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Editorial

Cultural Afterlives and Ethical Reimagining in Contemporary Times

Issue No. 45 of *dialog* brings together research papers that mobilise diverse strands of popular culture—literature, cinema, performance, memoir, translation, and humour—as critical sites for reflecting upon contemporary social concerns and imagining ethical deflections from them. In the spirit of Raymond Williams’s reminder that “culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind,” the issue treats cultural forms not as aesthetic embellishments but as lived practices through which social realities are negotiated, resisted, and reimagined (Williams, 1958/1989). This understanding resonates closely with A. K. Ramanujan’s view of tradition as something that is not static but “a series of discontinuous continuities,” shaped through acts of remembering, translation, and reinterpretation.

A significant strand of the issue engages ecological thought through literary memory, translation, and place-based practices. Papers revisiting ancient literary ecosystems argue that classical texts encode sophisticated ecological ethics that can counter the violence of extractive modernity and environmental collapse. Walter Benjamin’s notion of translation as ensuring a text’s *afterlife* finds a parallel here: translation becomes not merely a linguistic transfer but an ethical reactivation of ecological knowledge for the present. This ecological concern is further extended through studies of borderland communities whose practices of dwelling resist mainstream exploitation and foreground relational coexistence with land. Trauma—both intimate and collective—forms another critical axis of the issue. Essays examining women’s domestic trauma alongside genocide memoirs reveal the uneven politics of memory, where some forms of suffering are institutionalised and ritualised while

others quietly sediment across generations. As Cathy Caruth reminds us, trauma is “an experience that is not fully owned,” returning belatedly and insistently (Caruth 1995: 151).

Cinema and performance culture emerge as vital mediating forms that sustain critique across spatio-temporal and cultural divides. Studies of Shakespearean adaptations in Eastern cinematic traditions demonstrate how classical tragedy survives through transnational and diagonal adaptations, where ambition, morality, and identity are re-inscribed within new sociopolitical contexts. Alongside this, analyses of performance cultures—ranging from stand-up comedy to satire—foreground humour as a precarious yet potent mode of dissent. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, laughter performs a carnivalesque function, while in Indian aesthetic thought it recalls the dual movement of *hāsyā rasa*, which both exposes social contradiction and offers momentary relief from it.

Extending and reframing these concerns, the paper on neurodivergence and soft aesthetics provides a crucial posthuman and affective lens through which the issue coheres. By foregrounding the receiver’s sensory and cognitive experience, it resonates with Gilles Deleuze’s insistence that affect is “the capacity to affect and be affected,” while also echoing Abhinavagupta’s emphasis on *sahṛdaya*—the attuned, responsive reader or spectator who completes the aesthetic experience. Literature, cinema, performance, and humour are thus re-read not merely as representational forms but as affective encounters that reshape perception and ethical response.

As has often been the case in literary and cultural history, the ancient is re-looked and re-visited here not as nostalgia but as a reservoir of hope. Translation, adaptation, and performance emerge as critical tools for reaching new shores, while comic devices—humour, satire, irony, and laughter—simultaneously accentuate pain and emolliate it for the voiceless. In reaffirming

literature's enduring influence as a mode of ethical connection, *dialog* Issue No. 45 positions cultural practice itself as a site of responsibility, resilience, and imaginative renewal.

Engaging with the ecological turn in Translation Studies, Salma Begum and Sanjib Sahoo rethink Girmitiya literature beyond its dominant human-centred narrative. Their article mobilizes Eco-translation and Ecolinguistics to interrogate the erasure of environmental agency in translations of Abhimanyu Unnuth's *Lal Pasina*, proposing re-translation as an ethical and activist practice responsive to extractivist colonial histories and contemporary climate crises.

Smrity Jayara's contribution interrogates the fraught relationship between humour and disability, asking whether laughter serves as comic relief or social commentary. Drawing on Disability Studies and cultural theory, the article charts the evolution of disability humour from stigmatizing caricature to an ethically grounded, self-authored mode of expression. The study compellingly demonstrates how stand-up comedy and contemporary literary representations enable persons with disabilities to subvert stereotypes and challenge normative assumptions.

This issue includes Jaidev Bishnoi's essay on Chandrika Balan's short fiction, which examines female subjectivity and everyday life in Malayalam literature through feminist aesthetics and the lens of everyday resistance. By critically engaging with the discourse of *pennezhuthu*, the paper foregrounds subaltern agency articulated through negotiation, ambivalence, and lived experience rather than overt radicalism. The essay contributes to ongoing discussions on gender, agency, and narrative strategies in Indian women's writing; its insistence on reading women's agency within context, vulnerability, and contradiction—an approach that enriches current feminist literary scholarship. The paper engaging Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* as a testimonial

archive of everyday suffering is particularly significant for its refusal of trauma as a spectacle. It examines forms of gendered violence that unfold not in moments of catastrophe but through the slow erosion of women's bodies and subjectivities, thereby extending feminist trauma studies beyond Eurocentric paradigms. Conceptualising trauma as vernacular and insidious rather than spatially or temporally discrete, the essay traces how coercion embedded within marriage vows, reproductive expectations, and religious authority is rendered invisible and legally inaudible. The analysis foregrounds the failure of juridical and religious institutions—often structured by patriarchal bias—to recognise or redress such harm, thereby exposing the ethical limits of law when confronted with intimate, normalised violence.

From Banu Mushtaq's feminist short stories, which expose everyday domestic violence within intimate and religious spaces, to Consolée Nishimwe's Rwandan genocide memoir that narrativises the biopolitical regulation of life and death, the contributions in this editorial collectively interrogate how trauma is experienced, remembered, and mediated at the intersection of the individual and the collective.

By engaging multiple registers of marginality, this edition interrogates the silences produced by dominant cultural, political, and environmental narratives. Renuka K and Jenisha T's essay intervenes in this discourse through a reading of borderland travel writing, foregrounding how precarious environments are not merely endured but meaningfully inhabited through affective bonds and topophilic attachments to place. Drawing on Environmental Humanities and spatial theory, the paper reframes borderlands as sites of ecological belonging and quiet resistance rather than zones of abandonment.

Extending ecological inquiry, this issue also foregrounds ecological thought rooted in classical literary traditions.

Manjeera G's paper reads Illanko Atikal's *Cillapatikaram* through the lens of environmental aesthetics, demonstrating how the Akam poetic system—structured through the coded *tinai*s—articulates a non-binary, eco-social imagination where human life and natural landscapes co-emerge. By revisiting Sangam ecologies, the essay argues that ancient Tamil literary frameworks offer vital resources for reviving, reconfiguring, and rebuilding greener imaginaries beyond dominant Western environmental models.

This issue also includes a study that revisits Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* through their modern Eastern film adaptations, foregrounding the enduring relevance of the tragic hero across cultures and media. By analysing Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* and *Omkaara*, the paper demonstrates how diagonal adaptations reconfigure ambition, morality, and identity within distinct sociopolitical and cultural landscapes. The contribution situates Shakespearean tragedy within a transnational cinematic praxis, revealing how cultural transposition sustains the ethical and psychological force of classical drama.

Another article positions neurodivergent cognition as a posthumanist lens through which contemporary media aesthetics can be critically rethought. By foregrounding neurodivergent embodiment as a phenomenologically rich and epistemically productive mode of cognition, it demonstrates how sensory multiplicity and non-linear perception illuminate broader questions of media, technology, and aesthetic experience. The contribution aligns with *dialog's* interdisciplinary inquiry by bridging posthuman theory, media studies, and alternative epistemologies.

This issue also engages contemporary performance cultures through a grounded study of Indian stand-up comedy as a spatially and socially mediated form. Drawing on ethnographic

fieldwork across multiple cities, the paper theorises the “comic frame” as a fragile regime of conditional immunity produced through venue design, audience expectations, affective labour, and media circulation, within which subversion becomes temporarily permissible. By tracing how this frame is negotiated, stretched, and at times shattered—especially in digital afterlives of live performances—the article contributes to debates on censorship, reception, and the politics of humour in present-day India.

The issue is further enriched by a poetic cluster that sharpens dialog’s ethical and ecological imagination through lyric dissent: alongside Dr Sanjukta Dasgupta’s recent works “Midnight” and “Dystopia,” that articulate historical trauma, dystopian ecology, and moral anguish through what Adorno would call poetry’s “negative dialectics.” Moving from meta-poetic reflection to searing geopolitical critique and prayerful lament, bearing witness to contemporary violence and collective anguish, these reaffirm poetry’s role, in A.K. Ramanujan’s sense, as a form where “history, myth, and ethics meet in language.” Jasmine Kaur Chandla’s “The Fruits of Knowing” and “The Lichen and I” articulate feminist epistemic awakening, domestic ideology, and asymmetrical intimacy through allegorical and eco-symbolic modes. Drawing on the Edenic myth of forbidden knowledge and the everyday iconography of Indian domestic life, “The Fruits of Knowing” stages what might be read, in Foucauldian terms, as the gendered cost of consciousness—where learning becomes both liberation and social threat, and the female subject is suspended between intellectual becoming and affective containment. “The Lichen and I,” by contrast, mobilises ecological symbiosis as a relational metaphor to expose the silent economies of care, labour, and emotional extraction embedded in idealised narratives of love. Patrick Aura’s poems trace silent labour, generational precarity, and fragile ecologies using a materialist–eco-poetic lens resonant with Raymond Williams’s structures of

feeling and Bhabha's notion of cultural afterlives. Together, these poems reaffirm—echoing Bharata's rasa theory and Aurobindo's idea of poetry as mantric consciousness—that poetic language remains a potent site where suffering is aestheticised not to soften it, but to render it ethically audible and imaginatively transformative.

The issue also features two incisive book reviews that extend *dialog's* ethical and epistemic concerns through memory, ecology, and affect: the reading of Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* frames planetary consciousness through Keats's "Negative Capability" and Tagore's vision of the human as imbricated within a larger cosmic rhythm, while the review of Sarmistha Dutta Gupta's *The Jallianwala Bagh Journals* foregrounds feminist memory-work and oral historiography to recover women's silenced experiences of colonial trauma. Together, the reviews affirm literature, in Ashis Nandy's sense, as a counter-archive of conscience—resisting erasure, unsettling dominant histories, and sustaining ethical ways of seeing and remembering.

