, mutual negotiation, and a commitment to transparency across multiple partners (Balzarini et al.1).

In the landscape of contemporary popular culture, dominant narratives of intimacy remain anchored in the heteronormative ideal of “the one.” Sitcoms such as *How I Met Your Mother* reproduce traditional scripts centred on the pursuit of a singular, stable partnership often embedded within patriarchal gender roles (Bays, Carter and Thomas). However, the twenty-first century has witnessed an expansion in the visibility of alternative relational forms, facilitated by global media flows and the circulation of liberal discourses surrounding individual autonomy. Shifting social attitudes toward sexual behaviours, which vary across gender and sexual orientation, have further contributed to the normalisation, at least within the representational sphere, of diverse intimate arrangements (Blanc 1605–07).

Yet, this representational expansion has not yet yielded a uniformly progressive discourse. Instead, media portrayals of non-monogamous relationships, particularly those involving women, are characterised by a profound ideological duality. On one hand, these narratives appear to challenge inherent gender norms by foregrounding female desire and agency. On the other,

they frequently reinscribe normative boundaries by depicting non-monogamous women as unstable, morally questionable, or ultimately unfulfilled (Rukeyser et al.). This paper argues that such duality is constitutive. The media simultaneously enables and regulates the visibility of non-monogamous women, allowing for limited transgression while ultimately reaffirming dominant personal hierarchies.

The central inquiry of this study lies in understanding how media operates as a site of both representation and regulation in shaping perceptions of non-monogamous women. Rather than viewing media as a passive reflector of social change, this research approaches it as an active agent in the production of social meanings regarding gender and intimacy. The focus extends beyond individual attitudes to examine how media participates in the broader governance of intimate life.

This problem analyses particular significance in the Indian context, where evolving media representations intersect with deeply entrenched socio-cultural and legal frameworks. While globalised media circulates imaginaries of sexual liberalisation and relational plurality, these encounter a socio-political environment structured by heteronormative familialism and moral regulation (Banerjee 125–28). Consequently, the reception of these representations is not uniform but produces a complex negotiation between personal aspiration and cultural constraint.

Accordingly, this study examines the intersection of globalised media representation and the lived experiences of individuals in urban India. It asks: How do media portrayals of non-monogamy shape women's understanding of their interpersonal relationships within a context that continues to privilege monogamy? The paper advances a twofold argument. First, that media representations are structured by an ideological duality that both enables and constrains female agency, and

second, that in the Indian context, this duality is intensified by socio-legal frameworks that regulate intimacy, creating a tough terrain for the negotiation of non-monogamous identities.

By situating media representation within a framework of cultural governance, this study contributes by highlighting the tension between visibility and regulation in the construction of non-monogamous femininities. In doing so, it emphasises the necessity of distinguishing between global representational trends and their situated interpretations within specific socio-cultural contexts, addressing a critical gap in current analyses of non-monogamy and the media.

Methodology

The complex socio-legal landscape of contemporary India, increasingly shaped by a “biopolitics of fidelity” and ongoing heteronormative censorship, requires a qualitative research framework that emphasises depth over statistical range. This research uses a multi-dimensional phenomenological methodology that begins with a comprehensive literature review and media analysis to define the narrative, followed by the collection of primary data (Willis and Harvey 3). The literature review analyses current research on the sociology of intimacy and Indian jurisprudence, creating the historical and legal framework necessary for analysing the present norms of cultural governance. Simultaneously, a critical media analysis was conducted on a carefully chosen set of Western and Indian visual narratives, including the Spanish series *Elite* and Indian productions like *Gehraiyaan*, to pinpoint recurring tropes and the ideological duality that defines their representation (Montero and Madrona; Batra). This dual foundational phase establishes the semiotic framework for the subsequent Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which analyses the lived experience of individuals dealing with the tension between personal agency and state-sanctioned moral norms (Willis and

Harvey 3). By recognising participants as self-interpreting individuals, the methodology surpasses limited description, advancing towards a critical theorisation of how individuals interpret specific media texts when their personal experiences clash with dominant cultural narratives (Willis and Harvey 3–4).

To provide an integrated understanding, the study has used textual and media analysis that is supported and contextualized by qualitative data derived from in-depth, conversational interviews. Informal, semi-structured interviews were applied to implement primary data collection in order to establish a natural and unstructured conversational environment. With the aim to reduce social desirability bias and minimise the structural constraint that frequently limits conventional qualitative analysis, the researcher intentionally made use of pre-existing relationships and established social networks with the participants. The researcher aimed to systematically use a Google Forms driven, structured questionnaire as a dynamic digital interview guide. Participants were able to organically express their lived experiences and relationship frameworks with the help of this interface, which enabled the researcher to methodically follow important conceptual frameworks across sessions without interfering with the flow of discussion. The researcher obtained verbal informed consent before each session and completely anonymised all recorded data in order to maintain research ethics within this confidential context.

The selection of sample size is a deliberate approach to the underlying realities of the Indian context, where non-monogamy is still a stigmatised and mostly hidden practice. Due to the social unreliability associated with these relationship structures, traditional large-scale surveys are methodologically inadequate for capturing internal complexities. Consequently, this research employs selective sampling to select information-rich cases, specifically one male and one female participant from urban Indian centres, who demonstrate significant reflexivity

concerning their media consumption and relationship dynamics. This emphasis on two distinct individuals allows for narrative density, enabling a detailed analysis of the gendered disparities in the execution of non-monogamy. This methodological orientation aligns with the idiographic commitment of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which prioritises the density of experiential insight over statistical breadth, positioning small-scale selective sampling not as a structural limitation but as a theoretical necessity for capturing the intricate and scrutinised complexities of lived experience (Willis and Harvey 4–5). Data was gathered via semi-structured, narrative-centric interviews conducted in confidential environments, aimed at enabling participants to express how scrutinised media tropes affected their self-perception and personal interactions (Willis and Harvey 5). The findings from these case studies do not assert statistical generalisability to the larger Indian population. However, they offer substantial theoretical transferability. They provide a crucial framework for comprehending how urban individuals traverse the evolving parameters of intimacy, offering an intricate perspective on the negotiation of broader power structures within the individual psyche.

Women and Non-Monogamy

Academic inquiry into the sociology of intimacy often exhibits a relative lack of research regarding non-monogamy through a specifically gendered lens, particularly concerning how women's participation is conceptualised within feminist research. For decades, feminist inquiry has been preoccupied with the structural constraints of intimate life, highlighting how women are consistently positioned as relational subjects, ascribed to the roles of caregivers, nurturers, and the moral anchors of the domestic sphere (Banerjee 125–28). Within these patriarchal frameworks, women are mandated to embody devotion and sexual exclusivity, with marriage functioning as

both a social imperative and a biopolitical mechanism of regulation. Consequently, any woman who prioritises autonomy or self-realisation beyond this dyadic framework is frequently pathologised as deviant or anomalous (Rajasekaran).

In the Indian context, these normative expectations are further intensified by the socio-cultural and legal centrality of marriage. Here, marriage is not merely a matter of personal choice but a familial and national mandate, often detached from liberal discourses of romantic love. Women's identities remain tightly tethered to their roles as wives and mothers, sustaining a system where emotional and sexual exclusivity is not only expected but strictly policed. Within such a rigid framework, non-monogamy represents more than an alternative relational form, it is a profound disruption of deeply ingrained gender norms and the biopolitics of fidelity (Haritaworn et al. 515–16).

Theoretical frameworks suggest that non-monogamous structures hold the potential to reconfigure these scripts by decoupling intimacy from exclusivity and challenging the gendered distribution of emotional labour (Haritaworn et al. 518; Sheff 252). By foregrounding informed consent, multiplicity, and radical transparency, such arrangements may enable women to exercise greater sovereignty over their intimate lives. Media representations that depict women in polyamorous or open relationships often gesture toward this transformative potential, presenting characters who assert desire, negotiate personal boundaries, and actively resist conventional scripts of fidelity (Hardy and Easton 1–15).

However, this perceived expansion of agency must be approached with critical caution. Representations of non-monogamous women frequently remain embedded within broader ideological structures that regulate the extent of their transgression. While certain media narratives frame non-monogamy as liberatory, they often do so within highly

constrained parameters, privileging specific class positions, aesthetic body norms, and Westernised forms of expression (Antalffy). As a result, the figure of the non-monogamous woman is characterised by a duality, she is simultaneously represented as empowered and marginalised as unstable, excessive, or morally ambiguous. This tension is especially apparent in contemporary discourse surrounding sexual freedom. While non-monogamy is often presented as a site of liberation, it does not automatically dismantle entrenched inequalities. Gendered double standards persist, men's participation in multiple partnerships is more readily normalised as an expression of lust, while women continue to face heightened scrutiny and social stigma (Sheff 260–64). Thus, even within egalitarian structures, patriarchal hierarchies may be reproduced in more subtle, insidious forms.

Furthermore, scholars have drawn critical attention to the intersection of capitalist structures and intimate life. As discussed in interviews with Kristen Ghodsee, women's sexuality within neoliberal systems is shaped by a "bundle of shifting social expectations," where emotional and material dependencies are negotiated within the framework of the monogamous dyad ("Capitalism Is Ruining Your Sex Life"; Arnold). In this sense, non-monogamy can be read as a challenge to the economic and affective logics of traditional partnerships, potentially redistributing emotional labour. Yet this shift is neither automatic nor universal, it remains contingent on structural conditions, including class access and social privilege.

Additionally, while non-monogamous relationships emphasise individual autonomy, they also demand complex forms of emotional labour and self-regulation. The ideal of complete independence can often obscure the gruelling relational work necessary to sustain such arrangements, particularly in contexts where social support systems are hostile (Hardy and Easton 6–12). For women, this involves navigating

not only interpersonal dynamics but also constant external judgment and moral surveillance from the state and society.

Thus, rather than viewing non-monogamy as inherently emancipatory, it is more analytically productive to approach it as a contested terrain where possibilities for autonomy coexist with persistent structures of constraint. The participation of women in non-monogamous relationships does not simply signal a rupture from patriarchal norms; instead, it reveals an ongoing negotiation of power and legitimacy within shifting socio-cultural contexts. This inherent ambivalence underscores the necessity of critically examining the material conditions and representational frameworks through which non-monogamous femininities are both constructed and policed.

Mass Media Representation of Women with respect to Non-Monogamy

The representational landscape of non-monogamy, particularly when centred on women, constitutes a complex and often contradictory terrain within contemporary popular culture. While global media flows have increasingly integrated narratives of relational plurality, these depictions remain anchored in deeper ideological frameworks that regulate how female sexuality is visualised and evaluated. Rather than presenting a coherent rupture from monogamous scripts, media portrayals frequently oscillate between a surface-level normalisation and a subtle containment, producing an ideologically ambivalent field of representation.

A significant dimension of this portrayal continues to be structured by highly sexualised and androcentric imagery. In various forms of adult media, multiple-partner encounters are frequently depicted; however, such representations rarely challenge entrenched gender hierarchies. Instead, they often reinscribe heteronormative scripts, positioning women as

objects of the male gaze rather than as autonomous subjects possessing sexual agency (Sheff 254). Within this visual economy, female sexuality is rendered visible primarily for consumption, often detached from true individual sovereignty.

In contrast, certain contemporary narratives appear to gesture towards more agentic representations of non-monogamous femininities. Series such as *You Me Her* and in foundational texts like *The Ethical Slut*, Hardy and Easton attempt to foreground radical transparency, consent, and self-determination (Shepherd; Hardy and Easton 1–15). By presenting women as active architects of their relational lives, these portrayals depart from earlier tropes, acknowledging the intricate emotional and ethical dimensions of non-monogamy and contributing to a more nuanced public discourse.

However, even these seemingly progressive narratives remain embedded within broader structural constraints. Media portrayals frequently privilege specific subject positions—typically those that are urban, upper-class, and aligned with Westernised aesthetic norms (Antalffy). Consequently, non-monogamy is often framed as a viable lifestyle only for the socially and economically privileged, thereby marginalising diverse lived experiences and re-inscribing exclusion under the guise of liberal inclusivity. This selective visibility narrows the representational scope, suggesting that only certain bodies are capable of pursuing alternative structures.

Furthermore, mainstream media frequently simplifies or distorts the underlying principles of ethical non-monogamy. Dramatised representations, such as those in *Sex/Life* (Rukeyser et al.), often prioritise spectacle and transgression over the painstaking work of negotiation and mutual respect. Such narratives may inadvertently reproduce negative stereotypes by framing non-monogamous arrangements as inherently chaotic,

emotionally unstable, or morally questionable, thus reinforcing the very stigma they appear to explore.

Yet, there are instances where media texts have historically navigated these tensions with a degree of ambivalence. In the *Friends* episode “The One with the Butt,” the character Aurora demonstrates a complex engagement with non-monogamy (Season 1, ep. 6). While the character is subjected to a measure of objectification and moral scrutiny, the narrative grants her a level of legitimacy and emotional density, reflecting shifting cultural anxieties regarding alternative kinship forms. This suggests that representational duality is a persistent feature of media history rather than a modern anomaly.

Central to this analysis is the recognition that media acts as an active agent in the production of social meanings (Berlant 1–15). Representations that appear to expand the boundaries of visibility may simultaneously regulate transgression through narrative closure—where non-monogamous women are ultimately disciplined or returned to the monogamous dyad. In this sense, the media operates through a logic of permitted deviation, allowing for limited ruptures of the norm only to eventually reassert its stability.

Furthermore, the intersection of gender with class and respectability remains a crucial factor in shaping these outcomes (Banerjee 125–28). Women who embody sanctioned forms of femininity are more likely to be depicted with empathy, while those who deviate are often pathologised as excessive or morally suspect. This dynamic underscores the extent to which depictions of non-monogamy are mediated by broader regimes of social stratification and the biopolitics of fidelity.

Therefore, it is necessary to move beyond simple evaluations of accuracy to examine the ideological work performed by these representations. A critical approach must

analyse how the media simultaneously expands the imaginable while delimiting the terms of legitimacy. The figure of the non-monogamous woman thus emerges as a site of intense negotiation, where competing discourses of autonomy, desire, and moral regulation intersect.

In conclusion, media ambivalence should be understood as a constitutive feature of contemporary cultural production. It reflects the ongoing tension between evolving claims to sexual freedom and enduring structures of gendered control. Ultimately, these portrayals reveal the limits of visibility as a marker of emancipation, emphasising the need for more nuanced and diverse narratives that authentically represent the complexities of non-monogamous choices.

Moral Dilemma of Media Practitioners

The representational politics of non-monogamy are not merely a matter of visibility; they are fundamentally structured by the ethical and ideological anxieties of media practitioners navigating the tension between commercial imperatives and social regulation (Antalffy). Producers find themselves in a precarious position, attempting to articulate alternative relational imaginaries while remaining tethered to market-driven sensibilities and established cultural hierarchies. Consequently, the depiction of non-monogamous women emerges as a negotiated compromise—a site where the impulse for progressive disruption encounters the mechanisms of normative containment.

On one hand, media narratives of non-monogamous femininities gesture toward a biopolitics of empowerment, foregrounding sexual autonomy and the sovereignty of desire. By presenting women as agentic subjects who navigate multiple intimacies with reflexivity, these portrayals threaten to dismantle the heteronormative script that restricts female

identity to the monogamous dyad. Such representations act as active agents in the production of social meanings, potentially expanding the public discourse to acknowledge the legitimacy of diverse kinship forms.

However, this transformative potential is frequently disciplined by the structural constraints of cultural production. The neoliberal drive for viewership often necessitates the re-inscription of familiar moral frameworks, ensuring that transgression remains palatable to a mainstream audience. Even within ostensibly liberal narratives, non-monogamous arrangements are often framed through the lens of instability or tragic unfulfilment, eventually resolving into more “stable” heteropatriarchal structures (Rukeyser et al.). This pattern reveals a persistent ideological duality where the media enables a degree of representational rupture only to ultimately reaffirm the stability of the norm.

This dilemma is further complicated by the selective visibility that governs mass media. Portrayals typically privilege urban, upper-class subjectivities that align with Westernised aesthetic body norms, effectively framing relational plurality as an elite lifestyle. This selective gaze marginalises more diverse lived experiences, suggesting that only certain bodies are entitled to alternative structures. For media practitioners, the ethical challenge lies in resisting these exclusionary tropes and avoiding the reproduction of social stratification under the guise of inclusivity (Antalffy).

Furthermore, representational strategies often oscillate between the romanticisation of non-monogamy as a site of radical freedom and its pathologisation as a source of emotional chaos. As seen in series like *Sex/Life*, the prioritisation of spectacle frequently obscures the ethical labour—transparency, consent, and negotiation—that defines consensual non-monogamy. By emphasising transgression over ethical

complexity, the media inadvertently reinscribes the very stigma it seeks to explore, reinforcing public misconceptions of non-monogamous identities as inherently unstable (Hardy and Easton 1–15; Rukeyser et al.).

The persistence of gendered double standards remains a significant barrier to representational integrity. Women who deviate from the monogamous script continue to face a measure of moral scrutiny and objectification that is rarely applied to their male counterparts. These disparities reflect the broader regimes of social regulation that categorise female desire as “excessive” or morally suspect. Even when attempting to foreground agency, media texts may fall into the trap of sexualising female autonomy for the male gaze, thereby undermining true individual sovereignty (Sheff 260–64).

The ethical responsibility of cultural producers must, therefore, move beyond mere inclusion toward a more nuanced and situated analysis. Authentic representation requires a commitment to narrative density that acknowledges the intersection of class, gender, and socio-legal constraints. Practitioners must move beyond the flattened tropes of the “liberated woman” to present characters who navigate both the possibilities and the gruelling relational work inherent in non-monogamous choices.

Crucially, these representational choices are made within a broader ecosystem of cultural governance, including state-sanctioned censorship and platform guidelines (Banerjee 125–28). Such institutional pressures often lead to a form of internal self-regulation, where creators pre-emptively limit narrative transgression to avoid controversy or moral backlash. In the Indian context, this is intensified by a biopolitics of fidelity that views non-normative intimacy as a threat to national integrity, further circumscribing the imaginable parameters of non-monogamous femininities.

In summary, the moral dilemma of media practitioners is a persistent negotiation between the aspiration for social complexity and the pressure of ideological conformity. This tension does not yield neutral results. It produces an ambivalent field of representation that simultaneously offers glimpses of autonomy while maintaining the boundaries of legitimacy. These portrayals reveal the limits of visibility alone as a marker of social change.

Ultimately, the impact of media on public perception is contingent upon whether it reinforces existing prejudices or fosters a more empathetic and equitable discourse. A critical engagement with the politics of representation is essential for understanding how the media participates in the governance of intimate life. For non-monogamy to be understood as a valid relational form, it requires a shift away from superficial spectacle toward narratives that honour the complex negotiation of power, desire, and commitment.

Cultural Governance and the Biopolitics of Intimacy

In the contemporary Indian socio-political landscape, majoritarian cultural ideologies and judicial discourse do not merely coexist; rather, they operate within a shared discursive field where legal reasoning and political rhetoric frequently converge to shape the regulation of intimacy. Within this context, an idealised figure of Indian femininity emerges—one in which desire is disciplined through fidelity and individual autonomy is subordinated to the mandate of sacrifice. The traditional Hindu wife within a monogamous framework is constructed not only as the embodiment of ideal womanhood but also as a symbolic anchor of social and national stability (Banerjee 125–28). This construction extends beyond cultural nostalgia, operating as a biopolitical mechanism that stabilises collective identity by prescribing normative patterns of behaviour amidst rapid socio-cultural transformation.