The issue is further strengthened by its engagement with translation as ethical critique, most notably in K. Denish Raja Durai's English rendering of Mu. Metha's *A Street Singer's Homage to a Father of the Nation*, which situates modern Tamil *pudukavithai* within a Marxist-humanist lineage to interrogate postcolonial disillusionment, fractured nationalism, and Gandhian afterlives—recalling Benjamin's claim that translation releases the "afterlife" (*Überleben*) of a text while renewing its political charge. Read alongside the poetic interventions of Sanjukta Dasgupta and Patrick Aura, this translation affirms—echoing Aurobindo's notion of poetry as mantric truth and Ashis Nandy's idea of cultural conscience—that lyric, whether original or translated, remains a vital mode for bearing witness to historical betrayal, ecological precarity, and unfinished freedom.

My heartfelt gratitude to the editorial assistants Arunjot Kaur and Chahat Rampal, who have worked tirelessly and contributed immensely in finalising the manuscripts for several editions of *dialog* under the guidance of Prof. Akshaya, the former Editor. Dr. Kamalpreet, along with Sonali Negi and Arushi Bhandari, who have recently joined the editorial team, have assumed their responsibilities with the same spirit of commitment and professionalism. The entire 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, Assistant Manager, Press, Panjab University, Chandigarh; Amolak Singh and Vikram from the Department of English and Cultural Studies; and Ankush have also contributed significantly to bringing out this issue of *dialog*, Volume 45.



From Indenture to Ecology: Rethinking Girmitiya Literature Through Eco-Translation

Salma Begum* and Dr Sanjib Sahoo†

Abstract

This study offers a critical engagement with Rashi Rohatgi's *Blood Red Sweat* (2023), the English translation of Abhimanyu Unnuth's Hindi novel *Lal Pasina* (1977), which chronicles the experiences of girmitiya or Indian indentured labourers. While acknowledging the significance of Rohatgi's translation, this paper calls for a re-assessment of Rohatgi's translation and by extension a re-reading of Unnuth's text through the theoretical lenses of Eco-translation and Ecolinguistics, to foreground a non-anthropocentric paradigm of translation. Such an approach is necessary because existing research on Girmitiya literature has mostly concentrated on the human narrative, overlooking the disastrous impact of one of the largest migrations of humans on the ecology of the host lands. Although both Unnuth and Rohatgi engage with the socio-economic aspects of the sugar plantation economy, yet Unnuth to a lesser and Rohatgi to a larger extent fails to address the environmental concerns present in the source text. Inspired by Michael Cronin's proposition in *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2017) that translation must respond to the urgencies of climate change, this paper proposes an alternative evaluative framework for the translation of fictional texts, in this case Girmitiya literature, by foregrounding the (in)visibility of ecological ramifications embedded within narratives shaped by extractivist colonial capitalism.

Keywords: Blood Red Sweat, Eco-translation, Globalisation, Girmitiya, Lal Pasina, Sugar Plantation Economy.

* PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Tezpur University

† Faculty, Department of English, Tezpur University

Introduction

This paper examines Blood Red Sweat (2023), the English translation of Abhimanyu Unnuth's classic Lal Pasina (1977) and calls for a critical re-evaluation of translation of fictional texts, in this case, Girmitiya literature through the lenses of Eco-translation and Ecolinguistics. This (re)assessment is necessary for every initial translation for it is inherently an incomplete act marked by shortcomings— following the argument of Sharon Deane-Cox while working on Antoine Berman and P Bensimon's seminal work in the French journal *Palimpsests* (1990). It is only through “the restorative, corrective, and illuminating properties of retranslation” (3) that any translation can approximate the source text and attain a sense of completion. While acknowledging the validity of the retranslation paradigm, the study prioritizes a rigorously ecological orientation in literary translation over the pursuit of mere proximity to the source text. Prior to addressing the exigencies that necessitate such an approach, one needs to illustrate the intricate interrelation between translation and ecology, and to demonstrate the manner in which the former facilitates understanding of the dynamic interplay between humans and the environment. This paper will follow the pattern where a line from Abhimanyu Knuth's Lal Padina, the first book in his trilogy on Iritis's, or indentured laborer will be used alongside its English translation, Blood Red Sweat, rendered by Rishi Rohatgi. The first entry is the excerpt along with its transliteration and below it is the English translation by Rohatgi.

Example 1.

ST: गन्ने का रस उबलते समय हवा सौंधी गन्ध से लद जाती थी। कारखाने के काले धुँएँ से वातावरण धूमिल और बोझिल प्रतीत होने लगता था। (Unnuth 37)

(Ganne ka ras ubaltey samay hawa sondhi gandhi se lad jati he. Karkhane ke kaley dhuwe se vatavaran dhumi aur bojhil pratit hone lagta tha)

TT: When sugar cane juice is heated, a sweet scent permeates the air and black smoke escapes from plant chimneys in a dense mass. (Rohatgi 39)

Eco-translation: Even though there is a sweet smell in the wind when sugarcane is boiled in the factories by workers, the air is made dusty and heavy from the emission of smoke from the factories. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

A careful reading of the above line from the Source Text (ST) and its English translation by Rohatgi reveals the erasure of the role of humans, both the owners and the workers, in the destruction of the environment. The phrase “sweet smell permeates the air” has a positive effect on the reader as the character is shown as enjoying the sweet smell of the sugarcane in the wind. There are several similar lines in both the ST and the TT, some of which would be examined later on. While the novel vividly depicts the suffering of the girmitiyas, it is passages such as this that fall short in foregrounding human agency in the environmental degradation, especially that resulting from the operations of the sugar industry. “What is needed in this translation practice is not the translator’s linguistic prowess but environmental awareness, understanding, appreciating, and empathising with nature within the bounds of ecological possibility” (You 181). Therefore, there is a need to re-read/(re)translate such lines. Through the insertion of phrases such as “even though” and “in the factories by workers,” and by substituting “becomes” with “made,” the translation would foreground the deleterious origins of the sweet-smelling wind, thereby rendering visible the human agency implicated in ecological degradation, all the while preserving the narrative’s central focus on the human saga of suffering depicted in the

novel. This strategy is analogous to Arran Stibbe's concept of "reframing", grounded in the understanding that a "frame" constitutes a narrative or cognitive schema activated by specific trigger words, while "framing" refers to the application of such schemas to structure perception across disparate domains. "Reframing" functions as a discursive intervention that disrupts prevailing conceptual patterns by deploying alternative linguistic cues, thereby enabling the rearticulation of domains of experience traditionally mediated by dominant ideologies and fixed interpretive structures (Stibbe 47-48). Such an ecologically informed approach to the re-reading/(re)translation of Unnuth's text would place the Girmitiya saga within a broader framework of ecological concerns while not taking anything away from the suffering and servitude of the protagonists. However, such reframing/re-reading/(re)translation immediately gives rise to two concerns. The first arises from the charge that Eco-translation alters the meaning of the Source Text (ST), in this case Unnuth's novel, raising critical questions regarding the permissible extent of translational intervention, and the potential resistance of authors/readers unprepared for such an ecologically reoriented rendering. The question of ethics and translation will be discussed later on in a separate section. A second, closely related concern is the need to re-read/translate literary works through an ecological lens.

The second concern must be dealt with first. The need for rereading/re-translation of literary texts can be found in the drastic changes made to the environment during the last two centuries and the aftermath of such changes felt all over the world. Naomi Klein argues that humanity is at "decade zero" of the climate crisis while governments are focused on economic growth over environmental concerns. She critiques society's ecological amnesia, and the lack of global mobilization compared to responses to other crises like wars and calls for radical, collective action (23). This amnesia can also be found in the literary sphere as pointed out by Amitav Ghosh who accuses

“literary journals and book reviews” of ignoring climate change and when it does appear in literary publication or discussion, “it is almost always in relation to non-fiction: novels and short stories are very rarely to be glimpsed within this horizon” (9). The drastic climate change has drawn the attention of translation theorists like Michael Cronin. Recognizing the urgent need to address imminent natural calamities, he advocates for a change in both our actions and our mindset regarding ecology and translation (9). This study is inspired by the growing realization that both literary and non-literary texts have often erased the specificity of nature to serve anthropocentric concerns – a phenomenon that, as Arran Stibbe demonstrates in *Ecolinguistics* (2015), much like Cronin, has historically supported the ideological needs of various social and political formations. If language plays an important role in influencing our thoughts and actions, then translation/re-translation is perhaps one of the ways of raising ecological concerns and awareness through language. Such an approach would have to naturally prioritize and make selective choices as it is impossible to fully preserve every element of the source text due to the focus on raising ecological consciousness. This brings us to the question of ethics and translation as mentioned above.

Translation and Ethics

Eco-translation is one of the latest paradigm shifts in the discipline of Translation Studies which has seen several such shifts over the past half a century. As mentioned earlier, this increased interest in Eco-translation is primarily due to the consequences of human actions and its impact on nature. However, very few attempts have been made to apply Eco-translation in practice. One of the main reasons being the concern of changing the meaning of the Source Text (ST). The extent to which a translator may alter a text, the preservation of its originality in the context of Eco-translation, and the potential resistance from authors or readers together raise critical

concerns for an ecologically informed translation practice. Such questions lead us to the question of ethics in Eco-translation in particular and translation in general.

Translation Studies, influenced by almost exclusively Western tradition, focused, at least, in the early stages primarily on linguistic and technical aspects of translation. The impact of Biblical translation on Western translation tradition meant that ethical considerations were often implicit, with translators expected to faithfully convey the meaning of the source text. The cultural turn in translation studies involves a shift in focus from merely linguistic or technical concerns to the exploration of the cultural dimensions of translation. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi in their seminal work *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999) expose the underlying question of authority over a text, highlighting how the rise of printing and the emergence of the concept of ownership brought into focus the translator's rights and agency in relation to the original work. The conceptual discrepancy between translation and so-called originals is embedded in our epistemological frameworks and gains further significance when considered alongside the historical emergence of the "original" during early colonial expansion, a period marked by Europe's appropriation of territories beyond its borders (2).

One of the most important trends in recent times is where the focus has shifted to the translator as Lawrence Venuti emphasises in *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995). Venuti claims that the translator is rendered invisible and describes the strategies through which they are made. The translated text is always taken as a second-order representation of an original. The translator, therefore, goes through a process of self-annihilation and makes himself invisible and marginalised in the process. However, meaning is "always differential and deferred, never present in original unity" (Venuti 17-18). Therefore, plurality of meaning and complexity is inherent in every interpretation of the

text. The ethics of activist translation and interpretation is central to this argument, since Eco-translation, like Ecocriticism, involves activism aiming for social change. The translator intentionally and explicitly gears towards social change and disruption of existing power dynamics/structures (Boeri and Luchner 245-46). One can cite the following words of Maria Tymoczko to defend Eco-translation.

[Eco-]Translators must make choices: they cannot capture all aspects of a source text, and their choices establish a place of enunciation, as well as a context of affiliation. Because of isomorphisms of language and asymmetries of culture, because meaning is both open and overdetermined, because texts make contradictory demands that cannot all be simultaneously satisfied (say, the demands of complex content and spare form), and because the information load associated with a source text is excessive, among other reasons, [Eco-]translators must set priorities for their translations. They must make choices about what to translate and what to silence. (453)

Review of literature

This paper has taken up the translation of a classic by Abhimanyu Unnuth (1937-2018) for close reading because he is one of the well-known authors writing on the *girmitiyas*.ⁱ His works deal with the larger community of Indian labourers relocated to Mauritius, under indenture, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to work in the sugarcane plantations due to the shortage of labour after the abolishment of slavery in 1833. His trilogy – *Lal Pasina* (1977), *Gandhi ji Bole The* (1984) and *Aur Pasina Behta Raha* (1993) – tracing the history of three generations of *girmitiyas* encompassing the ship journey crossing the ocean or *kala pani* (lit. black water) ranks among his well-known works. *Lal Pasina* depicts three generations of

girmitiyas, namely, Kundan/Devanand, Kissan and Madan as they struggle to survive and rise above their wretched lives.

The term “girmitiya” comes from ‘girmit,’ a mispronouncing of the word ‘agreement’, referring to nineteenth century and early twentieth century indentured labour from Northern India to the sugar colonies in the Caribbean and Asia Pacific regions. Though the agreement was for five years only and extended for another term, indentured labourers, mostly from lower castes/class, were a little better than slaves and most of them could never return. One of the largest mass movements in history, estimated to have 1.3 million people, and marked by issues such as displacement, alienation, culture shock etc., has been the focus of increasing attention in academic circles (Lal 1985; Dabydeen & Samaroo 1996; Kale 1998; Bharadwaj & Misrahi-Barak 2002; Carter and Torabully 2002; Mishra 2007; Kishore 2010; Kumar 2013, 2017; Rohatgi 2014; Dabydeen, Kiladeen and Ramnarine 2018; Pande 2020; Singh and Chapparban 2023)ⁱⁱ. However, even this increased attention to girmitiyas is negligible when compared to the visibility of the diaspora that had migrated to UK, USA, Canada and represented in works produced by Anglophone Indian diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and others. This body of literature has dominated academic circles, particularly postcolonial studies while the literature written by girmitiyas or on them by their descendants have not garnered much interest till recently.

Indian intellectuals of the diaspora (Appadurai, Radhakrishnan and Bhabha, among many others) presume that the lives of the Indian NRIs (the ‘new’ diaspora of ‘non-resident Indians’) constitute the self-evidently legitimate archive with which to explore histories of diasporic subjectivities. They have also tended to presume that the ‘new’ presents itself as the dominant (and indeed the more exciting) site for purposes of diasporic comment. (Mishra 4)

Vijay Mishra points out the distinction between the “old” Indian diaspora i.e., the *girimityas* and the new Indian diaspora. The first or “early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically, nineteenth-century indenture” “occupy spaces in which they interact by and large with other colonized peoples with whom they have a complex relationship of power and privilege as in Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam” (Mishra 3). The “new” diaspora or “late modern or late capitalist”, on the other hand, “traverse a different kind of topography” and “have entered metropolitan centres of Empire or other white settler countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA as part of a post-1960s pattern of global migration” (Mishra 3). The present call for Eco-translation, thus, seeks to enrich the field of Indian diasporic studies by drawing attention to works not originally written in English and serves as “a critique of the postmodern trend towards collapsing diasporic (and historical) differences” between the *girimityas* and the new Indian diaspora (Mishra 4). This paper examines select excerpts from the Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT) while proposing alternatives of the same through the ecological perspective.

Eco-translation

As mentioned earlier, Translation Studies has been influenced by the ecological turn in academic disciplines, particularly the rise and rapid progress of the field of Ecocriticism. Inspired by works like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and building on “earlier environmental scholarship in Romanticism and 19th-century American Studies, focusing on themes like regionalism and landscape aesthetics” (Felluga 97), Ecocriticism emerged as a distinct field in the last part of the previous century. Viewed initially as more practical than theoretical, Ecocriticism “has evolved by incorporating various theoretical frameworks such as Cultural Materialism, poststructuralism, phenomenology, Cognitive Studies, postcolonialism, and feminism . . . [giving] rise to new hybrid fields like eco-feminism, eco-imperialism,

eco-phenomenology, eco-semiotics, and postcolonial ecocriticism” (Felluga 97). The strong political orientation, connecting to global environmental crises and advocating for green politics and conservation, of Ecocriticism aligned perfectly with Eco-translation which sought to prioritize conveying ecological themes from source to target texts, potentially fostering ecological awareness and action over strict fidelity to the Source Text. Literary works often reflect in oblique ways the environmental issues, with pollution and environmental damage serving as prominent themes, intertwining humanity with history, nature, and urban settings. Translators face the challenge of preserving these ecological elements when transferring texts to new cultural contexts.

Michael Cronin’s *Eco-translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2017) deals for the first time at length with the intersection of translation and environmentalism, examining how translation practices can contribute to better understanding and building a richer and sustainable future. Cronin borrows the term “Eco-translation” from Clive Scott, who used it for the first time at a lecture given in the University of Exeter in 2015 and defines it as covering “all forms of translation thinking and practice that knowingly engage with the challenges of human-induced environmental change . . . how to comprehend the agents and objects of this change” (2). He further argues that translators have a responsibility of adopting an ecological perspective while translating and creating awareness in an age of the Anthropocene – “the new geological era of human-induced climate change” (Cronin 3) and the shift of humans from biological to a geological agent. Human history can no longer remain indifferent to the history of the planet. From this awareness comes the need to develop a post-anthropocentric identity which affects all human activities, including translation. Cronin goes on to discuss the situation of the translator which he says is invisible and needs recognition not just of his work but also of the process (9-10).

Since Cronin failed to lay out a clear-cut framework or strategy for Eco-translation of a text, the application of Eco-translation remains an emerging field. A few scholarly contributions like Rosanne Klaver's unpublished MA thesis, *Preserving Ecologically Beneficial Texts: Towards an Applied Approach to Ecotranslation* (2018), Hannah Bradley's article, 'Rumours of Nature: An Ecotranslation of Ulrike Almut Sandig's "so habe ich sagen gehort"' (2021) and Chengcheng You's "Who Speaks for Nature? Genre, Gender and the Eco-translation of Chinese Wild Animals" (2022) have begun to explore its practical implementation. Both Klaver and Bradley ground their analyses in the tripartite framework of Eco-translation proposed by Guillermo Badenes and Josefina Coisson (2015), employing it as a theoretical foundation for their respective case studies. Building upon the methodological precedents established by these works, this paper revisits and retranslates Lal Pasina, with a particular focus on the silencing of the natural world in previous translation, despite its prominent and agentive presence in the source text. Badenes and Coisson give three possible approaches for Eco-translation i.e., (a) rereading and retranslating literary works where the voice of nature was silenced in translation; (b) translating works that present an ecological vision and have not yet been translated; (c) and translating via manipulation works that do not originally present an ecological vision with the aim of creating a new, now ecological, text (362-65). Sanjib Sahoo has also used this model in his unpublished paper 'Greening the *Rāmāyaṇa*: An Eco-translation Perspective on the Translation(s) of Sabin Alun, the Karbi *Rāmāyaṇa*'.

This study also borrows from Arran Stibbe (2015), the useful concept of "stories we live by" which determine how one perceives the world. Stibbe stresses how Ecolinguistics analyses language from an ecological perspective to create new stories to live by while exposing and resisting damaging stories and contributing to the search for new stories depending on the ecosophy of the

analyst. It can play a major role in the reinvention of society as language shapes our ideologies and actions and draw attention to discourses and practical application of language to stories which appear to be ecologically destructive or alternatively to seek out or promote discourses that will help protect and preserve the ecology (Stibbe 5).

Abhimanyu Unnuth's *Lal Pasina* is a text about the plight of the *girmitiyas* – indentured labourers brought to work in sugarcane plantations between the 1830s to 1910s from Northern India and were taken to Mauritius, Natal, Surinam, Fiji, and British Guiana – and their struggle towards a better life and freedom. But Unnuth's narrative fails to highlight the fact that the exploitation of the *girmitiyas* went side by side with a policy of rapacious exploitation of natural resources. His narrative of human suffering fails to convey fully the manner in which the South Asia have been incorporated in the global capitalist economy based on the ruthless policy of "extractivism" which worships growth, focuses on ends (products), and obscures the means that produce those ends, like energy, fossil fuels, or humans (Cronin 33). It is in the context of "extractivism, sacrifice zones, and liquefaction of nature", that Eco-translation becomes important (Cronin 46). This paper proposes to foster and enhance ecological consciousness by drawing attention to the use of language which appears to be ecologically destructive and alternatively to search or promote discourses that will help protect and preserve the ecology and also broaden the scholarship of diasporic studies, which has earlier been anthropocentric, by adding the environmental perspective.

The following analysis examines selected passages from the English translation of *Lal Pasina*, exploring how they may be critically re-read and (re)translated through an ecological lens, thereby illuminating the text's latent ecological stance and articulating the rationale for privileging such an interpretive and translational approach.