The assertion that “Bharatiya sanskriti” functions as a site of moral repair situates women’s sexuality at the centre of national regeneration. The boundaries of virtuous citizenship are thus inscribed onto the body of the woman who adheres to a singular love, desires exclusively within marriage, and sustains familial cohesion. Monogamy, in this sense, shifts from a personal relational choice to a broader marker of ideological conformity and cultural loyalty (Banerjee 125-28).

Crucially, this ideological framework extends beyond rhetoric into regulatory practices. The 2021 digital media rules, which encourage platforms to monitor and restrict sexually explicit content, operate not only as instruments of obscenity control but also as mechanisms that delimit acceptable forms of intimacy (Banerjee 125–28). Within such a mediated environment, female desire is rendered legitimate primarily when it aligns with heteronormative expectations. The figure of the sexually autonomous woman—particularly one who disrupts the monogamous dyad—emerges as a site of intense anxiety, rendered simultaneously hyper-visible and delegitimised by the state.

This moral regulation permeates public discourse, where political rhetoric frequently mobilises the language of nationalism to frame non-normative sexualities as forms of cultural contamination. However, it would be reductive to locate this regulatory impulse solely within the political executive. The judiciary—while formally committed to constitutional principles—can reflect elements of this broader cultural logic, often articulating it through a liberal-legal vocabulary that maintains the status quo.

This tension is evident in *Joseph Shine v. Union of India*, where the Supreme Court decriminalised adultery and affirmed individual autonomy, yet simultaneously reiterated the centrality of marriage as a foundational social institution (*Joseph Shine v.*

Union of India). Such reasoning reveals a profound paradox within Indian jurisprudence: The language of rights and liberty often coexists with a subtle, yet persistent, reaffirmation of normative relational structures.

A similar ambivalence characterises the *Supriyo v. Union of India* decision declining to legalise same-sex marriage (*Supriyo v. Union of India*). While the Court acknowledged the inherent dignity of queer relationships, it deferred the matter to legislative authority, citing the importance of democratic process. This position contributes to the continued centrality of heteronormative frameworks within legal and cultural discourse. By situating the recognition of non-normative relationships outside the immediate scope of constitutional protection, such decisions illustrate the limits of liberal legality when confronted with prevailing social norms and the biopolitics of fidelity.

Law in this context appears to extend beyond mere adjudication, at times aligning with broader normative visions of intimacy that privilege marital stability, reproductive continuity, and familial order. What emerges is not a simple opposition between tradition and modernity, but a more complex entanglement in which legal institutions negotiate, rather than fully transcend, dominant cultural expectations regarding the “correct” expression of intimacy.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the treatment of women’s sexuality within legal processes. While courts may recognise live-in relationships, they often do so only when they approximate the structure and permanence of marriage. In family law disputes, a woman’s sexual history—manifested through digital communication or personal expression—continues to be mobilised as a marker of moral character (Banerjee 125–28). Legal reasoning in such instances frequently operates through implicit gendered assumptions: Male transgression is framed as episodic, whereas female sexual

autonomy is interpreted as indicative of fundamental moral failure.

This reflects a broader mode of governance in which the law operates not solely through rights, but through the moral evaluation of affect, attachment, and behaviour. It privileges forms of intimacy grounded in discipline and sacrifice, while rendering alternative relational arrangements suspect or inherently illegitimate.

Media functions within a parallel logic of regulation. Series like *Four More Shots Please!* or films like *Gehraiyaan* may appear to expand the representational space for female autonomy and sexual exploration (Nandy; Batra). However, these narratives frequently resolve through patterns of regret, punishment, or reintegration into normative structures. The sexually autonomous woman is often narratively disciplined, her transgression contained within a framework of eventual correction. Such patterns reflect a broader representational logic of permitted deviation, wherein cultural texts allow for temporary disruption only to ultimately restore the normative order.

This cyclical containment has significant implications, not only shaping what is visible but also constraining what is imaginable. Cultural producers internalise these boundaries, resulting in forms of self-regulation that pre-emptively limit narrative possibilities. In turn, the relative absence of diverse relational models reinforces institutional claims regarding the marginality or instability of non-normative intimacy, thereby sustaining a self-reinforcing cycle of cultural regulation.

Consensual non-monogamy, in this context, acquires political significance not merely as an alternative relational arrangement but as a reconfiguration of the underlying structure of intimacy itself. By decoupling commitment from exclusivity

and foregrounding principles of consent and transparency, it challenges the dyadic model that underpins both legal frameworks and cultural imaginaries. This has particular implications for women, whose emotional and sexual labour has historically been organised around ideals of sacrifice and fidelity (Hardy and Easton 1–15; Sheff 252–55).

It is essential, however, not to romanticise non-monogamy as inherently emancipatory. Its transformative potential remains contingent upon structural conditions, including class privilege and social acceptance. Nevertheless, in a context where women's intimate lives are subject to persistent surveillance by family and state, non-monogamy represents a meaningful site of resistance to coercive norms.

In this light, one may draw on Lauren Berlant's notion of intimate publics (Berlant 1-15) to understand how alternative forms of belonging circulate beyond the traditional family. Similarly, Sara Ahmed's critique of compulsory happiness (Ahmed 27-49) highlights how non-normative relational choices disrupt not only social conventions but also state-sanctioned affective ideals.

Ultimately, non-monogamy in the Indian context cannot be reduced to a private lifestyle choice. It must be understood as a contested terrain where personal autonomy, cultural norms, and institutional power intersect. The experiences of non-monogamous women reveal not a complete rupture from existing structures, but an ongoing negotiation within them—exposing the profound possibilities and limits of intimacy under conditions of cultural governance.

Case Study I

This exploratory analysis focuses on Participant A, a pansexual female aged 24–29 from an elite urban milieu. Holding a Master's degree in English Literature and possessing a

professional background in pedagogy and digital content creation, her trajectory toward non-monogamy was facilitated by a synthesis of personal relational history and sustained engagement with diverse media narratives encountered during her academic tenure. Having navigated both monogamous and polyamorous frameworks, she currently engages in casual dating following the termination of a long-term partnership.

Participant A's orientation toward relational plurality is anchored in a critique of the monogamous dyad, which she perceives as insufficient for fulfilling the complete spectrum of intellectual, affective, and physical needs. While she identifies this perspective as increasingly prevalent among educated, urban youth, she acknowledges the inherent tension between her choices and the dominant social scripts upheld by older generations. This generational dissonance, characterised by the conflation of non-monogamy with moral laxity or infidelity, underscores how acceptance remains unevenly distributed and stratified along parameters of age, education, and cultural exposure.

A central theme in Participant A's narrative is the arduous management of emotional labour, particularly concerning the negotiation of jealousy. Identifying this as a recurring disruption within same-sex male dynamics, her primary coping mechanism involves emotional detachment or the dissolution of the arrangement. Such responses illuminate the extent to which non-monogamy demands not merely an ideological rejection of exclusivity, but an intensive commitment to reflexivity. Rather than an inherently liberatory state, her experience reveals the constant negotiation required to sustain alternative intimate forms within a hostile social environment.

Regarding societal perception, Participant A emphasises the persistence of moral surveillance despite the expansion of representational visibility. Although she navigates a degree of

acceptance within her immediate peer group, she maintains a strategic silence regarding her intimate life within her kinship structures. This selective disclosure reflects a broader biopolitics of intimacy, wherein non-monogamous individuals must calibrate their visibility to navigate anticipated judgment and the enduring stigma attached to non-normative desires.

Media representation serves as a pivotal agent in Participant A's self-construction, acting as a site for both normalisation and awareness. However, she offers a critical analysis of mainstream media's ideological duality, noting its tendency toward polarised portrayals that either romanticise relational plurality or pathologise it as a site of moral deficiency and instability. She cites the character of Veronica in *Cocktail* as a representative trope, where female autonomy is narratively disciplined and ultimately subordinated to the reassertion of conventional monogamous norms (Adajania).

Furthermore, Participant A recognises the subconscious influence of media in structuring internal expectations and internalised norms. While she does not view these narratives as direct determinants of behaviour, she acknowledges their subtle role in delimiting the imaginable. She distinguishes between the containment of mainstream media and the relative validation offered by social media platforms, which function as more supportive spaces for the circulation of alternative relational models. This distinction highlights the multiplicity of media environments and their varied impact on the construction of non-monogamous identities.

Crucially, Participant A frames her participation in non-monogamy as a mechanism of personal empowerment, asserting her sovereignty to define the terms of her relationships and resist the patriarchal mandate of permanence. This autonomy represents a radical refusal of gender norms that prescribe emotional and sexual restraint for women. However, this

empowerment is never absolute; it remains a contested terrain, perpetually negotiated within a socio-cultural context that continues to privilege the biopolitics of fidelity and heteronormative control.

Analytically, Participant A's experience exemplifies the central thesis of this study. Media representations of non-monogamy operate through a profound ambivalence, simultaneously enabling and constraining female agency. Her account illustrates how media-generated imaginaries of relational freedom coexist with entrenched social regulation, creating a fragmented experiential landscape. While global media flows facilitate the articulation of alternative possibilities, they do not dismantle the structural conditions that limit their realisation, compelling individuals to navigate the tension between visibility and legitimacy.

In conclusion, this case study reveals that non-monogamous subjectivities are not merely adopted but are actively constructed through the interplay of media discourse, social constraint, and personal reflexivity (Sheff 252–55). Participant A's reflections provide a nuanced perspective on the lived realities of non-monogamous women in urban India, highlighting how aspirations for autonomy are inextricably intertwined with the persistent structures of regulation and the gruelling labour of relational negotiation.

Case Study II

This exploratory analysis shifts its focus to Participant B, a heterosexual male aged 24 to 29 situated within a middle-class urban environment. Currently single, his intellectual background includes a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, complemented by professional experience in information technology and creative pursuits in music and writing. His trajectory toward non-monogamy was facilitated by a synthesis of diverse media flows,

ranging from literature and sitcoms to digital platforms, which functioned as a catalyst for initial curiosity and a subsequent investigation into alternative relational frameworks.

Participant B's orientation toward relational plurality is anchored in a desire to challenge the hegemony of conventional scripts. While initially unfamiliar with such arrangements, his perspective gradually evolved into a more favourable view, perceiving non-monogamy as offering an expanded spectrum for intellectual, affective, and physical fulfillment. This trajectory underscores the role of media not merely as a passive source of information, but as an active agent in reimagining the parameters of the imaginable, particularly among the educated, urban youth.

Simultaneously, Participant B's narrative reveals a profound ideological ambivalence regarding the long-term sustainability of non-monogamous structures. He identifies the gruelling emotional labour and the complexity of managing multiple relational dynamics as significant disruptions, expressing skepticism regarding their viability and citing a perceived high rate of failure. This tension illuminates the dissonance between the aspirational appeal of non-monogamy and the practical difficulties of its enactment, suggesting that engagement with such forms is perpetually negotiated through uncertainty and reflexivity.

Regarding societal perception, Participant B observes a generational divide characterised by the same dissonance identified in earlier case studies. While younger populations exhibit a degree of openness, non-monogamy remains a stigmatised practice within traditional social contexts, frequently pathologised as taboo. He emphasises that while these structures offer a level of individual sovereignty not found in the monogamous dyad, this autonomy is disciplined by persistent moral surveillance and the risk of judgment. Consequently,

participation requires a strategic calibration between personal desire and social acceptability.

Media representation serves as a pivotal, albeit contested, site in Participant B's self-construction. He critiques mainstream portrayals for their superficiality, noting a tendency toward polarised depictions that prioritise sensationalism and sexual transgression over ethical complexity. This critique aligns with the broader observation that media production is frequently governed by commercial imperatives and viewership, resulting in dramatised narratives that prioritise spectacle over the painstaking work of negotiation and mutual respect.

A significant dimension of his analysis concerns the gendered double standards inherent in these representations. Participant B argues that media narratives frequently favour men while positioning women in non-monogamous relationships in a less sympathetic light, often reducing them to objects of desire lacking emotional density. This observation points to the persistence of androcentric scripts that reinforce reductive stereotypes, even within narratives that ostensibly challenge traditional norms. Such depictions reveal the limits of visibility when it remains embedded within patriarchal hierarchies.

He further reflects on the formative influence of media consumption during adolescence, acknowledging its subtle role in structuring internal expectations and a willingness to experiment with alternative relational forms. This underscores the role of media as an agent in the production of social meanings, contributing to the development of values and behavioural orientations related to intimacy. By delimiting what is imaginable, these narratives participate in the broader governance of intimate life during critical stages of socialisation.

Looking ahead, Participant B anticipates a gradual expansion in social acceptance, driven by continued media

visibility and public discourse (Nhalungo). However, he maintains that such a shift is contingent upon the development of more balanced and nuanced narratives. In his view, authentic portrayals that move beyond superficial spectacle are essential for dismantling the biopolitics of fidelity and fostering a more empathetic, inclusive, and equitable social discourse regarding non-monogamous choices.

Analytically, Participant B's account complements the insights derived from Participant A, reinforcing the central thesis of this study. While both recognise the normalising potential of media, Participant B places greater emphasis on its distortive tendencies and the ideological duality that defines representational containment. His reflections illustrate how media imaginaries not only shape individual curiosity but also reproduce the gendered hierarchies and misconceptions that structure societal responses to non-normative intimacy.

Together, these observations confirm that media operates as a site of profound ambivalence, simultaneously enabling visibility while delimiting the terms of legitimacy through selective and gendered representation. Participant B's experience demonstrates how individuals internalise, negotiate, and contest these representations, revealing the complex interplay between media discourse, personal agency, and the enduring structures of social regulation in the construction of contemporary intimate life.

Conclusion

This exploratory study highlights the complex and controversial issues urban Indian women face when engaging in non-monogamous relationships. The study shows that visibility alone does not lead to real liberation but that it examines the connection between global media portrayals, long-standing social and legal systems, and individual experiences. A deep

ideological duality exists in how contemporary mass media operates. On one hand, it helps normalise various perspectives on female agency, transparency, and relationship diversity, allowing people to question traditional, heteronormative narratives about sexuality though, on the other hand, mainstream media uses androcentric frames, selective visibility based on class, and narrative closure that often limits non-monogamous identities.

A widespread “biopolitics of fidelity” adds to this representational conflict in India as the state promotes traditional marriage stability and female self-sacrifice as key elements of national integrity and moral order. This is evident in political rhetoric and majoritarian cultural ideology. Legal institutions display a structural doubt that supports heteropatriarchal family structures and regulates female sexual expression and this continues despite significant legal changes, such as the *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* case that expanded personal autonomy. Any deviation from monogamous relationships faces systematic exclusion, moral scrutiny, and ongoing social stigma due to this pervasive culture of censorship (*Joseph Shine v. Union of India*).

As the qualitative insights from the study reveal, a fragmented and subjective context shapes how urban individuals practice non-monogamy. Non-monogamy becomes a constant negotiation that requires emotional labour, strategic concealment within kinship dynamics, and ongoing psychological clashes with ingrained social norms and it is not simply an easy path to liberation. Ultimately, the study calls for cultural producers and public discussions to move beyond androcentric, reductionist ideas as there is a need to validate consensual non-monogamy as a legitimate form of interpersonal form. To foster an egalitarian social dialogue, we must recognise the complex realities of intimacy, autonomy, and power that exist within the modern Indian psyche through nuanced and detailed narratives.

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A Study of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* as Posthuman Epistemology

Jaswinder Singh*

Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is to unfold the mystic strangeness of the character of Billy Biswas by foregrounding the fact that he is a perfect example of multi-subjective consciousness and posthuman identity. The narrative is proliferated with images, ideas, and actions that point to the explicit cues of the posthuman vision of the central character that aligns with the “ecophilosophy” of critical posthuman discourse, which postulates “a strong sense of collectivity, relationality, and hence community building” (Braidotti 49). Critical posthumanism as an advanced philosophical and methodological approach critically examines the themes/ideas/representations where life and matter, human and nonhuman, human and ecology, human and machine, and multiple life forms co-evolve and are “constituted by and constituted of” symbiogenetic connections (Nayar 11). The critical posthuman ideas offer creative and critical tools to dispel and displace the conventional humanist idea of human agency, which consolidates the political, cultural, and social dominance of man over other life forms, including animals and the earth. The novel serves as a typical example of and a literary representation of posthuman alertness, and its diverse themes and thoughts manifest a sense of multiple belongings and collective relationality. The paper attempts to establish the fact that the novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a posthuman representation of a world where all dialectical oppositions collapse and, therefore, fuse the nature-culture diversities and congeries into a monistic paradigm.

Keywords: Critical Posthumanism, De-territorialisation, Dis-identification, Primitive Force, Symbiogenesis

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Introduction

This paper inquisitively reconfigures and re-evaluates the strangeness of the central character in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* by examining it through the posthuman lens. The objective of the study is to employ some of the strategic and critical ideas of posthuman epistemology and new materialism to analyse the novel and its central character as the perfect example of posthuman ideals, along with the emergent ecophilosophy of new materialism. The paper engages with the critical and methodological insights of these new paradigms of creative and alternative thought and practice, which help in reconfiguring and interpreting the novel as a monistic assemblage of all life forms where any exclusive and transcendental position has been denied to human beings. Billy Biswas, the central character of the novel, ironically distances himself from any such primacy and relegates his position to a new level where humans do not flaunt any sole agentic force. The novel constitutes manifold events and acts of consciousness which can be assessed as posthuman subjectivity. The paper also postulates that any attempt to limit the character of Billy Biswas as a self-contained and self-constituting figure whose entire crisis is psychological and existential is unilateral and disoriented. A large number of assessments deal with either the dialectical themes to explain the identity issues or they rely on those humanist ideas that focus more on individual skepticism. The majority of these assessments have pinned down the character of Billy Biswas as an existential humanist whose primary and ultimate goal is his dire quest for his personal freedom and, therefore, in a sense, projecting his value of life above everything. Several academic works increasingly resonate with such recurrent themes of identity crisis, alienation, self-realisation, freedom, etc., which contradict his open and radical approach to life. Billy Biswas has been substantially projected as an individual dejectedly working to integrate his self-

understanding and autonomy. Such themes explicitly align with the tenets of existentialism. In the words of Thomas Fynn:

In arguing that existentialism is a humanistic philosophy, Sartre means that it places the human being at the centre of its attention and the apex of its value hierarchy. . . he insists that the ultimate value, the goal of our endeavours, should be the fostering of the freedom of the individual, by which he means the enhancement of his or her concrete possibilities of choice. That creative freedom, he implies, should not be sacrificed to any 'higher value, whether it be the 'class' of the Marxists or the 'God' of the religious believers. (47)

Several critical responses lead us to understand that the character of Billy Biswas is emblematic of humanist and existential typology, and the novel operates at a dialectical dualism. The existentialist themes like alienation, soul searching, identity dilemma, spiritual discontent or estrangement, and quest for a meaningful world become the dominant explanations (Leena 348; Urmil 42; Sharma and Rajput 543; Vatsa and Gaur 64; Mendhe 324). Whereas, the dialectical themes like west versus east (Barche 97), civilised/modern vs. Uncivilised/primitive/ancestors, material vs. tribal, self vs. other, physical vs. spiritual, romantic vs. superficial etc. have been predominantly discussed under the category of nature-culture binary (Ganshyam 98; Faizan 56; Lakshmi and Reddy 95; Prasad 107; Mathur 425; Anapurna and Ram 165). These numerous works either evaluate the personal crisis of Billy Biswas or portray him as reeling under the dialectical duality. Any such attempt to read the character of Billy Biswas merely as an agent pursuing individual, psychological, or ontological aspirations risks diluting a deeper understanding of his radical position as a posthuman subject. Rather, Billy Biswas profoundly embodies his posthuman awareness of what

Braidotti calls “a colossal hybridization” — a vision of multiple belonging (65).