The Human Role in Destruction:

The excerpt at the beginning of the paper already reflects how the human agency can be recovered in the destruction presented through translation. There are several instances where the author or the translator has erased the human agency.

Example 2.

ST: ईख के खेत ठीक सामने थे। वहाँ की हरियाली स्वतन्त्र थी। कुन्दन की चारपाई खिड़की के पास होने के कारण उसकी आँखें उस दुर्लभ स्वतन्त्रता को घूरा करतीं। कुछ वर्ष पहले यह हरियाली वहाँ नहीं थी। सभी कुछ देखते-ही-देखते हो गया था। (Unnuth 16)

(Eikh ke khet thik samne the. Wahan ki hariyali swatantra thi. Kundan ki charpai khirki ke pass hone ke karan uski akhein us durlabh swatantrata ko ghura karti. Kuch varsh pehle yeh hariyali wahan nahi thi. Sabhi kuch dekhte hi dekhte ho gaya tha.)

TT: From his bunk in the prison infirmary, Kundan looked out onto the lush green. It had not been a long time, but the plantations had wholly changed the landscape. (Rohatgi 21, emphasis added).

Eco-translation: From his bunk in the prison infirmary, Kundan looked out onto the lush green. It had not been a long time, but the plantations had wholly destroyed the beautiful landscape that existed earlier. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

Here, the Hindi sentence “Kuch varsh pehle yeh hariyali wahan nahi thi. Sabhi kuch dekhte hi dekhte ho gaya tha” does not show the ecological impact that the plantation industry had on the landscape. Even though in the English translation the addition of the word “plantation” has made the role of plantation in changing the landscape clear, yet it can be made more specific

by substituting the term “changed” with the term “destroyed” and adding terms like “beautiful” and “existed earlier” foregrounds the destructive impact of plantation culture.

Substituting genus for species/ giving wrong names:

Since the exact names of plant/animal species help to increase the salience by conjuring vivid images in the reader’s mind, translating these names requires a lot of careful work particularly in cases where there may not be equivalents in the target language. Very often, the translator substitutes the name of a species with a general name, thereby decreasing the salience of the species. While the translator Rohatgi has done justice in some places, in other places she has not given the correct names of the species. For instance:

Example 3.

ST: अभी बहुत दिन नहीं हुए थे। उस दिन वह गेंदे के पौधे रोप रहा था। अभी तो गेंदे के उन पौधों में पहले फूल भी नहीं आए थे। एक आदमी पगडण्डी चढ़ता हुवा ऊपर आ गया था। (Unnuth 185)

(Abhi bohut din nahi huye the. Us din woh gende ke podhe rop raha tha. Abhi to gende ke unn podhon mein pehle phul bhi nahi aye the. Ek admi pagdandi chadhata huwa upar aa gaya tha)

TT: A few weeks later, Kisan was busy planting dandelions in front of his cabin when a man appeared (Rohatgi 173).

Eco-translation: A few weeks later, Kisan was busy planting marigolds. *Those marigold plants hadn’t even flowered yet.* He climbed up the steep path/ trail. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

Example 4.

ST: मूँगफली के पौधों की जड़ में तीतरों ने बिल बना दिए थे। (Unnuth 245)

(Moongphali ke podhon ki jard main titaro ne bill bana diye the)

TT: Partridges had pecked at the roots of pistachios . . .
(Rohatgi 225, emphasis added)

Eco-translation: Partridges had pecked at the roots of peanut plants. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

In the above examples, the names of the flowers or plants have been wrongly translated. In Example 3, we can see that ‘*gende*’ has been translated as ‘dandelions’, whereas the correct name is ‘marigold.’ Similarly, in Example 4, ‘*moongphuli*’ has been translated to ‘pistachios’, which should have been ‘peanuts.’ Rohatgi has also dropped out the sentence “अभी तो गेंदे के उन पौधों में पहले फूल भी नहीं आए थे।” which may be because it seems like an unnecessary sentence yet such details about the plants should not be ignored, even if it feels like they do not add any value to the human story. Apart from such wrong translations and omissions, there are also the erasure of species as evident from the examples given below.

Example 5.

ST: पहाड़ के काफी ऊपर तक देवदारु के पेड़ थे, जो बहुत घनी दीवार का काम कर रहे थे। (Unnuth 183)

(Pahad ke kafi upar tak devadaru ke ped the, jo bohot ghani deewar ka kaam kar rahe the)

TT: The trees growing on the mountainside sheltered him from view. (Rohatgi 171)

Eco-translation: The cedar trees growing on the mountainside sheltered him from view. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

Example 6.

ST: गौतम राव का बेटा जामुन के डाली पर बैठा जोर से गाकर लोगो के हौसला को बढ़ा रहा था I (Unnuth 245)

(Gautam Rao ka beta jamun ke daali par betha jor se gaakar logo ke hosla ko barha raha tha.)

TT: Sitting on a branch, Gautam's son sang out loud to encourage those who worked. (Rohatgi 224)

Eco-translation: Sitting on a branch of a malabar plum tree, Gautam's son sang out loud to encourage those who worked. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

In both these examples, one finds that even when the author had used exact names of trees (debdaru) and (jamun), it was erased during translation by Rohatgi. Language has the power to translate the existing biological diversity into more specific terms instead of erasing or ignoring them when equivalent terms are not found. While both Unnuth and Rohatgi can be critiqued for a lack of eco-vision, and although the source text may be manipulated to some extent as Badenes and Coisson suggest (362-65), it is difficult to overlook the significant lapses in Rohatgi's translation, particularly evident in the above cited examples of omissions and misnaming. Such erasure of plants and animals as may have served the ideological purpose of different social and political formations, but in the present times, there is a need to reverse this destruction of language. From an ecological perspective, Unnuth's text suffers from the erasures of specificity creating "blandscapes" which can be removed with specific places, names, and vocabulary in place of large generic units and an attempt should be made to situate them in real-time

by creating a timeline. Through this strategic move, there will be a shift from the ideology of 'blandscape' to an ideology of regeneration. "... to use language well is to use it particularly: precision of utterance as both a form of lyricism and a species of attention" (Macfarlane 11). Roger Deakin talks about the necessity to "bring people not to just think of 'trees' as they mostly do now, but of each individual tree, and each kind of tree" (qt. Macfarlane 10-11).

Renaming the 'blandscape':

Through Eco-translation, the translator can rename the places that have remained un-named both in the ST and Rohatgi's translation which can save them from lexical abandonment or what MacFarlane calls 'blandscape' (23).

Example 7

ST: जब वे लोग...उस दूसरी कोठी से इस इलाके में आए थे, उस समय किसान दस-ग्यारह का रहा होगा ... उसके पार्श्व की पहाड़ी तो उसी समय से उसे मोहे हुए थी। ... अगर उसकी बस्ती नदी के करीब और पहाड़ी के एकदम नीचे होती तो कितना अच्छा होता! (Unnuth 39)

(Jab woh log . . . us dusri kothi se is ilake me aye . . . uss samay Kisan das gyarah ka raha hoga . . . uske pass ki Pahari toh usi samay se use mohe huyi thi . . . Agar uski basti nadi ke karib aur Pahari ke ekdum niche hota toh kitna acha hota!)

TT: He was twelve years old when his parents had left the village where he was born to come here. It was only four years later that Kissan had discovered the river...the mountain that stood in the background was beautiful. Kissan, since that day, often asked why the village hadn't been built there. (Rohatgi 41)

Eco-translation: Kisan must have been eleven or twelve years of age when they had moved from the other house to Triolet . . . The Peiter Both Mountain (Mudiya Parvaat) had attracted him since then . . . If his village had been near this river Tombeau and close to the hills, how wonderful it would have been! (Translation ours, emphasis added)

Example 8.

ST: मालगासी कैदी जाते रहे, कुछ मालाबार कैदी भीतर आनेवाले थे। ... लेकिन मालाबार नाम से भारतीयों को कैद के भीतर पाकर उसे जितनी हैरानी हुई भी, उतना ही हर्ष भी। (Unnuth 25)

(Malagasy kaidi jatey rahe, kuch Malabar kaidi bhitari ane wale the . . . lekin Malabar naam se Bharatiya ko kaid ke bhitari paakar usey jitni hairani hui bhi, utna hi harsh bhi)

TT: And when they departed, other prisoners took their place: mostly Indians from various provinces but all called Malabars . . . (Rohatgi 28)

Eco-translation: And when they departed, other prisoners took their place: mostly Indians from various provinces such as Awadh, Chota Nagpur, Bihar, Agra, Oudh etc. but all called Malabars. (Translation ours, emphasis added)

The author, Unnuth describes the landscape in general terms such as ‘river’, ‘mountain’, ‘forest’, etc., and avoided naming any of the places specifically or placing them in a particular timeline. In Example 7, we can replace the “blandscape”, by providing the places with specific names in place of large generic units. Since the text is inspired by the author’s family history, we can use the author’s birthplace, i.e., Triolet to name the localities such as the rivers and the mountains. The translator could name the mountain, for e.g. the Peiter Both Mountain, which is also known as Mudiya Pahar, shaped like the head of a man, has a very interesting folktale related to it. Similarly, in Example 8,

the translator can use the name of various provinces from where the girmitiyas migrated. Through this strategic move, there will be a shift from the ideology of blandscapes to an ideology of regeneration.

Renaming marginalised characters and giving them dialogues/ active speech:

The absence of names or generalised names of characters from the other marginalised groups in Lal Pasina can be substituted with proper names to increase their salience.

Example 9.

ST: मालगासी था वह काला परिचारक, जिसने उसके पास पहुँचकर उसके खयालों को झिंझोड़ दिया। (Unnuth 18)

(Malagasy tha veh kaala paricharak, jisne uske pass pohunchkar uske khayalo ko jhinjor diya.)

TT: He observed the Malagasy servant, a big, beefy woman . . . (Rohatgi 23)

Eco-translation: He observed the Malagasy servant, a big beefy woman . . . named Andria. (Translation ours, emphasis added)

Example 10.