Conversely, the present paper arguably propounds the idea that his character embodies an anti-humanist position, situating him in a multi-subjective and multi-identity world or, in the posthuman terminology, an “embodied and embedded subjectivity” (Braidotti 82). The humanist notion, which renders primacy to the themes of self-identity or self-containment, is grounded in the erroneous presuppositions of classical humanism, which fosters the identical themes in existentialism also. M.A.R. Habib recapitulates and corroborates this fact by citing Lacan’s explanation of self and its philosophical precedents:

As Lacan states later in his paper, one such philosophy based on the pre-assumption that thought or consciousness forms a coherent unity is existentialism, which erringly grants the ego “the illusion of autonomy.” (590)

Such humanist assumptions entrench the dialectics of self and other where such dialectical projection prioritises the importance of autonomous self and its identity goals at the cost of ignoring the other forms of existence. Therefore, the present paper proposes that Billy Biswas must be subject to a new explicatory discussion underpinned by the emerging critical ideas/theories like posthumanism and new materialism. The paper explicitly traces and identifies multiple positions and layers that affirm and assert the posthuman ontology that characterises the whole discourse of the novel. Billy Biswas, radically and critically, manifests the instantiation of posthuman perspectives like “embedded embodiment” and “a colossal hybridization” (Nayar 20; Braidotti 65). Such phrases conceptualise an essential spatial-temporal dimension enfolding multiple subjectivities and a vital network of human-animal-the earth. To represent such vital

interconnections, this paper relies on the critical thoughts of two posthuman thinkers and critics, Rosi Braidotti and Pramod K. Nayar, who have put forth the critical, philosophical, and methodological approach to foreground the posthuman perspectives. Both Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) and Pramod Nayar's *Posthumanism* (2014) offer critical insights into posthuman epistemology. The paper employs the posthuman theoretical notions including "colossal hybridization," "syntogenesis," "nomadize subjectivity," "dis-identification," "multi-species citizenship," "posthuman ethics," and matter with "agentic capacities" etc. (Braidotti 49, 54, 65, 190; Nayar 67, 171; Coole and Frost 9).

Posthuman Epistemology

Posthuman investigations critically and strategically argue for displacing and rejecting the post-Cartesian and modern philosophical idea of human centrality as the only pivotal agency that presupposes its transcendental character over non-humans to "control and configure the passive nature of the matter" (Coole and Frost 8). Modern philosophical tendencies emerging from the European Enlightenment empowered the human as the sole agent, flaunting the exclusive capabilities of being "rational, self-aware, free and self moving" who strategically normalises and exploits matter in an unprecedented way (Coole and Frost 8). Rosi Braidotti finds the entire European "civilizational model" rests upon the discriminatory "cultural standards" which negatively fosters dialectical oppositions to forge racial and gender differences to privilege white male supremacy. She finds posthumanism as a radical approach to render a more positive and emergent response to the modern philosophy that enthrones the human, particularly male, white and able-bodied as the universal agents (13, 24). Braidotti calls her posthuman vision and writings a critical and constructive defiance determined to impair and dislodge the destructive notions of selfish individualism and male exclusivity privileged to the western

male anthropos. Such privilege positions were already boldly challenged in the feminist critiques for such male authoritarianism (77). Rosi Braidotti insists on re-looking at the dominant high humanistic principles that have been a corollary of Europeanised anthropos that ordain the “boundless capacity of humans to pursue their individual and collective perfectibility” (13). Such self determined assurance entails the unchallenged and unquestioned expansion of their biological, cultural, and moral capabilities which further consolidate the humanist notion of human-centric teleology driven by human reason. Rosi Braidotti argues that the humanist ideals solely stand for self-possessed hegemony, self-regulating and autonomous reason which easily transfers its teleological and ontological subjectivity into the norms of culture and its standards (13). She explicitly explains this ontological rigidity as an ingrained attitude of humanism: “Humanism historically developed into a civilizational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalizing powers of self reflexive reason.” (13)

Such self-reflexive reason arguably transcends itself as a “distinctive” and universal character which coincides with “Europe as universal consciousness” (Braidotti 15). The humanist ideal of self-autonomy, over rationality and morality becomes two supplementary coordinates which dismiss any scope of being severed from humanist orthodoxy. She puts forth this European anthropos as a flagship notion which vehemently propagates a hegemonic binary of self and other prompting serious conflicts of identity and difference (15). The otherness stands in stark contrast to the subjectivity consisting of self ordained consciousness, universal rationality and ideal ethical standards which treat the notion of difference as essentially lower, “inferior” or as in the words of Pramod K. Nayar, “less than human” (15, 23). Rather, the notion of difference/otherness was seamlessly transitioned into imperialised, racialised, marginalised and “naturalized” binaries reflected through the

humanist paradigm of “ableism” and “speciesism” (Braidotti 15; Nayar 13–14). Rosi Braidotti sternly makes a valid point:

We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others. Because their history in Europe and elsewhere has been of lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications, these ‘others’ raise issues of power and exclusion. We need more ethical accountability in dealing with the legacy of Humanism. (15)

The phrase “ethical accountability” suggests a need to rethink and reformulate the humanist ideals towards “an ethical appreciation of all bodies,” which can restore a multi-dimensional world with “a colossal hybridization” (Braidotti 15, 71, 65). Pramod Nayar likewise asserts the need to reconsider and renew the old paradigm of exclusivity of universal rationality and specific capacities with ethical grounding and responsibility. Nayar’s posthuman vision leads to blur the borders among human, animal, machines, and living and non-living matter. Posthumanism, as Nayar articulates, foregrounds the vital conceptualisation dissipating any “ontological liminality” that “situates the human above the various other life forms” (12–13). The idea of “ontological liminality” as discussed in the posthuman discourse deals with the problems of “categorizing” and assigning the label of “demonization” to those forms of otherness which through their different functions and environment look “diverse” and “monstrous” (114–15). Nayar points out the deep “human anxiety” of fear and insecurity reflected through the literary and aesthetic expressions about those non-human features which are shown through the divergent figures of “monsters”, human-animal hybrids, impaired or mutated figures and racially different life forms (114). These physiologically and environmentally different life forms which are structured as “other” can be “categorized” as “aboriginals,” “savages,” “disabled bodies,” including tribals, minorities and so on (Nayar 114–15). Since such human and

animal figures are entrenched with the marks of “diverse” functionality and features, they are predisposed to severe violence, dominance, governance, exploitation and control (Nayar 115). Since they accrue such liminality between human and non-human categories, they are subject to the whims of human imagination and representation. Braidotti also finds such human whim as exclusionary and a process of “metaphorization” which she uses particularly in the representation of animals/others measured through the moral binaries (69). Thus, Posthumanism is, as Nayar emphasises, a “radical reworking of humanism” where a new existential and discursive grounding prevails with new congeries of human-nature and human-machine hybridisation (13). Another important posthumanist perspective, which is ingrained in the above characteristics of posthumanism, is the ethical tones of empathy and care. Our “shared mortality and vulnerability” demands our greater response of mutual respect and dignity of life (Nayar 21). Such congeries do not form mere mechanical assemblage or enhancement of life forms; rather, they serve, as Rosi Braidotti points out, “as a democratic move that promotes a kind of ontological pacifism” (86). She further elaborates it as an acceptable redressal wherein these “monistic premises” augment a more compassionate aspect of subjectivity (56, 86).

Posthuman Concepts and Thoughts in the Novel

Some of the posthuman underpinnings are crucial to evaluate the strange case of Billy Biswas, whose character and life events assimilate and represent posthuman values. The posthuman perspectives such as symbiogenesis, human-ecological synthesis, or, as Rosi Braidotti puts it, “deterritorializing” and “becoming the earth,” are connected with these, and the “politics of response and responsibility,” which entail the ethics of empathy, selflessness, and mutual dignity (Braidotti 66; Nayar 48). Symbiogenesis is a biological concept wherein the biological studies have traced the human origin of life or the

origin of the human biological cell in association with “symbiotic evolution of life” (Nayar 62). Referring to the recent development in cell theory, biologists like Lynn Margulis and Marcello Barbieri, as quoted by Nayar, propose that the origin of complex life forms on the earth has a common origin. Lynn Margulis proposes that “the mitochondria, an oxygen respiration organelle in eukaryotic cells, were “a free-living” bacterium whose functions evolved symbiotically in various eukaryotic cells, which further led to the evolution of complex life forms” (Nayar 62). The genetic material with its genotype and the ribotype processes is transformed into proteins, and is the foundational biological setup common to all eukaryotic cells of all living organisms (Nayar 63). Therefore, having this shared genetic origin, these living organisms were “networks” of relational interactions (Nayar 63). They became autopoietic in later stages, where they developed their independent phenotype. Symbiogenesis is the co-evolution of all life forms and, as Nayar extrapolates this idea from S. Kauffman, the “genome is seen to have evolved such that it can interact with the biotic components of its environment” (Nayar 64). Nayar finds this hybridisation to be an important feature of posthuman realisation:

(Human is. . .) The consequence of hybridization and exchange of material and immaterial data, such as in the genetic code, across species, skin, and function of animals, plants, and humans. The human in this critical posthuman outlook is a ‘dynamic hybrid’ of ‘ontologically different elements’ (Jones 2006:572) (Nayar 20–21).

Critical posthumanism sees the human as a congeries, multi-species in origin and whose very survival is founded on symbiotic relations with numerous forms of life on the earth. Critical posthumanism sees co-evolution, symbiosis, and feedback responses as the determining conditions rather than

autonomy, competition, and self-containment of the human (Nayar 20). Rosi Braidotti also sheds light on the posthuman condition of inclusivity and “vitalist materialism” (56). She finds it more essential to reject any unitary and exclusive categories of anthropos which have been working to create boundaries of identities based on dualistic categories comprising intrinsic and extrinsic polarities (56). She cogently formulates the Spinozian concept of monistic world where formalising any distinction based on “matter, the world and the humans” is fatally threatening (56). Rosi Braidotti proposes repositioning and reconfiguring the human attempts which must reflect the “post anthropocentric shift” towards a new human-animal and geo-sensitive horizon (81). Posthumanism asserts that the earth is “a dynamic and sustainable notion of vitalist, self-organizing materialists” (Braidotti 81). This notion of the earth reinforces the fact that human subjectivity is not an effect of its isolated “transcendental reason”, rather it co-processes with the other life forms which are the essential “assemblage” of “non-human agents” (Braidotti 82). The earth is a multispecies planetary assemblage which unhinges, as Rosi Braidotti points out, all dialectical differences and posits “immanence of relations” (81, 82). The concept of “zoe egalitarianism” is not distinct and separable from the concept of becoming the earth. The congeries of human-animal-the earth undergo the process of “deterritorialization” or “dis-identification” which will reinforce the subversion of any hierarchical order or ranking among the continuum of human-animal-nature (Braidotti 71, 89, 88, 92). This egalitarian approach will dissipate any attempt of dominance of Man (Braidotti 88). She augurs that the “deterritorialization” will pave the way for renewed and reimagined landscapes and defamiliarise the normative values upheld by the dominant institutions operating with the “dialectics” of difference and otherness (88). The concepts of “defamiliarisation” and “deterritorialization” are the key notions of posthuman sensibility (Braidotti 89, 88). As a posthuman

strategy, both the concepts are the radical repositioning of a posthuman subject who critically distances and abandons the human “arrogance” and “transcendental exceptionalism” which anthropocentric notions have infused into Man through the established habits of his thoughts and representation of the other (86). These concepts reinforce a critical culture of challenging and displacing anthropocentric ideals of “dialectical schemes of opposition” and “established dualism” hinged through the humanist notions of Western ideologies of white men and their habitual thought systems which promote differences and demarcations based on gender, race and environment (71). Defamiliarisation and deterritorialisation will be conceptual tools to bridge the gaps caused by such violent divisions. Braidotti cogently explains:

The conceptual frame of reference I have adopted for the method of de-familiarization is monism. It implies the open-ended, inter-relational, multi-sexed, and trans-species flow of becoming through interaction with others. (89)

The third theoretical underpinning is the ethical responsibility which identifies “responsibility toward all forms of life, toward difference” (Nayar 48). It promotes the sense of embedded empathy. Since all life forms share their origin and carry “messy, intertwined histories,” they carry “imitative responses conditioned through embeddedness in a community of several species” (Nayar 47–49). The imitative responses refer to the biological foundations wherein the recently discovered nature of “mirror neuron” in the primates proposes the mutual empathic and understanding brain functions (Nayar 60). Sharing vulnerability and mortality will further transform our understanding of mutual care and the ethics of empathy. In a different rephrasing, Rosi Braidotti points out that the empathetic values set the more “significant goals” for the posthuman subject (78). Genetic development and

symbiogenesis confirm the development of innate codes of emotional communication and inbuilt moral goodness among all human and non-human categories (Braidotti 78). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost also reject any such sole privilege to “human intelligence,” whereas human intelligence should not be taken into account without seeing it within the “spectrum of vital materialization” (21).

Posthuman Subjectivity in the Novel

Billy Biswas, the chief protagonist, while answering a question about his choice of living in Harlem, a place of black people, defiantly says that he finds this place to be “the most human place” and “white America” for him was “much too civilized” (Joshi 9). Billy Biswas defiantly diminishes any centring of “white America,” which is quintessentially a paradigm of the humanist ideal of perfect or universal man. Nayar explicitly identifies such “whiteness” as the typical universal standard which has always been prioritised over gender, differently abled bodies, ethnic groups, other races, etc. (Nayar 23). He writes:

Critical Humanism treats humanism as a politically significant philosophy because it enabled Europeans, upper classes, professionals (like medical doctors or psychiatrists) to categorize individuals as inhuman or sub-human and confine them or deny them rights. (23–24)

Identifying Harlem as the “most human place” is Billy’s defiant rejection of humanist ideals promulgating a “civilizational model”, which Rosi Braidotti points out, is the inherent feature of European enlightenment eliciting “anthropocentric, gendered, and racialized” model which upholds “aesthetic and moral ideals based on white, masculine, heterosexual European civilization” (13, 68). Though Billy Biswas belongs to an affluent class in India, he decides to live in a place which ontologically is polemical to the binaries of black/white, slave/master, inferior

race/superior race. Harlem turned out to be an optimal place with exclusive and humanised coexistence. While Billy and the narrator share the apartment in the slums of Harlem, the intrigued narrator chanced upon asking about Billy's passion for anthropology, which was his favourite academic subject for his thesis and his real life. He says that all he wants "to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out the aboriginals of the world" (Joshi 13). The most crucial phrase of this answer is to "find out the aboriginal of the world," which in fact implies his greatest desire to familiarise his life with the oldest or the divergent civilisations still living in the oldest places of the earth (Joshi 13). He is nowhere specifically pointing out that such expeditions are to be confined to India only. The subsequent chapters introduce Billy Biswas' sudden disappearance from modern civilisation into the remote places of the earth among the human and non-human inhabitants. Such intended absorption in the wilderness with the tribal human beings and non-human projects the posthuman sensitivity of Billy Biswas, and such an act is "enmeshed in an environment" whereby Billy Biswas abandons all his European rationality, along with racial or gendered (his self-masculinity) bias (Nayar 141). This all of a sudden disappearance was attributed to a kind of personalised and psychological force—a theory explained and supported by Tuula, a European friend of Billy Biswas and a psychiatrist in an American hospital. She calls it Billy's "great force, urKraft, a... a primitive force" (Joshi 22). However, later on, the subsequent chapters unravel that his personalised force was no less than his posthuman urge for a "nomadic subjectivity" or an attempt to eliminate the traces of personalised "self" to redraw the territories with no boundaries which longs to integrate with "the aboriginals of the world" (Braidotti 49; Joshi 13).

This urge of "primitive force" to live among "the aboriginals of the world" has significant posthuman connotations and can be interpreted in the posthuman concept of symbiogenesis. Billy's

desire is not confined to the “aboriginals” of India. Rather, his vision is more enlarged and composite with the “geo-centred perspective,” a phrase Braidotti uses for all posthuman voices (81). Billy’s posthuman vision is not confined to living and marrying a tribal woman and cohabiting with the community. His vision, or to say, his “primitive force” is enforcing him to identify the entire wide gamut of “aboriginals” which include humans, nonhumans, and matter. Such a desire for “aboriginals” analogically corresponds with the concept of symbiogenesis. In fact, such a “primitive force” is a universal force that tempts all human beings to unite with the roots (origin of symbiogenesis). Its validity and legitimacy can be further corroborated by juxtaposing it with two other divergent opinions. The first logical positioning comes from the Freudian notion of ‘death instinct’, an important somatic processing in human psychology:

We may suppose that the final aim of the destructive instinct is to reduce living things to an inorganic state. For this reason, we also call it the death instinct. If we suppose that living things appeared later than inanimate objects and arose from them, then the death instinct agrees with the formula that we have stated, to the effect that instincts tend towards a return to an earlier state. (Freud 6)

Freudian theory of the wistfulness towards the “return to an earlier state” (6), which is the inorganic state, is tangent with the posthuman notion of organic complexity, where even the inorganic state is an inalienable constitution of human identity. As Pramod K. Nayar points out, this naturalised hybridisation, which had been theorised in the biological investigations as “symploysis”:

If humanism posited a self-contained, exclusive and bounded human, critical

posthumanism recontextualises the human into its setting (both organic and inorganic), and locates the human structure, functions and form as the result of a co-evolution with other life forms. (21)

Since both organic and inorganic carry the same genetic history and origin, and Freud too connects this instinctual inevitability with the primitive state, which is none other than the primeval inorganic state, or in a more open phrase, is the planetary dimension where all life forms shared their growth. Billy's idea of visiting and meeting the "aboriginals" is not merely a human connection. Rather, it stands for wider human psychological-ecological complexity. Such a human-ecological complexity is a posthuman condition.

The primitive force finally dislodges Billy from this inclusive and unitary "white America" to a new planetary dimension, which later turned out to be his original home stay - the Maikala Hills (Joshi 9). The hills range across the dense saal jungle covering the highest peaks. This "aboriginal" wild state is just not a neutral ecological setting where Billy makes his personalised entry to its life. The notion of "white America" is also metaphorically extended to Billy Biswas' stay in India after completing his doctorate from Columbia University. He was constantly reeling under his agitated mindset after his direct interaction with people like his father, who had donned high administrative and juridical caps and always undermined Billy's idea of life. His wife, too, became a disappointment. Both always advocated and symbolised a contemporary world which is entirely based on the westernised sense of life, unitary and dialectically different. This contemporary world of his father and wife is fully engrossed with "the making and spending of money" (Joshi 87). This contemporary world is a typical Western model that stands on the pillar of exclusionary anthropocentric ideals, contaminating human identity. Billy in

one of his letters to Tuula explains his dismissal of such human identity:

I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas, and while I am looking at them under my very nose they turn into a kennel of dogs yawning (their large teeth showing) or snuggling against each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws. (Joshi 87)

Billy identifies such “finely dressed men and women” as remnants of European rationality (Billy’s father was “the Indian ambassador to a European country” and in a posthuman sense, it is a serious cause of the “dialectics of otherness” (Joshi 11; Braidotti 68). The image of “dogs yawning or snuggling against each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws” explicitly informs us of the new emerging class of capitalist and corporate groups who are directly responsible for controlling and governing the socio-cultural and institutional categories. Billy sternly asserts:

What need would there be of psychiatrists, research foundations, learned societies, great scholars, scientists, ministerial advisers, ambassadors, generals, had the world not initially been hung on the peg of money? (Joshi 87)

Critical posthumanism too sternly stands out against the “advanced capitalism,” engendering unrelenting threat and oppression against vulnerable life forms, including humans of different races and classes, animals, and the planet (Braidotti 41). Billy’s insinuation of the “finely dressed men and women” tends to show the effect of massive homogenising of the Indian elite class, which is constantly turning into a consumerist class. The metaphor of “whiskey glasses in their furred paws” speaks out about the proliferation of profiteering and individualism

“hung on the peg of money” (Joshi 87). The metaphor of “dogs” for all such people is an ironic distancing and dismissal of them from the tribal people’s approach to collective social life, which stands contrary to the alienating idea of individualism, consumerism, and ideological conformism. Rosi Braidotti points out how the capitalist system, through its consumer fetish, creates individualism which effectively aggravates “uniformity and conformism to the dominant ideology” (61).

Billy Biswas emerges as a vocal critic of any attempt to dehumanise other people; or, in posthuman terms, he rejects “the structures of exclusion” (Nayar 115). Any human attempt that projects any ontological liminality is contrary to Billy’s notions of life. He has evolved a posthuman sensitivity towards fellow people who are generally treated as “infrahuman” or “less than human” based on their race or ethnicity (Nayar 14, 23). His posthuman sensitivity is evoked when he finds that one local ethnic group called “Banjaras,” which literally stands for nomadic people, were called “thieves” and “whores” by Meena Biswas’ young cousins who had become partial Americans (they cherish “American pop record”) (Joshi 55). Billy, without any hesitation, dismisses any such racialised attempt by literally abusing them and calling them “bourgeois prig” (Joshi 55). Billy’s condemnation of them as condescending for treating others as inferior or abnormal reasserts his posthuman subjectivity which demolishes the structures of “categorizing” and “metaphorizing” (Nayar 115; Braidotti 69). Billy’s wilful and stringent snub against this racial chauvinism reinforces his posthuman subjectivity which in fact stands for his defamiliarising act. Such social hierarchical valorisation against the “Banjaras” was dismantled at least at the personal level of Billy. This overreach can be taken as a progressive step towards establishing a sense of “panhumanity” and “dis-identification” (Braidotti 40; 88). Braidotti lucidly explains the characteristics of this idea of “panhumanity”:

This indicates a global sense of interconnection among all humans, but also between the human and the non-human environment, including the urban, social, and political, which creates a web of intricate interdependencies. (40)

Later on, after his prolonged disappearance from the social map of city life, he was found among the “aboriginals” of “Maikala Hills,” which include humans, nonhumans, and the raw nature. This transformation into a renewed identity is the posthuman dynamics of “defamiliarization” and “deterritorialization” (Braidotti 88–89). His dynamic merging with the different others enhances him to a new level – a priest, a healer, and a community leader who mediates between interdependent geographical zones of town and wilderness. This new repositioning is emblematic of a life “embedded” with wholeness and integrity. Critical posthuman discourse defines it as a model for “community building and empowerment” and “embedded embodiment” by shunning “ontological liminality” (Braidotti 54; Nayar 20, 12).

Billy Biswas’ posthuman approach cannot be merely limited to his sensitivity towards other human beings marginalised and dispossessed of any dignity. Rather, his scheme of posthuman thinking widens to include all stakeholders apart from humans. The other life forms, in terms of animals, wilderness, and the earth, have been set in the symbolic and folkloric backdrop. The notion of disparate forms of life and their disengaged connections on the earth is entirely dumped. The folkloric series entails the mutual participation of all stakeholders, where the nature-culture bifurcation dissipates completely. Billy’s re-emergence presents a new monistic world of multi-agential subjects. Superficially, it seems that Billy was keener to join the cultic practices of the tribal group that organises frequent wild dancing, singing, drumming, and orgies. Had it been the case, he would have exited from the dense forest long ago. Any attempt

to associate Billy's sexual liaison with Bilasia, a tribal woman, would end in a flimsy perception of his entire approach to community life, which is based on inclusivity and the ritualistic tradition of celebrating human-nature symbiosis. Had it been a merely erotic urge, he would have come back to his city life as he used to come back from Bombay, where he had an extramarital affair with a young girl, Rima Kaul. It was more complex and deeper. The effort here is to establish the fact that his genetic calling was so overpowering that he was forced to accept the fact that the human genetic apparatus has its impulsive desire to reintegrate the inner world with the outside world, as the biological theories like "symbiogenesis" declare. Symbiogenesis defines the origin of life forms and their evolution as "regulated not only from 'below' (i.e., from our genome), but also from 'above' (from the environment)" (Nayar 65). Taking further cues from immunological studies, Nayar lucidly postulates the posthuman notion that the human is not a "bounded, coherent and autonomous self" (Nayar 67). Immunological studies consolidate the fact that "Identity therefore is not based on the substance (the material, presumably bound) of the organism, but on its continuity with the world outside" (Nayar 66).

Such an idea of posthuman consciousness is very much deep-seated in the character of Billy Biswas. Billy, through his anthropological studies, probably has learnt the tenable facts of new sciences that human psychology is not a self-contained ego. All his regular expeditions and field work in the Maikala hills and beyond do not happen merely for any academic excellence. His sexual urge for Bilasia underpins his passionate side that turned out to be a community source to enter this enlarged and interactive world of Nature. Billy loses all reason in his city life when he ultimately visualises the actuality of his primitive (genetic) force. He knows it well that all such interaction is not delusional; rather, it apprises him of his innate characteristics based on common intelligence and empathy. This common

intelligence is not based on any transcendental “reason” which humans have projected as the exclusive foundation of their self-identity, rather this form of intelligence (emotions and moral nature) is genetically imbued and networked with the “informational codes” of others to interact in “multiple ways with the environment (Braidotti 60):

The moon was nearly full as today. Its light was everywhere, drenching the tree-tops, softening the stone, bathing the bush with mystery. From where I sat, I could see the stream, its water shining like so much mercury. The dry bed beyond, as far as I could see, was empty and nearly purple. The line of the trees that marked the farther end of the river bed was silent and yet terribly alive, as these trees have a way of coming alive at night. They all seemed to be waiting and watching and staring at me. It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia, the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, husband of Meena Biswas, and father of a handsome child; it was as though I were not all this but the first man on earth facing the earth’s first night. A furry little animal came out of a bush and sitting on its hind legs stared at me full in the face. Its eyes were friendly and fearless. “Come”, it said. ‘Come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you. (Joshi 110-111)

The subsequent reading proves even more revelatory: the collective voice of nature becomes a cosmic echo, which is, of course, translatable into the posthuman concept of “vitalist materialism” that “enfolds within the subject as the internalised score of cosmic vibration” (Braidotti 55–56). Of course, at the individual level, such wistfulness can be seen as the Freudian idea of human wistfulness to mingle back with the primitive inorganic state. In posthuman thinking, it is what Rosi Braidotti

calls “the recognition of trans species solidarity on the basis of our being environmentally based, that is to say embodied, embedded and in symbiosis with other species” (67). This transformative intelligence of Billy Biswas is based on his acceptance of mutual, co-evolved, and equally valid intelligence of all kinds of life forms. From the posthuman vision, he develops his network of intelligence with the intelligence of nonhuman entities. Rosi Braidotti affirmatively points out that intelligence is not an exclusive agency of human beings. In fact, the living matter inherits its own “bars of information” or “informational codes” (Braidotti 60). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost also acknowledge the fact that the tendency to mark the matter as inert or in the “state of equilibrium” is untenable (13). Any such tendency is based on the conventional ideas of classical physics and philosophy, which failed to recognise the matter as “exhibiting immanently self-organizing properties, subtended by an intricate filigree of relationships” (Coole and Frost 13).

Another important perspective that features in Billy’s posthuman vision is his sensitivity and sensibility of mutual sharing and coevolving. Such an inclusive approach of Billy definitely turns him into a posthuman subject, and according to Rosi Braidotti, this is the realisation of “the ethics of becoming” (49). The accrual of multi-subjective sensibility turns him out to be more ethical, empathetic, caring, and critical. Of course, his new interconnections do not intervene in his caring approach to the world outside. His merging with the new life forms has enhanced his capacity and agency, which is the direct result of the network he has found. He, with his enhanced intelligence, cures the incurable migraine of Romi Sahai’s wife, who ultimately proved fatal for his life, as she reveals his presence to the world, which Billy had abandoned. It is pertinent to note that the new agential capacities were not imminent to him before he became aware of his enlarged vision. Numerous instances corroborate the fact that he is now fully interspersed with a new

creative model based on “collectivity” and “community building” (Braidotti 49). Moreover, his perfect bonding and awareness with the local tribes, animals, ecology, and planetary objects make him a posthuman “nomadic” subject (Braidotti 49). The “nomadic subjectivity” or his understanding of “deterritorialization” ensures his dismissal of all kinds of dialectical oppositions and self-interested vision (Braidotti 89). His new belief in the parallel trans individuality recurs throughout his meeting with the tribal people, animals, and ecological forms. He “defamiliarizes” himself with the established codes of life and habits of discrimination. He critically takes an opposing stand against all forms of institutions that focus more on differences and maintaining dialectical positions in these differences. He severs his ties with the world, which covets material growth and is based on the notion of civilian supremacy over everything. The world, which is based on dualisms like nature and culture, self and other, civilised and tribal, rational and irrational etc., stands on multiple territories and boundaries, prompting disengagement from institutional discrimination and capitalist profiteering. Billy dismantles any such fixed boundary or territory that creates an inclusive world of identical people. Billy turns down the cultural identity of his class and social background and becomes a “nomadic” subject, and such an identity is a combination of “non-unitary subjectivity with ethical accountability by foregrounding the ontological role played by relationality (Braidotti 93). Any such conscious and creative paradigm stands for the Deleuzian idea (as Braidotti finds it a better posthuman model) of “deterritorialization” and “dis-identification” (Braidotti 88–89). He distances himself from the existing world, which maintains differences based on race, sex, and nature. He breaks away from the world, which creates binaries and opposition, and joins a primitive world that undoes any kind of dualism and assembles into the monistic earth.

Billy also assumes a very responsible role of a folkloric priest, he turns out to be an important link not only with the world flaunting power through local government and the armed forces, but also a critical interlink among the divergent congeries like stars, Chandtola hill, the Moon, and the people there. His astronomical intelligence predicts the rain forecast, which assures his enhanced capacity and his networked subjectivity. Once, he also sent away a tiger that had caused fear among the people. His telepathic mediation resolves all such man-animal conflict. He has acquired an understanding of a “transversal entity” which encompasses the human, our genetic neighbours, the animals and the earth as a whole” (Braidotti 82). Nayar similarly formulates this as “a network of connections, exchanges, linkages, and crossings with all forms of life” (14). His critical stance is an attempt to “dis-identify and disengage from the closed circuits of humanist anthropology. His posthuman intelligence finds out that the folkloric culture of the tribal people is not a mere cultic and collective orgy of the community. Rather, it is creative human-nature unification through the participation of all. Bakhtin elaborately explains the folkloric phenomenon as the collective coordination of all members of the earth:

The time attracts into its orbit, it will not permit any unmoving or static setting. All objects—the sun, the stars, the earth, the sea, and so forth – are present to man not as objects of individual perception (“poetic perception”) nor as objects of casual daydreaming, but exclusively as part of the collective process of labor and the battle against nature. (209)

Later in the end, when Billy dies unnaturally and untimely, the entire congeries of people, land, animals, and ecology fall apart. The narrator notices, “After Billy’s death, there was a rumour that Chandtola (a moonlit hill) had ceased to glow” (Joshi 222). He also failed to find out the triangle of stars whose

knowledge Billy had shared with him. The narrator burns his fingers with a cheroot while he searches “one side of the silvery horizon, but there was no sign of the triangle of stars that I was looking for” (Joshi 222). Billy Biswas was the conduit among such multi-species and subjectivities.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, both the novel and the character of Billy Biswas, have a critical message. When Billy was gunned down, his last words were “you bastards” (Joshi 213). He swears at the gunman who had pierced him with a bullet. Notably, his vocative stands for plural. Of course, the sense implies his resentment and disappointment against all, including his parents and wife. However, in a somewhat philosophical sense, the ending implies that people who have disengaged themselves from the true link of life and its divergent but embedded congeries are not true and legitimate offspring of the earth. They have severed their naturalised ties with their “genetic sources” and estranged their authentic link with the “multispecies origins and multispecies evolutions” (Nayar 68). Billy Biswas had understood that mere scientific insights from anthropology would not lead him to his transversal goals. He was well aware of the fact that anthropology has to be combined and processed with “cosmology” for the “holistic approach” to life within the enlarged network of human-animal-the earth (Braidotti 48). One cannot approach such an inclusive assembly of life forms, without eschewing one’s individualism. Therefore, this paper intends to establish the fact by undermining the idea of Billy’s individualised life goals. Billy Biswas’s short life is a radical attempt to position himself as the non-unitary, self-distributing and luminal to other stakeholders of the earth. He definitely rejects the culture-nature bifurcation where cultural coordinates take precedence and undervalue the idea of difference originating from others.

In a nutshell, the paper has attempted to reassess Billy Biswas as a significant posthuman voice. He radically shifts away from the binaries of nature and culture, civilised and tribal, city and wilderness, and so forth. He ensures at his individual level that nature and culture should intersperse and become non-exclusionary and non-imperial domains. Billy's inherent affinity with ecology and its human and non-human characters firmly positions him as a paragon of the posthuman subject.

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Immigrant Kitchen: Culinary Identity in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

The article will address the strong symbolic value of food and food practices as a significant metaphor of the complex process of negotiating cultural identity in the life of diasporas. The analysis, through close reading of multiple short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, argues that the immigrant kitchen is a significant yet controversial space where memory, tradition, and assimilation intersect. The paper examines how ingredients, meals, and even cooking are physical, tangible, and sensory reminders of a lost homeland and, at the same time, become a source of conflict between first-generation immigrants and their children born in America. It explores how culinary labour is gendered and is usually carried out by women who become accidental archivists and translators of culture. In addition, the analysis delves deeper into how food serves as a language of love, a mode of communication, where words are ineffective, and a barrier or a bridge in cross-cultural relations. Finally, this paper argues that food in the fiction of Divakaruni and Lahiri is never simply food; it is a palimpsest onto which the anxieties, adaptations and the hybrid identities of the South Asian diaspora in America are vividly drawn.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Diaspora Studies, Food Studies, Hybridity, South Asian American Literature

Introduction

The physical displacement of one's native country is accompanied by drastic psychological and cultural deracination.

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In this liminal space between the familiar past of the home country and the uncertainty of the new country's future, objects and practices of the lost world take on heightened meaning. Of these, perhaps the most powerful, visceral, and day-to-day reminder of who one was, and by extension, who one is becoming, is the food. The kitchen thus transcends its domestic function and becomes a site of memory, identity formation, and cultural negotiation, where the competing forces of assimilation and cultural preservation are enacted through everyday culinary practices. Determining food preparation and consumption becomes a dominant theme in the literary terrains that Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni create as two of the first authors to chronicle the intricacies of cultural displacement, nostalgia, and hybridity.

Food is a complex literary tool in literature, as reflected in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Arranged Marriage* by Lahiri and Divakaruni, respectively. To begin with, it is a storehouse of recollection, a sensory evocation linking characters to a past that is spatially distant but emotionally nearby. Second, it is a place of gendered cultural labour where women are the traditional cooks and nurturers, and it is their responsibility to ensure continuity in the culture, frequently at a high price. Third, food is a measure of assimilation; its presence, absence, or change indicates how far a character is from, or how close to, the mainstream American culture. Lastly, it is an elaborate form of communication—a language of love, struggle, desire and reconciliation which, in many instances, is more eloquent than a speech. This essay will examine, through a comparative analysis of some of the main stories, how Lahiri and Divakaruni use the immigrant kitchen not only as a setting but also as a main character in the ongoing play of becoming American without ceasing to be Bengali, Indian, or South Asian.

The association of food and memory is virtually primordial, an idea popularly codified in Marcel Proust's madeleine. The

immigrant is not just nostalgic about this; it is a constitutive part of identity. In a new setting, the flavour of a certain dish can instantly bend time and space, providing a moment of revisiting a homeland. Food is this sensorial storehouse that Lahiri and Divakaruni use to great effect. In Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter," the common meals of Shoba and Shukumar, which were a ritual of their happy marriage, are a sore reminder of its breakup; however, the food—the culturally coded food that Shoba cooks—carries the burden of memory. Lahiri writes, "she would leave a mess in the kitchen to him to clean, a mess of onion peels, cilantro stems, tea cloths stained with turmeric, heaps of pots and pans and dishes he would clean slowly, painstakingly, when he had eaten" (9). The Indian leftovers—onion peels, cilantro stalks, the bright yellow hue of turmeric—are not just physical debris but the remnants of a collective cultural existence which is disintegrating. The spices are the imprints of a forgotten domesticity. Later, the confessions over the meals, prepared by Shoba in advance, are clearly Indian. The food turns out to be the silent, consistent spectator of their unburdening, its familiar taste sharply contrasting with the new truths being brought to light. It becomes the last thread of connection between them as a couple of Bengalis, only to be shattered into ruins by the ultimate revelation.

The Proustian power of food is also present in Divakaruni's stories. In "The Word Love," the main character, Rexnie, a young woman finding her way in life and love in America, is continually reminded of her kitchen in India and her mother. The food of her childhood is synonymous with safety, love, and identity. In an attempt to cook with her American boyfriend, she becomes overwhelmed with the memory of her mother, who was so precise and loving in her culinary practice: "she would grind the spices herself, a bit at a time, roasting cumin and coriander seeds in the heavy iron skillet, until the air was foggy and fragrant with their smoke" (Divakaruni 45). The spice-grinding reminds her of mother; a cultural reminder that strengthens her

in a culturally lost relationship. The fragrance of roasting spices is the scent of home, a scent of defence against her alienation. To these characters, cooking and eating are not only about sustenance but also a means of memory, a way to summon and hold on to a self which the new world is otherwise depriving them of.