ST: रेमो साहब के थक जाने पर बगल में आ खड़े हुए रामजी सरदार ने कहार को लात से पीठ के सहारे उलट दिया था। वह निश्चल था। एक-दूसरे मालगासी सरदार ने उसे पेट के सहारे कर दिया था। (Unnuth 147)

(Remo Sahab ke hath ke thak jane par bagal mein aa khare huwe Ramji sardar ne kahar ko laath se pith ke sahare ulat diya tha. Woh nischal tha. Ek dusre malagasy sardar ne use pet ke sahare kar diya)

TT: He whipped the man with a vengeance and then Raymond and Ramjee approached the man, who was lying face down. With one foot, Ramjee turned him on his back. He remained unconscious . . . Another foreman turned him on his stomach. (Rohatgi 137, emphasis added)

Eco-translation: He whipped the man with a vengeance and then Raymond and Ramjee approached the man, who was lying face down. With one foot, Ramjee turned him on his back. He remained unconscious . . . Razafison supervisor turned him back on his stomach. (Translation ours, emphasis added)

Example 11.

ST: पर किसी से कुछ नहीं हो सका था क्योंकि दो सिपाही क्रिओली में गालियाँ देते हुए सामने आ गए थे। (Unnuth 19)

(Par kisi se kuch nahi ho saka tha kyunki do sipahi creole me galiya dete huwe samne aa gaye.)

TT: The other prisoners looked on in silence, and no one had the audacity to rescue their comrade. (Rohatgi 23)

Eco-translation: However, no one had the courage to do anything because two soldiers came forward and started shouting in Creole, “bouss to liki, Taler mo Kass to liki/fees.” (Translation ours, emphasis added)

The author while highlighting the marginalised lives of the *girimityas* and their struggles in *Lal Pasina*, knowingly or unknowingly, marginalised the other non-European people. Unnuth uses the collective noun for individuals of these groups and deprives them of a name or identity. In Example 9, there is no description of the servant, and the gender is male in *Lal Pasina*. Rohatgi adds personal details of the servant making her singular, not an anonymous mass, but she has not given her a

name which can also be added to increase the salience. In Example 10, the translator can add proper names in place of the collective noun and thus in a way provide them with an identity. In Example 11, reported speech has been used in the text which is a strategy of making the marginalised characters invisible. Hence, there is a need to redeem such erasure in translation which can be achieved by changing reported speech into active speech, thereby, recovering the minority voice. Unnuth's novel subscribes to the ideological view of settlers, that the host country or "non-European lands inhabited by indigenous people or wildlife . . . [are] 'spaces', 'unused', 'underused' or 'empty' (Plumwood 53) and made fertile and productive by the hard labour of the settlers, in our case girmitiyas.

They [girmitiyas] could no longer consider Mauritius to be a foreign land after all that sweat and blood. If the country was now flourishing, fertile, and rich, it was thanks to the arms of labourers who had contributed to its prosperity. And did it not belong to them a little? 'The pride of knowing that this land is ours is worth a few difficulties,' said Kissan. 'We have suffered to make it more beautiful and now it's time to reap the fruit of our efforts'. (Rohatgi 101)

Here the use of words like "flourishing, fertile and rich" makes it seem as if the plantations or the human intervention by the girmitiyas was beneficial to the environment. The idea that by changing what was once a "barren" land, they have done a favour to the land and so they see themselves as owners/or that they should be rewarded for enriching the land. Several questions arise from such an ideology. Was the existing ecology not "flourishing" before human beings took it on themselves to change the landscape? How is it "rich" now? Who is benefitting from the present crops? We are aware of the extinction of the dodo bird by the year 1861 due to deforestation, hunting and the introduction of endomorphic species by the Dutch soldiers in the seventeenth century. This loss had affected the ecology of

Mauritius as most of the native fruits disappeared since no other bird was large enough to swallow their seeds. James Ashworth (2023) gives a list of other animals like saddle-backed Mauritius giant tortoise, the domed Mauritius giant tortoise, the Mauritian giant skink, the Round Island burrowing boa, the small Mauritian flying fox and the snail *Tropidophora carinata* doomed due to human intervention. Eco-translation is a corrective to this view while not taking away anything from the traumatic history of the girmitiyas. In fact, Eco-translation would encourage a broader understanding of the girmitiya experience and the history of these post-colonial lands.

Conclusion

To sum up, there is an urgent need for re-translation of texts like *Lal Pasina* to tell the narratives around exploitation, not just of the girmitiyas but of “small communities” (Rymer 2012) present in the novel. Cronin agrees with Ross Rhymer that without translation, the voices of all these people will forever be silenced. The right to translation is more of a broader ecological struggle as the silencing of human voices and the erasure of nature go hand in hand (147-48). Re-reading/(re)translation of girmitiya literature highlights not merely the rich historical and cultural history of the indentured labourers but brings to the notice of the Western powers whose actions had brought about anthropogenic changes in these regions whose effect continues till this date. Thus, the proposed Eco-translation would not only help to push Unnuth and other girmitiya authors into the postcolonial canon but also expose the harmful ideology of global capitalism which has survived in the prevailing shibboleths of unlimited economic growth built on dominion over natural and human resources.

We reiterate once again that giving precedence to ecological considerations might “conflict with other areas of attention that the translator may want to preserve in the

translation, such as style and internal cohesion” (Klaver 39) and may result in a different target text. If classics like Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* can be translated and retranslated into English, several timesⁱⁱⁱ over the last hundred years then surely, Abhimanyu Unnuth’s classic *Lal Pasina* deserves one more translation.

End notes

- i. Unnuth, a descendant of girmitiyas in Mauritius, began working in sugarcane fields at the age of twelve. Despite limited formal education, mostly acquired at home and in local community halls, he became a teacher and renowned writer, earning the nickname “the Premchand of Mauritius” for his resonance with the working class. Influenced by Munshi Premchand, Unnuth viewed fiction-writing as a form of resistance. With over sixty novels and various prose, poetry, and essays, he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 2014 for his significant impact on Indian literature.
- ii. Brij V Lal’s *Kunti’s Cry: Indenture Women in Fiji Plantation* (1985); Chalo Jahaji: *On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji* (2000); *Mr. Tulsi’s Store: A Fijian Journey* (2001); *Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience* (2004); *On the Other Side of Midnight: A Fijian Journey* (2005). David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo, ed. *Across the Dark Waters: Ethnicity and Indian Identity in the Caribbean* (1996); Madhavi Kale’s *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* (1998); Ashutosh Bhardwaj and Judith Misrahi-Barak (ed.) *Kalapani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India’s Perspective* (2002); Marina Carter and Khal Torabully’s *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (2002); Vijay Mishra’s *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing*

the Diasporic Imaginary (2007); Ashutosh Kumar's Anti-Indentured Bhojpuri Folk Songs and Poems from Northern India (2013); *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920* (2017); Rashi Rohatgi's *Fighting Cane and Canon: Abhimanyu Unnuth and the Case of World Literature in Mauritius* (2014); David Dabydeen, Maria del Pilar Kaladeen and Tina K. Ramnarine (ed.) *We Mark Your Memory: writing From the Descendants of Indenture* (2018); Amba Pande (ed.) *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora* (2020); Neha Singh and Sajaudeen Chapparban (ed.) *Literature of Girmitiya: History, Culture and Identity* (2023).

- iii. Tolstoy's monumental *War and Peace* has been translated into English by Clara Bell (1886), Nathan Haskell Dole (1889), Constance Garnett (1904), Leo Wiener (1904), Aylmer and Lousie Maude (1922-23), Rosemary Edmonds (1957), Ann Dunnigan (1968), Anthony Briggs (2005), Richard Peaver and Larissa Volokhonsky (2007) and Daniel H Shubin (2020)

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Comic Relief or Social Commentary? Ethical Dimensions of Humour in Disability Discourse

Smrity Jayara*

Abstract

This research paper outlines the historical portrayal of persons with disabilities in literature. It traces the discriminatory representations of persons with disabilities, which reinforce their reductionist images in society. Traditionally, characters with disabilities were assigned the stereotypical roles such as jesters, villains, or pitiable figures, that deepen the social hierarchies and perpetuate the notion of disability as “otherness.” This paper examines the complex interplay between humor and disability. Humor has been frequently employed as a tool for marginalisation, but its role has gradually evolved. This study details how the emerging discourse of stand-up comedy is beginning to challenge the existing discriminatory narratives about persons with disabilities. Humor allows comedians with disabilities to subvert stereotypes and inform societal perceptions through their unique experiences. Drawing on the scholarship of disability activists like Paul Hunt and Tom Shakespeare, this paper argues that societal discomfort with disability stems from a denial of vulnerability and mortality, which leads to exclusion and ridicule. It also emphasises the importance of the voices of individuals with disabilities in raising awareness and articulating their lived experiences. This paper advocates for a transformative approach that enables persons with disabilities to reclaim their identities. In essence, this research paper reimagines literature as a medium to foster understanding, respect, and inclusivity.

Keywords: Constructive Humour, Disability Humour, Disability Studies, Destructive Humour, Normates.

* PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Delhi.

Introduction

Persons with disabilities have been employed as stock characters in literature since ancient times. Assuming their disability as a punishment for their past sins, persons with disabilities have been treated with hostility and abandoned by mainstream society. Fabricated myths, anecdotes, jokes, and stories around disability disseminate the stereotypes surrounding the disability of a person. Assigning persons with disabilities roles of jesters, villains, or as pitiable background characters in literary works further perpetuated their reductionist images and reinforced their “otherness.” There exists a thin line between mockery and humour, and this line often gets blurred by the normatesⁱ while ridiculing the “abnormality” of the person with disability. The complex relationship between comedy and disability has endured a long and arduous journey, with persons with disabilities often positioned on the precarious edge of the comic sword to amuse the “normal” public.