The burden of cultural continuity in the traditional patriarchal order that frequently characterises the immigrant families portrayed by Lahiri and Divakaruni disproportionately lies on women. The kitchen is their space; the work of their labour makes them the unwitting archivists, translators, and upkeepers of culture. This position is a tense one since it simultaneously gives them power and puts them in a box.

This figure is possibly the most tragic in Lahiri's "Mrs Sen's." In her case, her attachment to her lost life in Calcutta is mainly through the ritual of cooking. Her personality is closely tied to her cooking. The main part of the story is that she skilfully uses a blade to catch fish and to prepare them, which fascinates the young American boy, Eliot, whom she babysits. When it is time to get married in the family, she says to him, "or it is a big party of any sort, my mother sends the word out in the evening, and all the neighbourhood women come out with blades like this one, and they sit in the courtyard . . . and they chop and chop" (Lahiri 115). The blade is not merely a device, but a representation of community, shared female labour, and a cultural background in which her skills are prized and shared. Chopping in her lonely American apartment is a desperate, lonely act of a performer without an audience. Mrs Sen's inability to drive to the fish market symbolises her broader difficulty in adapting to American life, underscoring her cultural isolation and sense of displacement. She is an archivist of a culture without a museum; her great archival virtuosity is made superfluous in a world of frozen fillets and fast foods. The subsequent minor car crash, which was a result of her trying to

drive to get a fish, epitomises the devastating clash between her culturally instilled role in life and the requirements of her new world.

Divakaruni often delves into the dark side of this gendered culinary labour. In “The Ultrasound,” a pregnant mother is also pressured by her mother-in-law to eat the traditional foods that are supposed to bring her a male child. The cuisine here transforms into a tool of patriarchal domination, a policing of the female body and degrading a woman into a container of male inheritance. Eating is not a joyous or memorable event, but rather a form of subjugation and worry. Similarly, food is used indirectly to resist or retaliate against the unfair domestic conditions faced by women in stories such as “The Bats” and “Clothes.” The kitchen is, as such, not a mere refuge but a place where power is exercised over food. The woman, as an archivist, is also a prisoner, charged with preserving traditions that could be sources of oppression.

Metrics of Assimilation: Culinary Negotiations and Generational Differences

The kitchen in the tapestry of the immigrant experience is much more than a utilitarian kitchen that is used to make food. Moreover, it is a refuge and a battlefield, a school and a museum of itself. Negotiations of being, belonging, and cultural fidelity are the most personal and powerful negotiations being put into practice within the realm of its premises and ingredients; recipes are the primary vocabulary. The traditional food can be both the anchor to the past, the concrete, physical and sensuous rope to a homeland that may be made of only a shadow that is activated by memory. American food can perhaps sometimes represent the grabbing impulse of the future, a future of convenience, assimilation, and, in some instances, cultural dilution. This embracing of or opposition to American eating patterns is then found to be a very important gauge of assimilation and maps the

expected, and in most cases painful, rifts between generations, which have rifted immigrant families. This culinary cultural clash is perfected in the fine, allusive fiction of contemporary authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who go beyond symbolism, placing food at the heart of love, confrontation, and intercultural relations. With a close examination of their work, particularly *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Arranged Marriage* and *The Mistress of Spices*, we track how the kitchen is becoming the central site for the performance of politics of identity that is being performed, argued, and renegotiated day by day.

Consequently, Western food practices adopted or rejected by an immigrant family are a significant indicator of assimilation. This food collision is usually employed to trace the traumatic intergenerational divisions within the diaspora household. Modern writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have brilliantly dealt with this conflict between these two gustatory cultures. Food in their fiction does not just symbolise; rather, it represents the material expression of love, conflict, and cross-cultural interaction. A close analysis of their works, particularly Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* and *The Mistress of Spices*, reveals that the kitchen is the primary scene of daily enactment, debate, and negotiation of identity politics.

Refrigerator as a Sign of Generational Divide

The contents of a refrigerator function as a revealing indicator of an individual's lifestyle, cultural affiliations, and everyday values. The given household object is frequently employed as an effective metaphor to demonstrate the cultural and psychological divide between generations in immigrant literature. It is not merely a question of taste but two radically different conceptions of food, community, and the self.

Divakaruni is eloquently vivid in her short story collection *Arranged Marriage*; it is in her story “The Names of Stars in Bengali,” from this collection, that she writes of this collision. The main character is an elderly Indian mother who visits her daughter, who is completely assimilated into American life. The old mother is out of place as she is introduced to the alien world of her daughter’s kitchen. She refers to it as a new land with new white food: a plastic bag of already-washed salad, a tub of yoghurt, a block of tofu, a chicken breast in a transparent bag, etc. (Divakaruni 132). This is a deliberately sterile and sensory-deprived description. The food is washed, packaged, and covered with plastic, portraying a culture of convenience, isolation, and preservation, which is the complete opposite of the culinary culture of the mother. The words are instructive, not descriptive; they are of efficiency, not of passion, the adjectives without any mention of vivid colour, intoxicating fragrance, or a variety of textures. This is gastronomy as energy, deprived of the culture and community values.

This is a stark contrast to the inner, memory-saddened world of cooking that the mother inhabits, which has a sense of richness and labour-intensive preparation and is filled with communal purpose. Her cooking is both a ritual of love and identity, her daily practice of connecting with her ancestors and her country. The individual, packaged chicken breast is the “antithesis of her life’s communal, labour-intensive, spice-filled cooking” (Divakaruni 133). The word “communal” is key here. The culinary tradition of the mother is social in nature, designed to be shared with the family and neighbours, and preparation is commonly a shared endeavour. The pre-prepared, isolated objects of the daughter symbolise an individualistic American life from which the mother feels lonely and alienated. The refrigerator, then, is not simply an appliance but an obvious transparent, glass-paned demarcation of two worlds. The whole story of their divergent lives is told in its contents: the one based

on the common recollection and sense-weaving of the past, the other on the future, independent and fast-paced.

The mother tries to fill this gap by preparing a Bengali fish curry, *maacher jhol*. This is not just a meal, but a deep effort to feed her daughter a memory and identity, to familiarise her with the flavour of her past. She is cooking as she recalls how “[her] mother’s saree end would smell of mustard oil and *kaalo jeere* even after the food had been consumed” (Divakaruni 135). The preparation of food is a prayer, an invocation of ghosts and customs into a kitchen devoid of any spirits. She dreams that the old, confusing tastes can become a Proustian *madeleine*, piercing the veneer of her daughter’s American life and reaching the Bengali heart underneath.

However, the daughter’s reaction is polite and aloof: “It is nice, Ma” (Divakaruni 136). This half-hearted approval is worse than rejection. It means that the food and, consequently, the culture it embodies have become a foreign language that her daughter can hardly comprehend, let alone speak. The divide between generations is absolute. The mother is the custodian of a culture which her daughter, by the twin influences of circumstance and decision, has abandoned. The unsuccessful communion with the fish curry underscores an ugly reality: the language of taste is not an innate gift but something that has to be taught and practised regularly, or it will be lost.

Similarly, in Lahiri, the mother cooks for Lilia some of the spiciest Indian food: “lamb curry with dried fenugreek leaves, oval-shaped naan bread with potatoes and spices, *kheer* with cardamom and pistachios” (Lahiri 25). To the adults, Mr Pirzada, a Bangladeshi scholar who lost his family in the 1971 Liberation War, and the parents of Lilia, it is a food that is crucial to them. It strengthens their subcontinental identity and turns into an exercise of solidarity and reassurance in the face of the panic of seeing their homeland being ripped apart in the nightly

news. The food is a first-hand, sensory association with the place and the people they fear.

This is the world Lilia, a young American, lives in. Her cultural collision is not at the dinner table, but in other places, in the greater American scene that she navigates with ease. It is the most important one when she chews a piece of American candy, included in her Halloween inventory, before Mr Pirzada. His answer is one of mere, unexplainable confusion. Halloween ceremony, dressing up, door-to-door trick-or-treating, and the collection of industrially manufactured sweet booty are totally foreign to him. This scene points out that, as an American raised in America, Lilia will find it easier to cross the divide than her parents did. Her palate is already bifocal, and she can relish her mother's compound kheer and the simple, artificial sweetness of a candy bar. This embryonic duality is the beginning of her own journey to a hybrid identity that her parents and Mr Pirzada can experience and perceive, but never actually live in, since they will always be elsewhere and in another time.

Food: A Language of Love and Strife

Along with a powerful symbolism of assimilation, food is primary and one of the efficient ways to communicate where cultural barriers and language block verbal communication. Food preparation and food sharing are the main forms of expression of love, conflict, and the complexity of intercultural and intergenerational relationships.

This symbolism is beautifully developed in Lahiri's "This Blessed House" and in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The novel focuses on a newlywed couple, Twinkle and Sanjeev, as they move into their new American home. They are at loggerheads over the recurrent discovery of gaudy Christian paraphernalia: a porcelain effigy of Jesus and a snow globe filled with the Three Wise Men, left behind by the former owners. Sanjeev, eager to

project an image of sophistication, respectability, and cultural propriety, wishes to remove the Christian artefacts immediately. Twinkle, by contrast, embraces their novelty and insists on displaying them, reflecting her more flexible and playful engagement with American culture.

This is a superficial clash over taste that stems from their opposing ideas about identity in America. This is reflected and enhanced in their relationship with food. Sanjeev has old-fashioned views of a wife, with an emphasis on cooking skills, especially Indian cuisine. Twinkle, on the other hand, is a very enthusiastic, yet extremely incompetent cook. This is the key language she needs to master to enter her anticipated role in culture, and her inability to do so is a constant source of stress and disappointment for Sanjeev. Her failure in the kitchen is a metaphor for her seeming inability to fit into the conventional role of an Indian wife, intensifying his fear of marriage and their status in society.

This culinary and marital conflict is solved, ironically yet brilliantly. Twinkle eventually wins Sanjeev's admiration by preparing the perfect dal, one sourced from a restaurant kitchen rather than her own. This domestic manoeuvre is far more than a simple illusion; it operates as a layered process of cultural translation and diasporic negotiation. Twinkle clearly grasps the performative expectations attached to an "authentic" Indian feast in Sanjeev's eyes. For him—and for many of his generation—food serves as a key marker of cultural continuity and social standing within the immigrant community. However, rather than conforming to the long-standing, labour-intensive expectations imposed on women in the kitchen, she strategically uses this awareness to fulfil a distinctly American ideal: hosting a seamless, impressive, and low-effort social gathering. By arranging a catered meal, she constructs a space of cultural hybridity, blending Sanjeev's traditional values with her own more adaptive modern outlook.

Food serves as a sort of diplomatic gesture in this situation. Even in the absence of her direct work, it becomes a delicate display of concern presented through a well-planned illusion. In addition to maintaining Twinkle's independence and enabling her to reject being restricted to household duties, this gesture allays Sanjeev's underlying concerns of cultural authenticity. In the end, the dinner masks their larger ideological differences by acting as an artificial point of togetherness. It is a friendship built on the practicality and ease of catering rather than on the collaborative effort of cooking. This calculated use of food reflects the complex and sometimes contradictory strategies required to navigate the fragmented realities of second-generation identity.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni extends this concept into the realm of magical realism, where food and spices take on literal transformative power. Tilo, the enigmatic spice mistress, runs a small shop in Oakland, California, but her role goes far beyond that of a shopkeeper. She serves as a healer and guide to members of the Indian diaspora, offering spices as remedies. Turmeric serves as a safeguard for families, fenugreek fosters unity, and red chilli wards off harm. To a homesick bride, she offers cinnamon for comfort; to someone disconnected from their roots, she provides the grounding scent of asafoetida. These customs turn spices into tools for cultural and emotional healing.

Although the novel is set in a fantastical world, it is an extrapolation of a deeper truth in Lahiri's more realistic books and in Divakaruni's earlier work: food is a powerful medicine for the soul. It is a language which can express wishes and solutions that words fail to express. In a narrative such as the story "Meeting Mr Kumar" from *Arranged Marriage*, a young woman employs her exceptional cooking skills to feed, entice, and connect with a man through the language of passion and

competence in the food she prepares. The food is a part of her, a gift of her talent and cultural background.

On the other hand, rejecting this language can be a strong form of aggression or disapproval. Making a meal that is unadventurous, a sacrifice by burning, or the regular consumption of uninteresting, fast food can be a shout of resentment in a family that goes unnoticed. A well-cooked meal is an offering to the heart, a feast, a grand event; a dinner that is skipped is a cold war in this complex culinary vocabulary. Sharing meals or not sharing meals turns out to be the best indicator of a relationship's health.

Furthering the Palate: More Literary Viewpoints

Although the theme of food as a measure of assimilation seems to have a groundbreaking structure in Lahiri and Divakaruni, it is diverse and abundant across the range of Asian American and immigrant literature. The other voices involved in this dialogue must be taken into account to appreciate it fully.

Korean American musician Michelle Zauner is a raw and powerful witness to this theme in her memoir *Crying in H Mart*. To Zauner, Korean food is an unbreakable connection between her mother and her identity. She starts the memoir by saying, "Since my mom passed away, I weep in H Mart." A Korean grocery store is a haven of flavour and recollection. The obsessive, demanding nature of the relationship her mother had with food, her hunt for the right ingredients, and her careful cooking of dishes such as kalbi and kimchi were her primary ways of expressing love. The purpose of learning these recipes by Zauner after her mother dies is a pathetic effort to maintain that contact and keep her mother's voice alive in her hands and her taste buds. It is a fight to learn recipes so she can reclaim the identity she feels is being lost through assimilation and loss. It is

a heartrending detail that, to the second generation, cooking can be an archaeological reclamation.

Likewise, in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*, food serves as a continual source of misunderstanding and attempted bonding between the Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. The mothers demonstrate love by forcefully offering food because they believe the daughters are not suffering from emotional malnutrition but from physical malnutrition. When a daughter rejects a traditional dish, it is not seen as a matter of taste but as a rejection of the mother. The well-known crab-dinner scene, in which the mothers scold the daughters for their preference for low-quality crabs, is a conflict of worldviews: the mothers' practical knowledge, gained through hard work, is opposed to the daughters' privilege, whose attitude to life can be characterised as naive. Their frustration and the inability to communicate due to the huge cultural and experiential gap transform into food on the table.

Theoretical Framework: Culinary Postcolonialism

The autobiographical struggles of Lahiri and Divakaruni are explicable within the context of the postcolonial theory, especially the ideas of hybridity and mimicry expressed by Homi K. Bhabha. The immigrant kitchen is a third space, a place of cultural negotiation, where the dominant and subordinate cultures of American and immigrant cultures collide and intersect. Such an interaction is not a one-way process of assimilation but rather a complex, sometimes contradictory, process that results in new hybrid identities.

In "This Blessed House," Sanjeev engages in "mimicry." He wants to imitate the ideal of a successful, assimilated American professional, but his wish is "not white but almost white" (Bhabha 86). By denying the Christian kitsch, he denies what he sees as a crass, low-end American culture that may jeopardise

what he wants to project: that of a refined assimilation. He desires to imitate a certain socioeconomic ideal of an American. Twinkle, on the other hand, is a hybrid. She is not afraid to blend cultural signs, exhibiting Christian figurines in a house of Indian Americans, serving Indian food at an American party prepared by a restaurant. Her identity is not an unsuccessful imitation of either culture but a new, aggressive thing, the product of their mixture. Her answer is a culinary take on what Bhabha outlines as the subversion of authority through repetition with difference.

The mother in “The Names of Stars in Bengali” is in a pre-hybridity phase, in which the original culture is the dominant, unchallenged frame of reference. Her daughter symbolises assimilation, in which the original culture has been dominated to a large degree. The conflict between them is on the original, the copy, the source, and its translation. The abortive fish curry mission is a symptom of the challenge and even the inability to convey profound cultural memory to an audience that is no longer equipped with the vocabulary to take it in.

The Global Pantry: Extending the South Asian Experience

Although this discussion has centred on South Asian American literature, the culinary generational gap is a near-universal aspect of immigrant literature. The theme of the potato, the traditional bread of poverty and famine, being rejected by the assimilated generation, is a common theme in Irish American memoirs. The embarrassment of the second generation toward smelly lunches of salami and provolone in school cafeterias, where one can only find a schizophrenic peanut butter and jelly sandwich, is a cliché of Italian American stories. The Jewish American authors frequently struggle with leaving behind the kosher kitchens for more secular diets, which becomes an indication of the breakdown of religious restrictions and community practice.

This universality highlights the fact that food is the most tangible and direct relation to culture. It is consumed and thus literally becomes part of the self. Hence, one of the most radical and intimate forms of assimilation is dietary modification. The battle it wages is not merely a battle of palate; it is a battle of the elements of the soul and of the body, of what we will admit to enter the body and what we will not admit to enter the body. The basic scenes upon which the drama of immigration and assimilation is persistently enacted are the kitchen, the refrigerator and the dining table. Through the careful, sensuous writing of authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one is made to realise that food is the surest gauge of distance from the homeland and the extent of the generational gap. It is a more artless and sincere language than the tongue frequently permits, and can represent the utmost affection, the most antagonistic, the most complicated bargains of a hyphenated identity.

The evolution of the first-generation labour-intensive, spice-filled curries to the pre-packaged, convenient, white food of the second-generation is a journey of tremendous change, rife with loss and gain. It is a tale of anchors raised and new horizons celebrated, not with great historical declamation, but with the silent, unheralded decisions of what to cook, what to eat and with whom to share it. Just as these stories reveal, to know the heart of the immigrant, one has to first know how to read the menu.

Neutral spaces in the immigrant kitchens of fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni do not exist. They are haunted by memories of the past, burdened with the baggage of cultural expectations, and strained by an existence suspended between two worlds. These authors show that identity is not a given but a process sliced, salted, roasted, and savoured day to day through their subtle descriptions of food and culinary practice.

Food is the most convenient and deepest storehouse of an exiled culture, a sense of rope to a homeland which is remembered more idealistically than ever before. However, this archive is operated mainly by women who are both empowered and responsible as custodians of culture. The change in generations toward American cuisine, or the clumsy incorporation of cultural cooking, traces the course of assimilation and the sour-sweet truth of the cultural shift. Furthermore, food is not material in human relations only; it is a very important language that reveals love, discord, and lust where words are helpless. In the end, it is implied that as the first generation attempts to recreate that same perfect, unchanging flavour of home, the second generation and, in fact, the future of the diaspora, is in developing something new, something hybrid, a hybrid cuisine. It is a food that may be a combination of nan bread and ready-made salad, or the use of traditional spices in different combinations. It is not a dilution of culture; it is its evolution, the testament of the power and versatility of identity itself. Set on a table with memory and innovation, the real tale of immigrant experience is served, meal after meal.

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Digital Representation of the Fragmented Self through the Lens of Reification: A Cultural Examination

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Abstract

In literary and philosophical theory, the term ‘reification’ describes the conversion of abstract concepts like consciousness, identity, or spirituality into concrete things. Reification entails considering abstractions as commodities that can be valued, measured, and traded, in contrast to symbolism, which only symbolises an idea. In Marxist ideology, especially in the writings of Georg Lukács, ‘reification’ refers to a twisted perception of reality in which people are reduced to objects and these very objects possess agency and influence over people. In the modern digital era, this process has been greatly accelerated via social media sites where people create almost fake identities by using morphed digital representations. These digital artifacts have now become markers of a person’s worth and social existence, and have almost replaced genuine human experience. Self-objectification has become a prevalent aspect of the present digital society and only filtered and manipulated versions of reality are valued in comparison to authentic self-expression. This phenomenon fragments the holistic aspect of the human experience by encouraging people to see others and themselves through an objectifying lens. According to reification theory, there is an increasing inclination towards favoring representation over reality in the current digital era and the remedy lies in engaging critically and consciously with digital technology: online content should be seen as a representation of the self and not a reality of the self.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Digital Self, Georg Lukács, Marxist theory, Postmodernism

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Introduction

Reification in the context of literary and philosophical theory may be understood as the representation of an abstract concept, such as consciousness or God in the form of a material object. It is different from symbolism in that it implies not merely representation but rather, commodification of abstractions into things that may be measured, priced, bartered and/ or sold. The value of these objects is subject to market forces of demand and supply (both natural and artificially generated) and consequently, the inevitable fluctuations in value. In Marxist thought, reification signifies a (fallacious) way of interpreting the world in which objects are misrepresented and consequently misinterpreted as subjects; and subjects are misrepresented and misinterpreted as objects; with the result that subjects are rendered passive or determined, while objects become animated as the active, determining factor. For instance, Petrović defines reification as, “The act (or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations and actions of man-produced things which have become independent of man and govern his life. Also, transformation of human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing-world. Reification is a ‘special’ case of alienation, characteristic of modern capitalist society” (Petrović 411).

Reification and Georg Lukács

This idea’s most significant early presentation may be found in Georg Lukács’ 1923 essay ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,’ which was published in his book *History and Class Consciousness*. He noted that while it seems patently obvious to the logical mind that some ‘things’ such as desire, happiness, love, and so forth, cannot be concretised, valued and bartered/ sold/ bought; Capitalism’s drive to create markets and commodities to exchange in those markets leads society as a whole and individuals as its units, to reify such abstractions and fetishise the resultant commodities. These ‘commodities’ are invariably highly visual in nature so that they can advertise themselves and attract potential consumers. More the visual appeal, more the ‘value’ of the reified commodity. Since such

commodified 'objects' are not on display or being exchanged for their functional value (which is relatively stable and subject to the somewhat predictable forces of demand and supply) but rather their abstract value (which is prone to differ and fluctuate considerably due to the absence of any concrete controlling force), they become highly vulnerable to competition and rejection.

Lukács sees reification as a phenomenon which impacts four dimensions of social relationships: among objects and people, among people, between the individual and himself; and between individuals and society as a whole (Stahl 731). Reification leads to the objective and subjective predominance of the commodity form, a situation in which everyone and everything is treated with impunity and without distinction in a thing-like way. Individuals are encouraged to create their own brand; package or present themselves in a visually and economically attractive manner; and sell themselves to others such that they can acquire social value or popularity as quantified by their following on social media. At the same time, by losing sight of the qualitative dimensions of the social self and relationships, individuals become increasingly isolated in the real world and their real selves. Vogel et al. conclude in their statistical study that people reveal themselves selectively and construct their identities or characteristics in a preferred or reflective manner on social media (206). Individuals also develop increasingly addictive tendencies to compare themselves with others' perceived appearances, abilities, popularity, and social status as projected on digital media platforms (Feinstein et al. 161). This puts these individuals at a high risk for developing psychological, physiological, financial and of course, social issues; as documented by the plethora of research literature on the negative impacts of spending excessive amounts of time online, especially on social media applications.

Street, as early as 2003, postulated that seeing other people's and even one's own idealised digital presentation causes people to mentally compare themselves with others and even their own digital selves, thus affecting them in complex ways, especially emotionally. Such individuals also become highly vulnerable to changes in the value of

the abstractions they attempt to embody, and at risk of either becoming fragmented in their subjectivity or losing their subjectivity altogether. It may be deduced that the line between the self and the reified self becomes increasingly broken and blurred as the individual becomes both the manufacturer and consumer of imaginatively reified subjectivity that he attempts to sell in an attempt to validate the self in a society that increasingly raises, or rather changes, the bar for self-presentation and self-representation.

Lukács believed that the rise of the dominance of the commodity form in the economic sphere has led to a concurrent de-valuing of subjective consciousness, identity, emotion and thought. This might be interpreted as a rise of the domination of what society believes to be ‘masculine’ qualities to the detriment of ‘feminine’ qualities. Lukács propounded that a break with the organic unity and totality of human existence is a necessary precondition for economic development. Therefore, it is inevitable that the commodity form has, over time, subjected all aspects of society to its rule (Lukács 98).

Postmodern World and Digital Mass Media

In the postmodern world, digital mass media tools such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), TikTok, YouTube etc. are being used by individuals as ways of expressing themselves and representing themselves to the world. This can lead, and one may conjecture, has already begun to trigger to a virtual tsunami of reification by which digital media objects (such as digital mass media accounts, posts, photographs, videos, and so forth) are being treated as subjects in themselves (for instance, online artificial intelligence generated avatars are often believed to be real by the consumers and sometimes the producers themselves) or proof of the existence and value of subjects (people who erase his/her digital presence choose to obliterate the visible self, while enhancing digital presence leads to enhanced visibility and social value). Proof of this may be found in research conducted by writers such as Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick who note that “visual content creates higher impression formation by escalating social presence” and that “visuals are also easier to recall” (54). Objectification of the self has therefore become the need of the hour for justifying and

even proving the reality and value of the subjects for subjects without digital media representation as being treated as non-subjects, non-objects and in fact, non-entities. This phenomenon has a propensity to spill over from the individual unit into society as a whole due to the highly communicative nature of digitisation. Habermas mentions in his theory of communicative action, communication/ language forms the foundation of rationality, society and modernity. It is thus not perhaps a far stretch to say, this kind of reified communication has the potential to put humankind as a whole at risk.

Reification leads to a breakdown of the holistic intrinsic nature of human experience, leading to attitudes of contemplation or viewership where one passively adopts an objectifying gaze towards one's own mental state and capacity and invites others to do the same. Rather than struggling for the assertion of one's subjectivity, as in the twentieth century, the twenty-first century subject endeavours to fragment and erase his subjectivity, increasingly viewed by himself as weaknesses, imperfections and rough edges. He compares his subjectivity unfavourably with the carefully curated and processed objective representations of subjectivity by other individuals and attempts to imitate the same by commodifying himself and inviting himself and others to view him not as he is but rather, as he ought to be and presents himself to be through his social media handles. He may also choose to commodify himself in different ways on different social media platforms or on multiple accounts on the same social media platform in an attempt to garner as much social approval as possible. This digital and social commodification and schizophrenic presentation of multiple personalities may lead to a dissolution, partial or complete, of subjectivity and sanity. Rightly has Jameson argued that postmodernism is characterised by the consumption of sheer commodification as a process. Managing a large network of social media accounts and friends; feeling jealous of others; fearing missing out on online activities; and stress resulting from multiple social media personas and interactions; can lead to social anxiety levels ranging from low to very high, which in turn can cause a variety of social and psychological disturbances.

Analysis and Key Findings

As a part of postmodern society, which is, according to Guy Debord “the society of the spectacle,” anyone and everyone with a digital identity is propagating self-created myths replete with if not falsified then at the very least, selectively exaggerated self-identities in accordance with the hyperbolic digital human community (1). An unfortunately rampant by-product of this new culture is the rise of fraud through fake accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X) etc. by which individuals attempt to scam people by making them believe that they are who they pretend to be. But even more disturbing is how people seem to be fast losing awareness that they are scamming not only others but also themselves by losing connection with who they really are as a result of their strong identification with their online selves. Debord talks about this when he mentions the retrogression of social life as “the decline of being into having, and the decline of having into merely appearing” (Debord 17).

Psychologically, the distance between the real and digital self is growing with the real becoming more and more unpalatable as the digital becomes more and more fanciful as opposed to representational. It is not uncommon for the average person to lament how wonderful it would be if they could walk around with a filter on their face in real life and attempt to romanticise their existence by posting heavily edited photographs with quotes or ChatGPT-selected words, often in addition to snippets of AI-recommended music, to create an aesthetically and intellectually palatable version of self and virtual reality. In juxtaposition with the nature of offline setting, digital information is by default “more salient and visible” (Appel et al. 44), thereby creating ‘hyperreal’ digital universes and identities. This inevitably leads to increased cognitive dissonance within the individual who begins to emotionally identify the mythologised digital self and drift further and further away from the real self. This phenomenon had made a community-level appearance in Japan through the rise of a class of people termed the ‘Hikikomori’ or ‘shut-ins’ starting as early as the

1980s. These individuals who choose to distance themselves from society, friends, family and regular workplaces/ educational institutions etc. in favor of remaining confined to their rooms playing video games, watching anime and socialising via only digital media, represent the power digital lives have to make the individual acquire a distaste for the pressures of conventional, offline living. Their treatment of their online identities as their subjective existence and relegation of their offline bodies to the realm of non-consequential objects is a clear case of reification. Their sense of alienation from offline society due to its many pressures and limited opportunities for self-expression, self-realisation and self-actualisation makes these individuals develop a form of commodity fetishism for their online fictional selves. If the online self is appreciated, they feel as if the qualities they represent in/ perceive in their online self gets automatically transferred to their actual selves. This is why the postmodern, and daresay, post-Coronavirus society's individuals' sense of daily self-esteem tends to hinge on the number of likes, comments and shares received on their social media posts. They reciprocate the attention they get by in turn, bestowing likes, comments and shares on social media posts of others. This is what Debord identifies as an inverted society which is made up of relations between commodities as opposed to relations between subjects/ real people. It is a situation in which "passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity" (Debord 4).

'I am seen (online) therefore I am', seems to be the new collective, unspoken dictum. To this are added the notions of hyper-humanity as arising from hyper-textuality. The postmodern individual sees himself as not a contained unit but rather a hypertextual self, consciousness with links to its digital representations embedded within it as a vital and inextricable part of the self. Relationships are hypertextual too. Those who know individuals in real life are almost invariably linked to their digital lives. The web of human relationships is now a world wide web of human relationships. The hash tagging and linking of the self is not a mere act of narcissism. It is necessary for visibility in the

postmodern world. It is visibility that ensures survival in the postmodern marketplace. Direct living has become “mere representation,” laments Debord and the digital self is now seen as not only a representation of the non-digital self, but rather as an indispensable medium, as vital as the flesh-body itself, through which the non-digital self exists in and interacts with the world (1).

Humankind has thus entered a place and time of neo self-idolisation in which individuals are becoming increasingly alienated from the tangible world around them and escaping into the reified digital world that allows them to create reified versions of their own selves and others for psychological and sociological satisfaction. In response to the plethora of avatars online, new digital communities are mushrooming in various parts of the world wide web to create virtual doll-houses and environments for digital individuals to live in.

The digital world, a combination of the world wide web and digital devices, have reduced the analogue world of subjects to a place lacking in animation, refinement and satisfaction. Whatever little remained of value of the objectified real world has been significantly de-valued by the Coronavirus outbreak of 2020 which forced hitherto analogue activities to shift from offline to online modes of existence. In a world where the survival of the fittest remains a reality, the shifting of the self to online platforms is a need of evolution and an assertion of the unreal over the real.

The presentation of the self in the form of digital information has an undeniably high utilitarian value by allowing for the relatively stable, long-lasting and far-reaching preservation and expression of human consciousness. Thinkers such as Schiller have bestowed high praise on creative expression or play drive by indicating that humans are only fully human when they play. Schiller also postulates that play uses art and beauty to achieve a unity of emotion and reason that ultimately leads to the cultivation of a beautiful mind and soul. Needless to say, without a shadow of doubt, almost all online platforms are not only a vital source of commerce and commodity; combined with manipulation and

make-believe; but also, of self-expression and play. However, the problem is that instead of leading to the hypothesised unity of emotion and reason, the play is becoming an end, a subject, an entity and the destination in itself, in stark contrast to the world of space-time reality that our bodies are bound to exist in.

Korean dramas like *Celebrity* (2023) and *Mask Girl* (2023) clearly depict the negative effects of reification in modern digital culture. Both shows look at how social media and online visibility turn people into consumables whose value is based on popularity, public attention, and digital interaction. A future where personality itself becomes a commodity is revealed in *Celebrity* (2023) through the protagonist, Seo Ah-ri's ascent inside the influencer economy. People are rewarded for their capacity to draw followers, provide material, and preserve a well-curated online persona rather than for their inherent talents. The show reveals how digital representations frequently take precedence over the actual people who created them, resulting in fierce rivalry, dishonesty, anxiety, and moral compromise. Metrics like this are increasingly used to mediate human connections. Similarly, *Mask Girl* (2023) also examines the social and psychological effects of a culture that is fixated on looks and online approval. The protagonist, Kim Mo-mi' experiences demonstrate how people are reduced to visual objects assessed by an anonymous public due to beauty standards and online attention. Alienation, insecurity, and violence follow as the line between the real self and the performed digital persona progressively blurs. The play illustrates how people internalise society's objectifying gaze and start to see themselves exclusively as objects to be devoured. Both these Korean dramas criticise the reified character of digital society, where visibility is equated with existence and self-worth. They expose the darker aspects of existence in a hyper-mediated digital age by showing how the quest for online recognition may undermine subjectivity, commodify identity, and have significant emotional and societal repercussions.

Our culture is becoming so increasingly reified that the digital representations/ artificial intelligence generated images and videos

are being mistaken for by people as the subject and by the subject as the self. For instance, a well-crafted Instagram page with carefully curated, edited and captioned photographs is commonly taken for the representation of the self by others as well as the subject's own self. The situation has become such that the subject is no longer content with experiencing real life as it happens. Real life must be aesthetically photographed, captioned, uploaded and duly liked by the subject's followers in order for the subject to truly enjoy life and express individuality. The reified subject is so caught up in this process that an ill-received or ignored Instagram photo or Facebook post may cause the individual to feel like a failure and spiral into depression, or surge out into the real world again with the hopes of making it big with the next digital post.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

It may be argued by critics such as Brecht and Aronowitz who view the distinction between subject and object is a fallacious one, arising from Kantian dualism which sees the natural world unnaturally divided into two neat, water-tight categories of subject and object. This, while always a source of criticism and question, has become even more complicated with the rise of artificial intelligence and digital representations of subjectivity via objectification of the self.

As explicated by Hendrick, this problem arises only because modern thought takes the contemplative subject of reified self-world relations as its paradigm, ignoring the alternative of an active subject that is engaged in content production. Fichte's proposal to postulate an identical subject-object (that is, a subject that produces objectivity by positing objective reality as distinct from itself) is what the digital world represented in its early stages. What it represents now, by having blurred the lines between subject and object to the point of non-distinction, remains a conundrum.

An answer may be found in the idealist conception of art, in this case, digital representation of the self, as an activity for the creation of a meaningful totality and in Schiller's view, as a form

of play by understanding it as such and stripping it clean of any additional signification.

What remains even more important than the theoretical resolution, is the realisation of the phenomenon of reification by the subjects themselves. As Lukács writes, “The act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object” (Lukács 178). The individual can understand and overcome reification through a practical engagement with totality. This kind of practical engagement may be seen in the attempt of Instagram influencers who present their bodies without any form of digital filters or strategic modification to fit current ideals of social approval; replete with their honest-to-reality messages and positive hashtags as documented by researchers such as Cwynar-Horta (51). Critics of Lukács such as Adorno and Bewes point out that this stance seems to commit Lukács to the position that a complete overcoming of reification is possible, thereby resulting in the creation of a healthy and transparent individual and society. However, this understanding ignores Lukács’ insistence that the resistance against reification must be understood as a never-ending struggle (Feenberg 199, 206). The “unconditional absorption of the total personality in the praxis of the movement”, Lukács writes, is “the only possible way of bringing about an authentic freedom” (320). While the modern world viewed fantasy as a necessary and pleasurable escape from banal reality, the need of the hour of the postmodern world is to escape from the pleasure-web of the fantasy world by recognising it as such and relegating it to the realm of personal imagination rather than endeavouring to concretise, represent and sell these fragmented and fluctuating notions to the world via digital mass-media.

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Photo Essay

Myth, Ritual, and Symbolism in Sangla Holi: A Socio-Cultural and Performative Analysis

Jasmine Kaur Chandla*

There are places that hold memory in their stones, their rivers, their very air. Sangla is one such place. I first came here in March 2020, when the River Basra was still half frozen and the apple orchards stood bare, their branches reaching like supplication toward the peaks. I did not know then that I would return in 2023, and again in 2025, each time drawn back not merely by scholarly obligation but by something older and less nameable. The pull of a festival that refuses to be merely watched. Sangla Holi does not perform itself for you. It performs itself through you, through the drumbeat that enters the chest before the ears register it, through the smoke of the pyre that settles into your hair, clothes and stays there long after you have left the valley.

Situated at approximately 2,700 meters above sea level in the Baspa Valley of Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, Sangla is “known for its picturesque landscapes, apple orchards, and traditional Kinnauri villages” (Rongmei). Each spring, as the last of winter’s frost thaws into the Baspa River below, the village erupts into three days of sacred performance. This is Sangla Holi, a principal component of the four-day Faguli Festival observed in the Sangla Valley (Curly Tales Desk). Unlike the vibrant and colourful Holi celebrations in other parts of India, Sangla Holi is a carefully choreographed theatrical epic. A play in which kings cross swords, ascetics debate philosophy, and gods walk among mortals. It is simultaneously an act of worship, a re-enactment of cosmic battles, and a political theatre of alliances and reconciliation.

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To understand Sangla Holi is to understand the pulse of Kinnaur itself. Situated nearly 200 kilometres from Shimla, close to the Indo-Tibetan border, Kinnaur was part of the Mahasu district until 1960, when it was recognised as a separate administrative unit (Kanwar and Negi d558). Once a crucial subdivision of the erstwhile Bushahr state, its ruling lineage traces back to Pradyuman, grandson of Lord Krishna, believed to have founded the dynasty after vanquishing Banasur (Negi Loktus 13). Yet the region's identity is not solely shaped by political genealogy. The people of Kinnaur, the Kanaures, inhabit a unique cultural space shaped by the convergence of three religious traditions: Bon animism, Buddhism from Tibet, and Hinduism from the plains. As P.S. Negi Loktus observes, a Kanaure is traditionally "*born as Bon, lives a life of Hindu/Buddhist, receives a Buddhist/Bon funeral*" (24–25). Sangla Holi is a beautiful example of this layered inheritance, what Richard Schechner would recognise as "restored behavior," a living performance in which traditions are not merely preserved but continuously reinterpreted, adapted to their historical moment while retaining their symbolic potency (36).