Historically, individuals with disabilities have been scapegoats for jokes that devalue and disparage their identities, thus proving how disability can be the “litmus test for evaluating social structure, values and behavior” (Albrecht 73). Paul Hunt, an early disability activist and co-founder of UPIAS, in his research paper “A Critical Condition,” outlines the primary reasons for the antipathy of normates towards persons with disabilities. Hunt explains that a “deformed and paralysed body” reminds humans of their vulnerability as “people do not want to acknowledge what disability affirms—that life is tragic and we shall all soon be dead. . . shying from the disturbing reminders of unwelcome reality” (14). Tom Shakespeare, in his paper “Joking A Part,” adds to Hunt’s claim. Shakespeare conjectures that maybe the denial of their vulnerability, incompetence, and frailty is what normates are projecting on the “others”:

If impairment and illness challenge our sense of selves and remind us of our mortality, perhaps this is threatening or difficult to deal with, and necessitates exclusion and ridicule. Extreme physical difference is disturbing to our expectations of order and normality, and convention, and as Mary Douglas reminds us, anomaly demands a response, whether this is violence or veneration, expulsion or sanctification. (Shakespeare 4)

People with disabilities have endured being the targets of jokes that undermine their worth and validate societal biases. Article 8 (“Awareness-raising”) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006, aims to “foster respect,” “combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices,” create awareness regarding the “capabilities and contributions of persons with disabilities,” and “promote positive perception” of them (8). To achieve the goals mentioned in this Article, it is persons with disabilities themselves who need to step forward to raise awareness and sensitise the masses. The ability of a “normal” individual to objectively understand and address the issues faced by persons with disabilities may not be as practical as the firsthand experiences and perspectives of those who have personally struggled with disability. It is through accepting their own identity that individuals with disabilities are empowered to articulate their concerns and identify the oppressive structures that restrict their full participation in society.

To challenge prevailing myths and taboos, individuals with disabilities must actively subvert these narratives and create their own space within society. Rosemarie Garland Thomson emphasises the necessity for persons with disabilities to navigate social relationships to be recognised as fully human by “normates” (non-disabled individuals). She writes, “To be

granted fully human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humour, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort” (Thomson 13). If persons with disabilities want to engage in society, they must develop interpersonal skills to put their audience at ease. Tom Shakespeare explains that their abnormality is invisible to a person with an impairment, but to a stranger, the difference can be overwhelming (5). According to him, “the disabled person must find a way of acknowledging the difference, showing that it is not important and that the interaction can now progress” (5). The initial stigma of disability needs to be neutralised to initiate comfortable relationships.

Comedy can potentially serve as a tool for integrating persons with disabilities into mainstream society. The underlying irrationality behind random thoughts and misconceptions can be exposed through humour, allowing for an alternative and more subjective understanding of reality. Disability, when presented through comedy, can be portrayed as an intriguing and diverse way of experiencing life, contributing to a multifaceted approach to human existence (Reid et al. 629). As a vehicle for communication, comedy can play a crucial role in subverting, critiquing, challenging, and countering the prevailing misconceptions and stereotypes associated with disability. Disability studies scholars Ewa McGrail and Alicja Reiger, in their research paper “Humour in Literature about Children with Disability: What are We Seeing in this Literature?” state that humour helps relieve stress, bridge differences, and facilitate social and developmental interactions. According to McGrail and Reiger, humor becomes the “coping mechanism, a communication strategy, or a means to perceive and communicate to others the positive aspects of their lives” (2).

Throughout history, the portrayal of persons with disabilities in denigrating caricatures has served a dual purpose: entertaining the “normates” and perpetuating prejudices and stereotypes about disability. In their paper “John Callahan’s Pelswick Cartoon & a New Phase of Disability Humour,” Beth Haller and Sue Ralph outline four phases of disability humour that categorise the nature of humour used about persons with disabilities. These phases offer insight into the evolving nature of disability humour over the decades.

The initial two phases are characterised by Haller and Ralph as “destructive humour,” which involves eliciting laughter from normates at the expense of persons with disabilities. By understanding the evolution of disability humour, it becomes evident how comedy has been used to marginalise and devalue individuals with disabilities throughout different historical contexts. In the first phase, individuals with disabilities were fabricated as “representative fools” and exhibited in institutions or freak shows, presenting their deformed bodies to a “normal” audience. The second phase of disability humour is marked by defamatory jokes created by non-disabled individuals about people with disabilities, serving to belittle them based on their limitations. These patronising jokes have been categorised into various genres, such as Helen Keller jokes, sick jokes, and quadriplegic jokes, all aimed at mocking the perceived inadequacies of persons with disabilities (Haller and Ralph par.7). These historical phases of disability humour highlight the demeaning and derogatory treatment of persons with disabilities through humour, perpetuating negative stereotypes and reinforcing societal prejudices.

People with disabilities control the third and fourth phases of disability humour. These last two phases set the grounds for “constructive humour” that “creates positive environments where people support each other, promotes self-esteem and creates mutually beneficial connections” (Baum 4). In the third

phase, humour serves as a means of entertainment, but it primarily allows non-disabled people to understand the issues related to disability in a comprehensive context. In this phase, individuals with disabilities have to take responsibility and employ satire to create and articulate their experiences. Their descriptions aim to draw attention to the social barriers and discriminatory attitudes perpetuated by normates that hinder their personal development and advancement. Disability humour becomes an arena where persons with disabilities and non-disabled individuals have a role to play. In the latter two phases identified by Haller and Ralph, persons with disabilities take center stage, challenging reductionist narratives imposed upon them. They strive to shed light on their unique concerns and offer subjective perspectives on various matters concerning disability.

In the fourth phase, a shift occurs from a disability-focused approach to an inclusive and integrated approach in the realm of disability humour. This phase dissolves the topic of disability into the diverse humour panorama, making the person with disability an active participant in the humour landscape, while subtly emphasising “normalcy, equality and ‘bold honesty’” (Lockyer 1400). This integrated approach seeks to normalise the inclusion of disability and humour, promoting equal representation and a more authentic and candid portrayal of persons with disabilities in comedic contexts.

The twenty-first century is witnessing the coming-out of the “others” of society and voicing their concerns. Ellen Samuels, in her paper “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming Out,” explains “coming out” as “a process of redefinition of one’s personal identity through rejecting the tyranny of the normate, positive recognition of impairment and embracing disability as a valid social identity” (319). She further explains that coming out implies that the “disabled person no longer regards disability as a reason for self-disgust, or as

something to be denied or hidden, but rather as an imposed oppressive social category to be challenged and broken down” (319). In this context, humour plays a vital role in promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities into the mainstream by drawing the general public’s attention towards previously taboo topics. Tom Shakespeare, supporting the comic stance for expression, writes that persons with disabilities have gradually accepted their impairments and successfully overcome the consequential impediments, proving that it does not undermine their subjectivity or possibility (51). Disability humour, thus, marks “the boundaries between cultural groups and communities and as the social glue that holds them together” (Albrecht 67).

At its core, humour can alleviate tension and anxiety, allowing for smoother interactions where individuals do not feel obligated to empathise overly or become overly self-conscious in their approach. Granting normates the freedom to talk and laugh about their disability establishes a rapport and eases communication to overcome the entrenched stigma around this topic. However, it is essential to highlight that invoking laughter about disability requires the direct involvement of persons with disabilities in creating comedic content. Without the endorsement and participation of persons with disabilities, such jokes can be perceived as insulting and patronising (Haller and Ralph par. 9). The active engagement of individual with disabilities ensures that the comedic material remains authentic, respectful, and sensitive to their experiences and perspectives.

Literature is crucial in initiating and disseminating knowledge about the subjective understanding of disability while educating normates on effectively addressing this topic. Children born with impairments may develop resilience against verbal abuse, but those who acquire disabilities later in life often face disapproval from their peers, leading to depression and insecurity. In the twenty-first century, authors have adeptly

portrayed the challenges faced by children with disabilities and their subsequent journey of overcoming obstacles to find their place in society. These literary works not only shed light on the hardships endured by characters with disabilities but also feature confident and empowered protagonists who subtly critique the ignorance of the normates.

Accepting one's disability is the beginning of the struggles faced by individuals with disabilities. They must also navigate an environment that disables them and contend with the conventional outlook of society. Literature vividly describes the tribulations experienced by protagonists with disabilities, with some works showcasing protagonists who confidently challenge societal norms and mock the ignorance of normates. However, accepting their disability does not mark the end of the journey for individuals with disabilities. They must actively strive to create awareness and carve out a space for themselves within society.

To achieve mainstream inclusion, individuals with disabilities must engage and interact with their "normal" peers, conveying that they do not seek pity or sympathy but desire equal treatment. Humour is a powerful tool for persons with disabilities to captivate their audience, critique stereotypes surrounding disability, express their frustrations comically, and educate others about the topic's fallacies and misconceptions. By employing humour, individuals with disabilities can grab their audience's attention, challenge societal stereotypes, and foster a greater understanding of disability.

In Josh Sundquist's novel *Love and First Sight* (2017), the protagonist Will Porter, a character with visual impairment, offers a realistic portrayal of the experiences of a visually impaired individual attending a mainstream school. Having spent the first sixteen years of his life in an institution for children with visual impairments, Will is determined to break

out of his “blind bubble” and pursue his dream of becoming a journalist (Sundquist 10).

The narrative of *Love and First Sight* captivates readers through Will’s commentary, which satirises the ignorant perceptions of “normal” individuals around him. The novel begins with Will being escorted to his class by the school’s Vice Principal, Mr. Johnston. Will is resolute in his desire to blend in with his “normal” classmates and not allow his disability to define his identity. However, his oblivious Vice Principal inadvertently embarrasses him by drawing attention to his disability from the outset. As Mr. Johnston guides Will, he loudly announces, “Clear a path, people! Blind student coming through! Blind student coming through!” (Sundquist 12). The Vice Principal’s declaration blatantly highlights Will’s blindness as a defining characteristic. In response, Will sarcastically confides in the readers, “Wow, thanks, Mr. Johnston. I’m sure this is gaining me so many popularity points at my new school. My election as Prom King is now all but assured” (Sundquist 12). Mr. Johnston’s insensitivity persists as he introduces Will to his classmates. Despite the offensiveness of the situation, the author’s use of side commentary allows Will to mock his teacher’s ignorance, turning the scenario comical. The episode unfolds as follows:

“This is Will, a student who has transferred to our school this year. He’s blind.” Perhaps because this is English class, he adds a helpful definition of the word: “He can’t see anything... nothing at all.” He pauses to allow the gravity of my tragic situation to sink in. “Life is very difficult for him. Please offer him your assistance whenever you can, because—” (Sundquist 12)

Unable to listen to this gibberish any longer and feeling that the Vice-Principal's speech was making everyone uncomfortable, Will intervenes and steps forth to introduce himself. Will tackles his uncomfortable situation by humoring his readers with his teasing commentary on the insensible approach of his teacher while taking charge of the narrative.