One afternoon, I found myself sitting with a group of women at the edge of the festivities, laughing, passing food among themselves, watching the procession with the easy familiarity of people who have seen this all their lives and love it no less for that. I asked, almost casually, about the name Sangla. One of the older women turned to me, still smiling from something someone had just said, and answered as though the story were as natural as the river below us. The very name, she said, is rooted in the legend of Bairing Nages, the Naag Devta of the village. According to chiranings (divine utterances) spoken by the Grogch (oracle) in trance, in the place of the present village, Sangla used to be a huge lake. The deity Bairing Nages assumed the form of a rat and dug a channel at a place called Jaryo, releasing trapped waters and restoring the river's natural flow. In the local dialect, Sang means 'dawn' and La means 'drainage of water': Sangla is "the clearance of water at dawn" (Negi Loktus 147). For the Kanaures, history is

not merely inscribed in ancient texts, it is alive in the *chiranings* (divine utterances) delivered annually by the *grokches* (oracles) of the Shu, and in the *shu-geethangs* (divine songs) sung during native festivals (Negi Loktus 25). Sangla Holi is precisely such a site where myth is not merely narrated but enacted.

I have returned to Sangla three times, March 2020, March 2023, and March 2025, each visit layering new understanding over the last. What follows draws on those three periods of ethnographic fieldwork. The photographs are principally Kanwar Pal Singh's, taken across all three visits, with select images of my own from 2023 and 2025.

Four Days of Sacred Performance

The Phaguli festival is celebrated during the month of Phalgun (March) in the Vikrami Samvat calendar, on a designated day throughout Kinnaur (Negi Loktus 92). Sh I.L. Negi, former Adhyaksh of the Shri Bairing Naag Mandir Committee, traces the festival's origins to 1933, when it was initiated by the Gram Devta, the presiding village deity, Shri Bairing Nages ("Sangla Holi"). From its inception, the festival carried a deliberate pedagogical purpose: to transmit the values of Sanatan Dharma through embodied performance rather than textual instruction—a distinction that anticipates Schechner's argument that performance is never simply repetition, but always a re-doing that opens space for new meaning (36).

Day One: Invocation and Procession to Shri Bairing Nages

The festival begins at the heart of the Deshang (village), at a site known as Chhudo, where villagers assemble for a grand procession leading to the temple of Shu, Shri Bairing Nages. As Negi Loktus notes, every Deshang, or group of Deshangs, has a deity addressed as Shu, regarded as the supreme authority in the local cultural order (55). The festival commences with offerings of prayer to the deity, invoking blessings for prosperity, happiness, and communal well-being. Here, in Turner's terms, the community stands at the

threshold of ritual time, a liminal opening in which ordinary social structures are temporarily suspended in favour of collective devotion (Turner 94–95).

The temple soon reverberates with the sound of Baski, an ensemble of sacred instruments played by designated individuals of a particular caste (Fig. 2). According to Negi Loktus, these instruments number as many as eighteen, each producing a distinct tone, including the bam (nagara), dols (drums), kunnal, ron-singla, cymbals, shehnayi (a pair made of silver), and putting-putting (a small drum), collectively generating eighteen musical tones (Negi Loktus 58–59). The festival unfolds as a spectacle of sound, movement, and devotion, punctuated by the vivid presence of characters from the Ramayana like, Sadhus, kings, queens, Ram, Laxman, Hanuman, and other divine figures, who lead the procession (Fig. 3). Chants of "Holi Hai! Holi Hai!" echo through the valley, blending with folk songs and traditional melodies. Along the route, households open their doors to offer food, and locally brewed Phasur (a homemade apple or wild apricot alcohol) is served as a symbol of abundance and communal gratitude ("Sangla Holi," Chalo Kinnaur).



Fig. 1. Holi procession at Bairing Nages Temple during Sangla Holi, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 2. Baski, an ensemble of sacred instruments played by designated individuals, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 3. Characters from the Ramayana leading the Holi procession, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.

Day Two: Journey to Azad Kashmir, a Sacred Passage

On the second day, the celebration transcends the familiar boundaries of the village as the procession moves towards a place known locally as Azad Kashmir. The day is marked by ritual feasting, with traditional dishes such as Poley, Hodh, Cheelta, Puri, and local vegetables reinforcing the spirit of

hospitality and communal sharing ("Sangla Holi," Tribal Girl). The sacred instruments accompany the procession as villagers dance and sing in celebration.

After gathering in Azad Kashmir, the procession continues toward a site called Boning Saring. To reach it, the procession crosses the Baspa River by walking across a wooden log bridge placed by the locals. This journey serves as a powerful metaphor for both physical and spiritual passage (Fig. 5). The log bridge, spanning the roaring waters below, symbolises the transition between the mundane and the sacred, instantiating precisely the ritual liminality described by Turner — the “threshold” state in which initiates are betwixt and between social categories, temporarily unmoored from ordinary life and open to transformation (94–95). Upon reaching Boning Saring, a sacred resting point, the community pauses for refreshments and ritual observances before retracing its steps to the village. As evening descends, the rhythmic nati dance binds the villagers in a shared expression of devotion and communal joy.



Fig. 4. Holi procession heading towards Azad Kashmir, Day 2, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2023.



Fig. 5. Holi procession crossing the Baspa River via wooden log bridge, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 6. Procession at Boning Saring, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.

Day Three: Holika Dahan

The final day marks the climax of Sangla Holi (Fig. 7). As the principal day of the festival, it is centred on the ritual burning of Holika, Holika Dahan, which draws the entire village together ("Sangla Holi"). The procession, having received blessings at the temple in the morning, moves through various village routes carrying the effigy of Holika (Fig. 8). At each halt, households

offer refreshments, rituals are performed, and women sing folk songs, enriching the festival's spiritual and communal fabric. In the evening, the procession returns to the temple, where the Kayang dance is performed. In Kinnaur, the Kayang (nati) dance is traditionally performed anticlockwise, with men leading and women following (Negi Loktus 152). As the effigy of Holika is set alight by Hanuman under the rising moon (Fig. 9), the air fills with chants and invocations. It's a ritual reminder of the eternal struggle between order and disorder ("Way Back Home").

The role of Hanuman is central to this ritual enactment. In Kinnaur's understanding, he is a Jeevi Devta, a living deity, still present in the Kaliyug, still watching. Balvinder Lelan Negi puts it plainly in the documentary *Holi with Gods*, wherever the name of Ram is chanted, Hanuman must be there, as coordinator, as keeper of discipline, as the one who holds wrongdoers to account (Burhan Habshee). The blazing pyre consumes the effigy of Holika, signalling the culmination of disorder and the restoration of cosmic balance. Like each year, chaos yields to order, conflict to unity, darkness to light.



Fig. 7. Two Kings performing Swang at the grand procession, Day 3, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 8. Villagers carrying the effigy of Holika through Sangla village, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 9. The effigy of Holika set alight by Hanumang in the temple premises, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.

Swang: Theatrical Performance as Ritual Text

Throughout the three days of Sangla Holi, at every designated resting point where the procession halts, an important theatrical performance known as Swang is performed.

According to Balvinder Lelan Negi, the primary purpose of bringing Holi to the people of Sangla was to instil awareness of Sanatan Dharma and its cultural heritage ("Sangla Holi || Most Vibrant Holi of Kinnaur").

What strikes me most is that conflict is always the beginning, never the end. Two Sadhus, one Vaishnava, one Shaiva, face each other in theatrical dispute, their disagreement carrying the weight of centuries of doctrinal difference (Fig. 10). The crowd watches, and knows how it ends. By the performance's conclusion, the Sadhus reconcile. The argument was never really about division. It was about showing that division can be survived, absorbed, and ultimately transcended.

Another striking performance features two kings, each carrying a sword in one hand and a rumaal (handkerchief) in the other (Fig. 7). Engaging in a fierce mock battle to expand their empire, they symbolise political and territorial conflict. Their moment of reconciliation, marked by the waving of the rumaal, represents the diplomatic unity that underpinned empire-building in Bharatvarsha. The rumaal, transformed from a simple cloth into an emblem of diplomacy and resolution.

The Devi figures stayed with me longest. Men dressed as goddesses, holding a mirror in one hand and a sickle in the other (Fig. 11). I learnt through locals that the mirror reflects beauty and grace, qualities associated with Indian femininity, while the sickle symbolises labour, resilience, and the nurturing force of creation. This dual representation embodies the phrase "Nari Devi ka roop hai" (Woman is the manifestation of the Goddess), reinforcing the notion of divine femininity as simultaneously powerful and nurturing. Characters from the Ramayana, including Lord Ram, Lakshman, and other divine figures, do not arrive as illustrations of a text. Rather, they walk among the living, and the living make way for them.



Fig. 10. Fig. 10. Sadhus engaged in Swang, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2023.



Fig. 11. Devi figures portrayed by men, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Jasmine Kaur Chandla, 2025.

Day Four: Phaguli Festival and Faag Mela

On the fourth and final day, following three days of colour-drenched theatrical ritual, the Phaguli Festival culminates in the grand Faag Mela. This marks the transition from winter's harshness to the arrival of Basant (spring), signifying the end of the black times. Unlike the preceding days, the fourth day does

not involve playing with colours. Instead, the people of Sangla don their finest traditional attire, celebrating through dress rather than colours. Women wear the Doru, Soli, Pattu, and adorn their Thepang (Kinnauri topi) with fresh Narkasen flowers, the symbolic yellow of Phagun rendered in botanical form ("Faag Mela") (Fig. 12). The fair begins with the blessings of Shu Desang, setting a sacred tone for the day's proceedings.

One of the most significant aspects of the Faag Mela is the ceremonial procession of deities from their shrines, carried in public on Rathang (Sheerung), sacred palanquins (Fig. 13). The main deity, Bairing Nages, is accompanied by Majang Nages (the next in seniority) and the deity Bir, said to be *gupt* (invisible) in earlier times.

Once brought into the temple precincts (Santhang), the deity is positioned within public view, allowing for direct engagement. While the Shu-Mathes (priests) primarily communicate with the deity, other Kardars (functionaries of Shu) assist, and even members of the public may participate. When communication reaches a deadlock, the Grogch (oracle) enters a trance state to deliver Chiranings/Bhakhyans (divine revelations) on behalf of the deity. I.L. Negi describes the Phag Mela as Bairing Nages' own festival, the occasion on which he makes his grand annual appearance to celebrate Holi.

I realised, standing there, that each festival in Kinnaur carries its own distinctive tune, and the melodies of Shu-Geethangs (divine songs) at the Faag Mela are unlike anything I had heard on the other days (Fig. 14). The local belief holds that it is through Nages that the village sustains its Dhan (wealth), Dharam (righteousness), Nyay (justice), and Prakriti (natural balance).

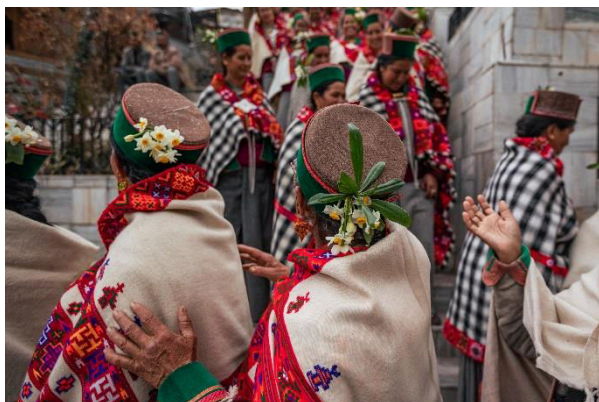


Fig. 12. Kinnauri women in traditional dress in Phagun, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 8 March 2023.



Fig. 13. Deities in public view near Santhang. Photo by Jasmine Kaur Chandla, 8 March 2023.



Fig. 14. Deities on their Rathang, communicating through distinct ritual movements, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 8 March 2023.

Conclusion: A Living Archive of Cultural Identity

By 2025, something had shifted in a way I could not quite name but could feel. The temple precinct that I had moved through freely during my first visit, following the procession, stopping, doubling back, was now so densely crowded that movement within it was barely possible. Around me, phones were raised above heads, recording. Tour operators had begun packaging Sangla Holi as a curated destination experience, marketing it as women-friendly, safe for solo travellers, a cultural encounter guaranteed to be authentic. People arrived with that particular alertness of those who have come to witness something rare before it disappears, not understanding, perhaps, that the act of arriving in such numbers is itself part of what changes it.

I stood at the edge of the temple precinct in 2025 and watched Hanuman approach the effigy, the same way I had watched in 2020 and 2023. The drums were the same. The

chanting was the same. The fire, when it came, was the same fire. And yet, there is a question I have carried home from Sangla across three visits, and I have not answered it, and I am not sure if it can be answered. When a ritual becomes a spectacle, does it remain a ritual? Or does it become something else, still beautiful, still moving, but subtly hollowed, the sacred centre slowly replaced by its own image?

I do not know. What I know is that somewhere in the crowd that night, the Grogch was preparing to speak the words of the deity. That the rumaal was being folded, ready to wave. That the women I had sat with along the temple wall would return next year, and the year after, not because anyone had packaged it for them but because Sangla Holi is theirs, woven into the fabric of who they are in a way no tourist itinerary can reach.

Perhaps that is enough. Perhaps it isn't. The Baspa River does not wait for the question to be resolved. It runs, as it always has, cold and indifferent and continuous, carrying everything downstream.

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Book Reviews

Climate of Denial: Darwin, Climate Change, and the Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century. Allen MacDuffie. Stanford University Press. August 2024. Pages – 296. ISBN: Hardcover ISBN: 9781503638938, Paperback ISBN: 9781503639546, Ebook ISBN: 9781503639553. Link: <https://www.sup.org/books/literary-studies-and-literature/climate-denial>.

Pousali Bhar

Allen MacDuffie's *Climate of Denial* offers a rigorous and wide-ranging examination of denialism across the long nineteenth century and its unsettling continuities in the present moment of climate crisis. While the book is grounded in Victorian engagements with evolutionary theory, its central concern lies with the persistence of climate change denial and what MacDuffie, drawing on Lauren Berlant, frames as a form of "cruel optimism," a wilful attachment to modes of thought that actively undermine human survival. The study thus moves between historical analysis and urgent contemporary relevance, seeking to demonstrate that denial is not an aberration but a deeply embedded cultural practice.

MacDuffie begins by tracing the emergence of denialist rhetoric in the wake of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Rather than focusing on overt and easily dismissible forms of "hard" denial such as those associated with Philip Gosse, he attends to more insidious and enduring modes of "soft" denial. These operate through ambiguity, partial acceptance, and strategic reframing, allowing individuals and cultures to accommodate unsettling scientific truths without fully internalising their implications. At the heart of this process lies the destabilisation of human exceptionalism: Darwin's decentring of the human subject and insistence on humanity's continuity with the animal world provoked a range of compensatory responses. These included renewed investments in religion, the reassertion of cultural hierarchies, racialized and imperial distinctions, and the intensified exploitation of a newly desacralized

nature—developments that MacDuffie links directly to the ecological crises of the present.

The opening chapter establishes the conceptual framework for the book by examining the coexistence of contradictory beliefs—a form of metacognitive dissonance that enables what MacDuffie terms “doublespeak.” Figures such as Darwin, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë are shown to participate in this dynamic, simultaneously acknowledging and disavowing evolutionary insight. While MacDuffie allows that such responses may have functioned as psychological coping mechanisms in a period when evolutionary knowledge remained largely inactionable, he draws a sharp distinction between then and now. In the contemporary context of accelerating climate catastrophe, denial no longer serves as a benign buffer but as a dangerous impediment to necessary action. Here, MacDuffie’s engagement with psychoanalytic frameworks like Freudian models of repression and disavowal proves especially productive, as it allows him to conceptualise denial not simply as ignorance, but as an active and structured mode of knowing.

The second chapter turns to the afterlives of Darwinian thought, demonstrating how evolutionary theory was reinterpreted to sustain rather than dismantle hierarchies. The notion of a vertical evolutionary scale facilitated both ontological distinctions between species and ideological distinctions between human populations. In this framework, Western societies positioned themselves as transcending nature, while colonised peoples were cast as closer to animality. Evolutionary discourse thus became entangled with imperial and racial logics, enabling the reassertion of human (and specifically European) superiority even as Darwin’s work had seemingly undermined it. MacDuffie’s reading underscores the extent to which scientific ideas can be appropriated to reinforce existing power structures, aligning his work with postcolonial critiques that expose the mutual imbrication of knowledge production and empire.

The subsequent chapters shift focus to literary form, exploring how denial operates within and through narrative techniques. In his

discussion of writers such as H. G. Wells, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Joseph Conrad, MacDuffie identifies first-person narration as a key site of disavowal. Confronted with unsettling truths about degeneration, hybridity, or the fragility of civilisation, these narrators ultimately retreat into forms of forgetting or rationalisation that allow them to resume ordinary life. Similarly, Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* exemplifies a refusal to fully reckon with the implications of scientific knowledge, even when such knowledge is explicitly acknowledged. What emerges here is a compelling account of narrative as both a vehicle for and a defence against epistemic disruption.

A particularly compelling section of the book examines the role of free indirect discourse in nineteenth-century realism. Building on insights from critics such as Amitav Ghosh, MacDuffie argues that this narrative mode both exposes and perpetuates denial. In novels like *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot stages a complex interplay between narrative voice and character consciousness, revealing the fractures and self-deceptions that structure individual subjectivity. For instance, moments in *Middlemarch* where Dorothea's moral certainty is subtly undercut by narrative irony exemplify how free indirect discourse renders visible a gap between ethical aspiration and cognitive limitation. Free indirect discourse, in this reading, becomes a formal mechanism through which the simultaneity of knowing and not-knowing is rendered legible.

MacDuffie's analysis of Virginia Woolf further develops this argument by foregrounding modernism's engagement with denial. Woolf's fiction, he suggests, registers the persistence of Victorian modes of thought while also critically interrogating them. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for instance, moments of existential and ecological awareness are repeatedly deferred or displaced, embedded within the flow of everyday consciousness. Clarissa's fleeting recognition of a "doomed race" is grammatically subordinated, absorbed into the syntax of ordinary life—a stylistic gesture that encapsulates denial at the level of language itself. Woolf emerges as what MacDuffie calls a "diagnostician of denial," attentive to the subtle ways in which individuals acknowledge and evade uncomfortable truths.

The book's conclusion extends its temporal scope, drawing connections to contemporary writers such as Annie Dillard and Margaret Atwood. By situating climate change alongside evolution as a "hyperobject" (in Timothy Morton's sense), MacDuffie emphasises the difficulty of comprehending phenomena that exceed human scales of perception and agency. His reading of Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy is particularly incisive, highlighting the self-perpetuating nature of denial in late capitalism, where knowledge of ecological crisis coexists with its systematic disavowal. In this respect, MacDuffie's work resonates strongly with Amitav Ghosh's diagnosis in *The Great Derangement*, though it distinguishes itself through its sustained attention to literary form as a site of epistemic negotiation.

If there is a limitation to MacDuffie's otherwise impressive study, it lies in the relative absence of a clearly articulated pathway beyond denial. While the book excels in diagnosing the historical and cultural mechanisms that sustain disavowal, it remains less certain about how such patterns might be disrupted. One might ask whether the emphasis on diagnosis risks reproducing the very structure it critiques: a mode of knowing that stops short of action. What would it mean, the review invites us to consider, to develop reading practices that not only expose denial but actively resist it? This question becomes particularly urgent in the context of climate crisis, where the gap between knowledge and action is itself a defining feature of contemporary life.