Will has been portrayed as a determined and ambitious young man who yearns to venture into the mainstream and lead a normal routine life. On the other hand, Mr. Johnston represents the archetypal uninformed "normal" individual who lacks understanding about how to approach individuals like Will and their impairments. Despite such callous reactions from the mainstream population, Will remains undeterred and becomes even more determined to participate in society actively.

Literature concerning persons with disabilities is increasingly incorporating comedic elements to highlight the uninformed behavior displayed by normates. Humour can be valuable in facilitating interactions between the person with disability and their non-disabled peers. Will Porter acknowledges the power of jokes in subtly and sharply conveying, "It's amazing how jokes can teach you the things people think but are too polite to say aloud, prejudices I assume other kids absorb with the help of their eyes—racism, sexism, and the like" (Sundquist 26). During initial interactions, non-disabled individuals may hesitate to approach persons with disabilities, fearing that they may inadvertently appear overly inquisitive or insensitive. Therefore, people with disabilities will have to initiate discussions to alleviate tension and create an environment conducive to meaningful conversations. For encouraging interactions, Albrecht mentions that humour performs the mediating role that "allows us to understand better the lives and trajectories of disabled people; to understand what it is like to span two worlds and cultures. Disjunctions between these two worlds are the basis of humour" (72). Thereby,

individuals with disabilities possess the agency to negotiate, renegotiate, and co-construct societal expectations and beliefs regarding disability. As such, they play a crucial role in initiating dialogue and bringing the larger society into the conversation.

In the twenty-first century, a new form of discourse known as “stand-up comedy” is emerging as a powerful tool for facilitating the mainstream inclusion of marginalised individuals. This trend is gaining popularity due to its adaptability, ease of organisation, and ability to convey messages in a fair and accessible manner. Stand-up comedians who perform solo acts have the freedom to communicate openly, drawing from their subjective experiences to elaborate on various topics. The immediate response from the audience further enhances the effectiveness of this platform. Performers can gauge the audience’s reaction in real-time to determine whether they enjoy the performance while also understanding the context and expectations. The comedic nature of this platform grants presenters an “interactional power,”ⁱⁱ allowing them to exert control over their audience while asserting their self-identity and challenging their status as oppressed voices in society (Lockyer 1402).

Stand-up comedy provides performers with disabilities a platform to share their experiences, offering a refreshing departure from their stereotypical portrayal as weak and dependent individuals. According to Sharon Lockyer, stand-up comedy has three key performative features. The first feature is the “authentic” expression of disability by individuals with disabilities. Through their performances, comedians with impairments “present an insider, although not essentialized, perspective, blurring the boundaries of the historical Us-Them dichotomy” (Reid et al. 630). Descriptions from people with disabilities make it apparent that impairment is a regular aspect of their existence, and it is “not unspeakable or unacceptable, but quotidian and banal” (Shakespeare 7). According to Teresa

Milbrodt, being the subject of a joke also represents the agency that persons with disabilities have for making fun of their regular mishaps (par. 3). Reid et al. elaborate, “By shifting from victim to perpetrator, they [persons with disabilities] undermine the power of people who laugh at them. They emerge as capable people who find life’s predicaments amusing” (635).

Lockyer identifies “reversal disability discourse” as the second key feature of performing stand-up comedy. Reverse humour is a discourse whose roots can be traced to that of an earlier discourse that “uses identical signs but which employs these signs for a reverse semantic effect” (Weaver 32). The semantic reversal can be created by changing the social dynamics of the joke teller. This discourse uses the “comic rhetorical strategy” to expose the flawed assumptions and ignorant comments that non-disabled people make while interacting with individuals with disabilities. By employing this methodology, comedians draw attention to the disabling social structures and challenge the conventional perspectives of non-disabled individuals. Through comedic rebuttals, they effectively counter the antagonistic perceptions of the “normal” public, utilising the paradoxical nature of humour to create an impact. Disability humour, according to Albrecht, “raises a hidden paradox” that can be uncanny for the normates as they cannot grasp “what is so funny about having a disability when others think that it is a tragedy” (67). Tom Shakespeare adds to this context:

. . . jokes between disabled people about the limitations and unpredictabilities of impairment achieve much of their comic power because they are so shocking to non-disabled people, who can imagine nothing less funny than extreme physical differences. Reversal of expectation is always richly comedic, and there is no greater reversal than treating what is

commonly represented as a tragedy as if it is a farce. (7)

The third interconnected performative feature of stand-up comedy is the concept of “shared laughter” (Lockyer 1407). For a comedian, establishing a connection with the audience is paramount. The comedian creates an environment where everyone can relate to the shared experiences, find humour in the jokes, and grasp the underlying messages. These performances foster a sense of “laughing with” rather than “laughing at” individuals with disabilities. The performer is tasked with building a community where everyone is pragmatically educated about the experiences of people with disabilities. While laughing conveys that the artist with a disability brings different experiences and perceptions about the world, and that this is not a factor that should impede communication (Milbrodt par. 20).

Through comedy, people with disabilities can find validation, support, and a sense of belonging. They can connect with others who share their struggles, triumphs, and humour. This shared experience fosters a bond and a sense of camaraderie among community members. Moreover, comedy clubs and events promoting inclusivity and accessibility send a powerful message of acceptance and equality. By providing accessible venues, such as wheelchair ramps or sign language interpreters, they demonstrate their commitment to creating an inclusive space for all individuals, regardless of their abilities. This sense of community-building is crucial, as it helps combat social isolation and creates a supportive network for individuals who may often feel marginalised or misunderstood in mainstream society.

Members of the society have to be sensitised about the experiences and perspectives of persons with disabilities to create an inclusive educational and work environment. As

McGrail and Reiger state, “Reading about characters with disabilities, who like their able-bodied peers can appreciate and produce humour, can help children and adolescents to see individuals with disabilities as complete people” (16). Disability Humour is a contemporary art form that is emancipatory in nature and encourages the coming out of persons with disabilities, to make society accept differences. Thus humour “is not a sign of repressed ideas or feelings, but on the contrary, it reflects a full awareness of the circumstances one is facing on regular basis” (Moran par. 9). Usage of humour makes normates comfortable about interacting with persons with disabilities, and it also motivates them to accept themselves and become confident about their identity. Gary L. Albrecht mentions, “disability humour may convey group solidarity, articulate inherent value structures, put experiences in context and ease the difficulties experienced in everyday life” (67). Comedy, thereby, becomes a medium to rationally counter the reductionist narratives, change the pessimistic attitude of society, and string together the different communities of society.

Endnotes

- i. “Normates”: Rosemarie Garland Thomson introduces the term “normate” in her work *Extraordinary Bodies*. She defines “normate” as “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8).
- ii. Interactional Power: Interactional power is “created when a participant is perceived by others to be more dominant, hold higher status, or be an expert or an authority” (Simmons-Mackie and Damico 87).

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Survival as Subversion: Female Subjectivity and Everyday Realities in Chandrika Balan's Short Stories

Jaidev Bishnoi*

Abstract:

This paper focuses on how Chandrika Balan—a noted contemporary bilingual writer from Kerala—engages with female subjectivity and everyday realities in her stories. Though she distances herself from the tradition of ‘radical’ feminist writing, or what is often referred to as *pennezhuthu* in Malayalam, her innovative and creative reworking of women’s lived experience and survival tactics makes her stories not only a powerful site of negotiation for women’s concerns but also a strong critique of patriarchal systems. While renouncing the convenient practice of perceiving women as “feminine” or “feminist”, Balan creates complex female subjects who are subversive without being openly rebellious. The power of her writing comes from the fact that she does not allow any theoretical template to straightjacket women’s lived experience, rather foregrounds it by making an effective use of humor, sarcasm, and irony. The paper will primarily focus on four of her short stories, namely “The Story of a Poem”, “The People’s Court”, “The Fifth One”, and “The Optical Illusion.”

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Malayalam short story, *Pennezhuthu*, Women’s writing in Kerala

Introduction

The history of modern women’s writing in Kerala goes back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Though the early writings fall short of fundamentally challenging the entrenched patriarchal structures in Malayalee society, they usher in a notable tradition of literary and creative ventures by women in

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

Malayalam revolving around women's concerns. This tradition becomes more diverse and confident in the post-independence period with the emergence of prominent fiction writers such as R. Lalitambika Antarjanam, K. Saraswati Amma, Rajalakshmi, Madhavikkutty, among others. However, it was only after the 1990s that women's anti-patriarchal writing is said to have acquired a place of its own as the number of writers receiving critical acclaim and popularity increased significantly. As J. Devika observes, women's writing became "a central topic of concern in the Malayalam literary public for the first time in the 1990s" (48).

Much of this concern was initially triggered by the term *pennezhuthu* (woman writing), coined by the radical left poet and critic K. Satchidanandan as part of his extended introduction to a collection of short stories, *Paapathara* (1990), by Sarah Joseph, a well-known feminist activist and writer. Satchidanandan derived this concept as a direct translation of French expression *écriture féminine* to refer to a particular strand of radical feminist aesthetics which he perceived for the first time in Malayalam in the stories of Sarah Joseph. To him, this aesthetics is constituted by at least two vital aspects of radical feminism: One, "the deconstruction of the structures of patriarchy" and two, "the reconstruction of the feminine experience hidden, repressed, or ignored in the past" (qtd. in Devika 50). Satchidanandan hails Sarah Joseph for her "clear recognition that if the women must break the silence imposed on her for centuries, [she must] forge a new language" (qtd. in Devika 52). He considers Sarah Joseph as "the first conscious feminist in Malayalam fiction" who has discovered "a woman's language, a poetic semiotics" which is centred around "the female body" and which is "adequate to express women's oppression, protest against patriarchy, [and] desire and emancipation" (Satchidanandan 14-15).