Nevertheless, *Climate of Denial* stands as a significant contribution to ecocriticism, Victorian studies, and the environmental humanities more broadly. By tracing the *longue durée* of denialist thinking and demonstrating its entanglement with literary form, MacDuffie provides a powerful framework for understanding the intellectual and affective barriers that continue to hinder meaningful responses to climate change. The book ultimately leaves us with an unsettling recognition: that to confront ecological crisis requires not only new knowledge, but a fundamental reconfiguration of how we process and respond to what we already know.



**Six of Cups. Neha Bansal. Hawakal Publishers
Private Limited, 2024.**

Dr Geeta Rani

Its title is drawn from the Minor Arcana of the tarot, a card associated with childhood, innocence, and the pull of the past. Where most poets invoke nostalgia as a mood or register, Bansal treats it as architecture. The Six of Cups card does not simply evoke the past. It establishes a relationship with it, orienting the self in a cyclical rather than a chronological manner. Memory here functions as a form of continuity, actively recreated through daily practice, domestic rituals, and embodied experiences. This is what gives the collection its critical coherence.

The poems move across familiar terrain. Childhood homes, festival cycles, family meals, siblings, grandparents, and pets. But the handling of this material resists the decorative. The opening poem, "My GrandPa (Baba)," establishes the affective register early. Tenderness is presented as a form of permission. Care becomes a site where the child's sense of self is released rather than contained. There is a recurring image of flight, figured through a bird, and it condenses something important: the idea that freedom can be experienced through intimacy rather than from it. This sets up the collection's broader argument. The domestic is not a constraint on experience. It is the primary medium through which experience becomes meaningful.

This emphasis on the domestic as a site of meaning finds its most sustained articulation in the food poems. "Black Carrot Kanji," "My First Dosa," "Moong Dal Halwa," "Naan Khatai," and "Mint Chutney" form a loosely connected sequence. Culinary practice is used across these poems as a vehicle for cultural transmission. Food acts as a delightful sensory journey, capturing the essence of ritual times, festive seasons, and

cherished family traditions across generations. In "Black Carrot Kanji," the imagery does this with quiet efficiency:

and the savoury rock salt and
the sharpness of red chili
combined curiously
to add colours to the
toasty winter afternoons. ("The Black Carrot Kanji")

The synaesthetic move is worth pausing over. Taste is being used to add colour. Senses are meant to overlap with one another. It is how genuine mnemonic experience tends to work. The poem reimagines the act of drinking kanji, engaging the body with the past rather than just the mind. These food poems are the collection's archival heart. Cultural continuity is sustained here not through a grand narrative but through the repetition of small acts: the stirring of a pot, the grinding of spices, the smell of a winter afternoon carried across decades.

"Crochet Lace Hankies!" most clearly demonstrates how memory is anchored in material objects, as the discovery of the hankies activates recollections of maternal labour and care. Their textures and colours are treated as encoded gestures, forms of intimacy that have been held in storage. What distinguishes this poem from simple nostalgia is its direction of movement. The poem does not end in longing. It ends in reciprocity, as the speaker purchases similar hankies for the ageing mother. Memory is enacted rather than merely recalled. The object is not a relic. It is a medium through which the relationship between past and present is continually renegotiated.

This logic of memory as practice extends most clearly to "The Parrot Called Harial," where childhood recollection is organised around acts of care, naming, and improvised responsibility. The name "Harial" is chosen deliberately, in resistance to more conventional alternatives. It signals an early

assertion of selfhood. The children's attempts to care for the injured bird are foregrounded not for their competence but for their sincerity. Innocence, in Bansal's handling, is not naïveté. It is a formative space in which empathy and agency begin to emerge together.

Temporal reflection surfaces most explicitly in "Rock Garden." A physical site endures. The body that once moved through it no longer does. Nostalgia here is not a return to the past but an encounter with disjunction, a recognition that the self who remembers and the self who experienced are not continuous. This is a more complex emotional gesture than the collection often attempts. It earns its place because it resists resolution. A related sensory logic underpins "Paper Boat," where memory is activated through sound, smell, and tactile imagery that evoke sensations such as the rhythm of rain, the warmth of spiced tea, and the heaviness of a childhood afternoon. These details re-create the past as a lived experience.

"Sibling Squabbles" is perhaps the collection's most emotionally precise poem. It complicates any reading of Bansal as straightforwardly sentimental. The poem captures sibling love not through warmth but through ambivalence, arriving at a moment of bewilderment:

In short, convinced fully
that she was indeed the
very bane of my life
how I prayed that she
gets married soon.
Why then, did I cry
like a baby, clutching
her left-over clothes,
the day after her wedding. ("Sibling Squabbles")

What is being rendered here is the gap between what we believe we feel and what is discovered when we are tested. Contradiction is allowed to stand without resolution. The poem becomes even more compelling because of it.

This capacity for emotional complexity is unevenly distributed across the collection. "A Love Song" situates its devotion within a cultural framework that privileges endurance and fidelity, invoking figures such as Sita and Savitri. The invocation is not without meaning. But emotional certainty is affirmed rather than subjected to pressure. The absence of ambivalence ultimately limits the poem's interpretive range. This tension recurs across the collection. Its commitment to emotional clarity makes it accessible and culturally resonant. The same commitment periodically forecloses the kind of productive ambiguity that would deepen its engagement. Bansal is strongest when contradiction is allowed to remain in the poem, as it is in "Sibling Squabbles," "Rock Garden," and the best of the food poems. She is most constrained when affirmation displaces inquiry.

Stylistically, syntactic simplicity and minimal punctuation are used throughout to produce an effect of immediacy. Thought and articulation appear closely aligned. This formal restraint is purposeful. It creates conditions for a lyric mode in which the reader is drawn into the experience rather than kept at a distance. The risk is that plainness can set in when the emotional material does not carry sufficient weight on its own. The collection navigates this tension with varying success. At its best, in the food poems, in "Crochet Lace Hankies!," in "Paper Boat," the simplicity is exactly right.

The poems in *Six of Cups* ultimately locate memory within the textures of the ordinary. The domestic and the quotidian are treated not as peripheral or marginal spaces but as constitutive ones. This aligns the collection with a broader tendency in

contemporary Indian English poetry, where everyday life is increasingly recognised as a primary site of cultural and historical meaning. The tarot frame is not merely an aesthetic gesture. It is an argument. The collection does not look backwards in mourning. It holds the past as something still moving through the present, kept alive in the small repeated acts of living. Bansal's simplicity is not a limitation of ambition but the very method through which the past remains active in the present. The tarot frame with which the collection opens thus returns not as ornament but as structure, marking memory as cyclical and continually renewed. Bansal's simplicity is not a limitation of ambition but the very method through which the past remains active in the present.



Poems

Lowercase Moments

Swapnadeep Kundu

Sometimes I think I write too much,
and yet not enough to breathe.
Each line feels like a promise –
something only my heart can see.

O, happy, happy morn!
I want to live the poetry I write,
not just keep it trapped in ink.
I want mornings that rhyme with warmth,
and nights that let me think.

I want my days filled with verses unrhymed,
found in the ordinary –
to laugh in lowercase moments,
and let silence be momentary.

I dream of love that feels like metaphor –
gentle, yet hard to define,

like when the moon that spills into your room
and you think, God, that should be mine.

I know it sounds pure gibberish,
mere marginalia, far too much,
but sorry –

I was never good
at keeping dreams out of touch.

I want to walk through cafés
that smell like unfinished poems,
leave smudges of ink on paper cups,
and talk to strangers like I know them.

I want to sit at bus stops
and write about the rain –
the way people pretend not to care,
while harboring all that pain.

I want love like prose
that forgets it's meant to end –
to hold someone so close,
our silences begin to blend.



HAIKU

Neetu Kumari Gupta

The Salty Sweet

Salt on every word,
My love wears a clever mask,
Read between the lines.

The Playful Jab

I tease because I care,
Spiky truth in every jest,
Love in every string.

Five chairs once in trust
Whispers now trail down the halls
Walls listen in shame.

Round table of five
One shadow bends toward the crown
Roots loosen, hearts part.



Translations

Advent

[A translation of Rabindranath Tagore's 'Abirvab' (আবিরবাব), originally published in the anthology *Kshanika* (ক্ষণিকা) in 1900.]

Ramyani Gayen

For days past in many a spring
 Long I awaited you alone;
 Today you have come with monsoon's song.
Today with a storm's rhythm
With dark clouds in voices deep
The song that my heart must sing
 Make that melody your own
 Today with this monsoon song.

From afar I once saw you bright
 Clad in veils of richest gold,
 Adorned with budding blooms bold.
Yet when near, stunned me your sight
Darkest blue was your light,
Lightning steps, fleeting and swift
 Here and there, did they fall.
 Where, oh, that garment gold!

That day I watched you, perhaps in a dream
 Your feet gracing the groves and meadows,
 And low before you were the flowering boughs.
Heard as though I, soft bells ringing,
The chimes around your waist, did they sing?
Felt as though I, from galaxy above
 Your breathes, gentle and low,
 As you graced the groves and meadows.

Today the world is shadowed with your presence
 The heavens carrying your tresses long,
 And around your feet, a flower song.
In you vastness, I drown
In unseen depths, with dreams unknown,
With darkness great, magnificent you come
 The shallows of my heart's ocean do yearn
 As you step, with anklets of flower song.

At spring in groves of blossoms rave
 I wreathed so many flower rings
 Yet, for you this gift is unfitting.
Where you traverse, at every step
Your hymns echo with the world itself,
That infinite melody can never be sung
 By this little lyre's thin strings.
 For you, my gift – unworthy, unfitting.

Who knew that sudden glance
 Will take away the monsoon song?
 Will return to me a shy love's morn?
Who knew of this shame, me with which you shall bless?
For I am have awaited you unclad, unworthy of your grace,
In this hall of flowering love, you asked for my bent knees
 And with this prayer's hymn, I am undone –
 With what grace have you come!

Forgive me then, forgive this folly of mine
 For the penury of my offering,
 Forgive me then of all my sins.
In this fleeting leaf-made home, on this night
Beneath the lantern, come to me in this shadow-light,
Upon this bamboo flute, allow your eyes
 To rest a moment with gaze divine –
 Forgive me, of my sins.

You did not come in the blooming spring
 When long I awaited you alone,
 Come, then, with this monsoon song.
Come, with the sky's eternal light,

Come, in flights of dreams infinite,
The song that my heart yearns to sing
 Make that melody your own
 Today, with this monsoon song.



Kundan Singh Kesar Bai

[Translation of a Short Story by Acharya Shivpujan Sahay]

Silky

Introduction

Acharya Shivpujan Sahay (1893-1963) is a prominent Hindi writer, editor and journalist associated with the development of modern Hindi prose. His works are characterized by Social realism, simplicity and the lives of ordinary people. Some of his famous works include *Dehati Duniya*, *Mata ka Anchal*, *Kahani ka plot* and *Smriti Shesh* among others.

Kundan Singh Kesar Bai is the only short story written by Acharya Shivpujan Sahay in Bhojpuri. It gains particular significance for its portrayal of a husband and wife from a rural background who are involved in the freedom struggle. The narrative brings the nationalist movement out of urban, elite spaces and grounds it within everyday life of the village. The story extends a couple's relationship from a mere domestic bond to a political partnership. It is significant to note that the wife is not confined to a passive role, she rather comes out as equally aware, resilient and invested in the freedom struggle. Sahay subtly challenges the conventional gender roles in this unique story and also reinforces the idea that the freedom movement permeated even the lives of the most marginalized and linguistically diverse communities.

Translation

Both were in the prime of their youth. The incandescent beauty of their forms often left viewers spellbound. The villagers often said in awe: When Brahma was bestowing beauty, those two must have reached his door first. Blessed indeed, embodying an

ethereal beauty. The farewell moment at their wedding was no less than a spectacle. They had no one but each other, no family to share their lives. Yet their courtyard pulsated with life in their presence. Each time one raised a gun, the other gazed upon the fierce expression, a smile flickered on their face, knowing well the storm raging within. When one played a flute, the other joined in humming with a rhythmic click of fingers.

On a night of full moon in Ashwin, beneath the soft patter of rain, they lounged on a woven mat in the courtyard, enjoying a playful conversation. He said softly, "I love you more than I can express in words". "I cherish your love more than anything", she replied, "I adorn myself in your love. You must remember, every single time when I have adorned myself in your love."

"In the frost embrace of Magh, in the burst of blossoms in Phalgun, in the tender unfolding of Chaitya, in the lazy sun soaked days of Jeth and under the dark of clouds in of Asadh and Sawan, in the darkness of Bhado, in the shimmering light of Karthik and in the shimmering breezes of Sharad and Poos."

The voice softened further. "In all the moments you have loved me, I adorned myself in your love with such tenderness that your eyes glimmered. I have woven your affection into something that made you smile. Do you remember, my love?"

But instead of a response, a yawn escaped her lips. Stretching into the fading light, he said with a sigh, "we have been blessed with so much happiness by god, but all this while, we have never done anything for the service of our motherland."

"My friends say: "Ever Since you have married, you have confined yourself within the walls of your house like an effeminate.""

“But what can I do about it?”, she said. “You must find the answer within yourself. If you rouse the spirit, sing the songs of patriotism to stir the souls, and respond to your friends with your strong initiative, no matter what you do, I will always stay by your side. Pick up the flag and see if I won't walk proudly by your side. I am a daughter of Kshatriya, after all.”

“My friend even went to the prison along with her husband. No matter the path you choose, I will always walk with you. Even if I have to burn into flames with you, I won't feel any pain. I will not hesitate walking on the edge of a sword, as long as I am with you.”

“You must decide for yourself first. I will be right behind you. A wife is her husband's shadow.”

“Listen...I am not trying to interrupt you but it is not only my fault. And mark my words. With the first ray of sun tomorrow, I will be the first to march out with the tricolour flag in my hand.”

“I'm not just weaving tales here.”

“You are quite a smooth talker.”

“Fine! Tomorrow when my boots step out of this door, you will watch my passion surge like a storm.”

In 1942, the land of bhojpuri was burning with an unstoppable rage. Every street boiled with defiant men. Each direction echoed, the explosions of rebellions, warehouses were being raided, spears and battle axes were being sharpened in several alcoves, the white hapless officers were being beaten in some corners, stations were plundered, police stations were reduced to rubble, post offices burnt in flames, railway tracks were being ripped off the ground. Policemen retreated to the shadows, fleeing from the rebellious wrath.

Strategies were being carved out in the cornfields. In an attempt to fit a camel through the eye of a needle, chaos enveloped the whole land, with the surge of an unstoppable energy.

Following the footsteps of Kundan and Kesar, the villagers eagerly joined the rebellion. The voices united in a single chant-to overthrow the British raj. The white officers dashed away at their sight. Their spirit and courage inspired people to come forth, but their aura was no less enchanting.

With each step, a roar followed. The crowds craved their words and captivating presence. People were spellbound by their beauty and will. They wielded such power over the masses that the British's hold began to falter. The government issued warrants on their name. The villagers guarded Kundan and Kesar fiercely. When the tricks of the police didn't work, then a different group of military personnel was deployed. Yet, despite all their efforts, they could not find a single clue of their whereabouts.

One fateful day, they returned to take back the remains of their home. Little did they know that the British officers were silently waiting for them. Kundan was talking to Kesar. Suddenly got alarmed hearing a slight whisper. With a firm tug, Kundan steeled himself and loaded his gun. While Kesar with the swiftness of a storm drew the sword out of scabbard, and wrapped the end of her saree like armor around her waist.

They drifted out together, tearing through the stillness. The police officers stood paralyzed as the door burst open. In the flash of an instant, Kundan killed three men. While Kesar, like embodiment of Goddess Durga, sliced two men, as their heads rolled down on the flood. Before the officers could get a hold of the situation, they severed the hands of a couple of officers, cracked the skulls of some, while a few lay with pierced chests, as their blood traced the floor and piercing sharp cries filled the

air. With a fierce display of their Kshatriya's strength, both the warriors stood, blood stained but unwavering. In a turn of events a bullet struck Kesar, and she collapsed over Kundan's body. The villagers started to gather hearing the sound of bullets, while the British officers quickly slipped away with the body of their men.

The villagers bathed the bodies of Kundan and Kesar in the sacred water of Ganges, anointed them with sandalwood, draped garlands across their still form, and showered the braves with flowers. The prayers mingled with the scent of incense, camphor in solemn reverence.

The procession marched from one village to another in honor of the martyrs, and their names were sung in every corner. Their bravery was worshiped as the villagers offered flowers at their feet in reverence. But one particular whisper of awe echoed from every direction, "Such noble death is destined for the rarest on earth."

They guarded them as one would protect the fragile blink of an eye. When the guns at the police station remained silent, constable Goranhi was sent in their place. Yet, despite their intent, the whites could not land their strike, though no answer to their failure was ever uncovered.

On the day the furniture was to be stripped from their home, the whites lay on the earth, backs against the soil, speaking in low voices within the barn. Then came the threats, echoing in the still air.

Kundan, sensing the urgency, fastened his shorts and prepared his gun with grim determination. In one swift movement, Kesar unsheathed his sword and held Miyan with an iron grip, his arms coiling like serpents around his waist.



BIO NOTES

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CALL FOR PAPERS/SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

dialog, a fully peer-reviewed, bi-annual international journal of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh, invites submissions for its forthcoming special issue (No. 47) on “Creative Afterlives.” The journal provides a forum for interdisciplinary research engaging literature, culture, and critical theory. Texts do not end with the moment of their publication. They endure through translation, reinterpretation, adaptation, and rereading across historical and cultural contexts. What appears to be the stability of a text often conceals a dynamic process of renewal through which meanings are continually reconstituted. This special issue draws inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s influential idea of the “afterlife” (Nachleben) of a text, articulated in his essay “The Task of the Translator.” Building on this insight, the issue explores the creative afterlives of texts: the ways in which works are reread, translated, performed, contested, canonised, marginalised, reclaimed, and reimagined. Rather than treating interpretation as secondary to authorship, this framework recognises reception as a generative practice that produces new meanings and new cultural lives for texts. Across time, texts accumulate layered histories of interpretation. Feminist, Dalit, queer, and postcolonial rereadings challenge inherited hierarchies of interpretation and open canonical works to new ethical and political horizons. The journal welcomes papers on, but not limited to, the following areas:

Rereading and historical reinterpretation
Adaptation, retelling, and intermediality
Feminist, Dalit, and queer reappropriations
Performance and textual reanimation
Digital culture and textual circulation

Translation as transformation
Canon formation and counter-canon
Reception theory and readerly agency
Archives, memory, and textual survival
Pedagogy as creative rereading

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1. Word limit for scholarly article is 4000 to 6000 words i.e. a minimum of 12 and maximum of 20 pages.
2. The paper writers are to submit their papers to editordialog@pu.ac.in before the deadline, i.e., 12 June, 2026, along with a 50 -word biographical note, and an abstract of the paper.
3. The papers must be original and hitherto unpublished. No simultaneous submissions are allowed.
4. The paper writers are required to give an undertaking that their paper(s) is/are original.
5. The papers must be in 12 -point Times New Roman (in accordance with MLA style sheet 9th edition).

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