Pennezhuthu faced stiff opposition immediately after its coinage, but most of the early criticism came from the conservative quarters.ⁱ However, later scholarship has highlighted certain fundamental theoretical lacunas in Satchidanandan's conception of pennezhuthu. G. Arunima points out that Satchidanandan fails "to engage with how pennezhuthu may contest or transform aanuezhuthu (men's writing)", and only replicates a mainstream position which implies that there is ezhuthu (writing), which is "gender neutral, value free", and there is "pennuezhuthu, which is simply a set and a form of feminine expression" (178). In her detailed assessment of Satchidanandan's essay, J. Devika highlights his ambiguous use of feminist theory and its problematic implications. The manner in which Satchidanandan imports Elaine Showalter's teleological model of women's writing ('feminine', 'feminist' and 'female') in the context of women's writing in Malayalam sets up "an implicit standard of assessment" in which women authors are "placed in specific categories according to the 'levels of progress' attained by their 'consciousness'" (56). Though Satchidanandan does not explicitly state a universal model for feminist literature, his perception of Sarah Joseph's writing as "the pinnacle of feminist progressive consciousness" in the Malayalam literature projects such a model (56-57). Satchidanandan's attempt to trace historically the present 'feminist subject' as epitomised by Sarah Joseph and explicated by his idea of Pennezhuthu not only renders "invisible" the works of female writers of the past but also dehistoricizes Sarah Joseph's writing and removes it from "its immediate contexts" (21).

Despite these problematic propositions, pennezhuthu soon gained popularity and institutional acceptance among the then dominant radical left academic circles and a group of creative writers. Though invented in the context of Sarah Joseph's writing, it became not only a yardstick to assess the works of existing writers, but also a prescription for the emerging writers

to portray and foreground women's bodily experience, sexuality, desire, and resistance to patriarchy in a particular manner. As it came to uphold an idealized combination of radical political goals and an experimental style of writing as the model of women's writing, the term met with vehement opposition from a set of writers which included Chandrika Balan, Gracy, A.S. Priya, and Gita Hiranyanⁱⁱ who categorically rejected such an imposition on their writings.

Pennezhuthu – 'A Gate Bigger than a House'

Chandrika Balan is a noted bilingual writer who writes both in her native language, Malayalam, and the language of her profession as a teacher, English. Although she began writing at the age of twelve, she had to stop at about twenty due to the scathing attacks she received for portraying "the wild zones of female experiences" in her story "Maalathinu Veliyil" ("Author's" ix). Balan resumed writing after a long break in 1993 under the pen-name Chandramati – with which she is primarily known to her Malayalam readers. By this time pennezhuthu had already become the dominant model of women's writing in Kerala. Balan distances herself from this label because, in her view, it denotes not only "sexual politics" but also "leftist politics" in Kerala, and therefore not acceptable to writers like her who wish "to stay above any party politics" ("Search" 346). She points out that barring a few writers like Sarah Joseph, "the space of pennezhuthu is now overcrowded with women writers who throw literary merit to the wind" and "compose dull theoretical stories of female heroes at war with society" (349). Instead of a strong anti-men and activist approach of radical feminism, Balan prefers a writing-style marked by "invisibility of the author, indirect narration, and the tendency to compromise" (344). She declares that "it is not the conscious aim of women's writing to idealize women", but to be "thoroughly unsympathetic" in exposing women's self (346).

Balan's avowed rejection of the mantle of *pennezhuthu* or radical feminism can also be seen in the context of the unease shown by several prominent female writersⁱⁱⁱ towards the label 'feminism' before the turn of the century because it came with its own risks and disadvantages. The well-known author Nabaneeta Dev Sen plainly articulates this unease, "most of us wish to belong to the mainstream, rather than be ghettoized and go down in history branded as someone who belonged to the margins" (8). The unease becomes all the more acute when the label is invented or proposed by a male counterpart as in the case of Chandrika Balan. Balan refers to Satchidanandan's essay as "a gate bigger than a house" (qtd. in Devika 59), hinting at not only the size of the essay but also the manner in which the male critic's interpretation was prioritised over the text. J. Devika insists that Balan's response to *pennezhuthu* comes as a reaction against the skewed power relations between the male critic and female author, quite evident in the present case as well as in the entire Malayalam literary world (60). She also emphasises that the resistance put up by Balan to *pennezhuthu* should be recognised as "the rejection of consecration/silencing within the radical left homoaesthetic circle"^{iv} on the one side and on the other "to the very form of homoaesthetic circle" (62).

For Chandrika Balan (and also others), this rejection of *pennezhuthu* does not mean that she cherishes "any illusion that all is well with women" ("Search" 349), or her critique of patriarchal structures is compromised. Rather, it allows her the freedom to respond to women's oppression in her own manner, endowing her writing a subversive aesthetic of its own. Most of her stories present an unresolved conflict between the conventional role of woman as a good wife or mother and her aspirations and dreams as an individual. Balan does not associate femininity with weakness or docility in the manner of anti-essentialist thinkers, nor does she glorify it as a powerhouse in the essentialist manner. Most of her female protagonists arguably traverse the space between the 'feminine' and the

‘feminist’, combining the traits of both without essentially becoming any one of the two. In other words, her protagonists are not social rebels or committed revolutionaries, nor are they docile weaklings. They are full-bodied human beings who want to live a dignified life of love, peace and harmony, but at the same time intensely aware that they are denied the same because they are women. Balan’s stories do not offer any ready-made template of solutions, rather provoke the readers to recognise the existence of women’s oppression within the gendered space of our society.

An intimate story of a poem

Balan’s story “The Story of a Poem” revolves around the lives of three characters – the protagonist Sushama who is a housewife, her office-going husband Reghuraman and his colleague at the office, Shriranjini. Sushama is an educated woman who nurtures the habit of writing poetry, but she only writes secretly because the domestic space which she inhabits leaves little room for her to do so publicly. Her husband wants to see her only as an ideal homemaker, caring mother and faithful wife. She attunes herself to these roles and performs all her homely chores. Nevertheless, when she is alone at home, the same space becomes ‘a room of her own’ and is used to give vent to her writing instinct. Driven by this impulse, Sushama writes a romantic and nostalgic poem about her former lover. The reader’s attention is specifically drawn towards how Sushama writes along with her kitchen work, “Look at her, writing the poem at the kitchen table on which lie scattered some blank sheets of paper, a broken pencil, a knife, vegetables, sliced and otherwise, and few plates” (“Story” 92). The narratorial voice closely follows what Sushama does in the private space, while also eavesdropping into the inner recesses of her mind.

Though the “hostile and suspicious world” does not give her adequate freedom to write, the act of writing is empowering and

makes her happy (92). After the completion of her poem in bits and pieces throughout the day, “there is no trace of any fatigue” even though she has “risen with the sun and moved with it” (97). Writing endows “a celestial rupture on her face” like “an apsara who has come to the green woods to give birth to a baby in secret” (97). She forgets her drudgery and mundane existence when she communicates with her former lover through her poem. Imagining the caresses of her lover, she feels sensations in her body without any sense of guilt. Her poem becomes a space of rendezvous with her lover in secret, which could not be peeped into by the voyeuristic world. The process of writing a poem transforms her into an individual who cares for nobody but herself. She does not want to remember the moments spent with her husband and wishes to be completely with herself. Responding to the memories of her husband, she bursts out, “go away, ...don’t stand in the way of my poem. Get lost!” (96). But there is an anti-climax to her ecstatic state. As soon as her husband and children arrive, she tears down the poem and throws it out of the window, “for she is the ideal wife and the ideal mother” (98). Hardly anyone misses the effective use of sarcasm and pathos here. However, before the story ends, the reader is reminded that Sushama’s poem can be retrieved from the pages of Balan’s story. Thus, though Sushama’s poem could not see the light of the day, her emotions and aspirations are preserved by Balan’s act of writing.

Balan’s story makes an interesting contrast with Sarah Joseph’s story “Inside Every Women-writer” in which the protagonist ultimately walks out on her husband overcoming her attachment to her children and house to claim her own world (Joseph 68-9). The manner in which Balan’s story ends where the protagonist continues with her role as a wife and mother instead of renouncing these roles assigned to her by the patriarchal society might not find favor with some avowed radical feminists. However, the story does exhibit strong anti-patriarchal impulse while remaining faithful to the lived

experience of a middle-class educated house-wife. Though Sushama is not able to renounce her familial duties, she is not tied to the ideals of motherhood or wifehood in any idealistic manner. When she writes poems expressing her suppressed desire, her transgressive side overpowers her wifely docility and comes to the fore in a subversive manner. She is not bothered about anybody when a new line of poem comes to her mind. She comes out of the bathroom “naked, running” and “shaking her dripping hair” to write down that line (95). Sushama expresses her tenderness towards her former lover and fantasizes about him without any sense of guilt or sin.

Balan’s story reflects the confines faced by women writers in the hegemonic masculine environment. Balan’s own writing career was ruptured multiple times, first because her family did not like that “an unmarried girl” went into it, and latter under the pressure of the self-assumed role of “the perfect woman” (“Author’s” ix-x). It is indicated in the story that though Sushama’s poem is not a profound piece of literature, it deserves special attention because it is written by a silenced woman^v (92). As Urvashi Butalia points out, notwithstanding the strangulation, the writing of poems “provides the oxygen” in the life of Sushama, otherwise it would have been very difficult for such sensitive women to live in the claustrophobic atmosphere of family and society^{vi} (10).

The story also exposes the patriarchal double standards prevailing in the middle-class society of India, where men prefer to marry a girl like Sushama who they think is docile and “excellent at culinary arts” instead of a truly modern woman who demands equal rights (“Story” 93). This is reflected in the character of Reghuraman who appreciates a radical woman like Shriranjini with whom he can go to a coffee house or chat over a cup of tea, but as a wife his first choice is Sushama who “does not talk much and follows his instructions” (93). He even fantasizes “different parts of her [Shriranjini’s] body as if they

belonged to Sushama” (93). But as a wife she is unthinkable, “let feminists be the wives of others” (94). Maitrayee Chaudhuri underlines the typical Indian mentality when she remarks that “the ideal woman” is considered “a judicious blend of traditional qualities of domestic skills, knowledge of religious rituals ... and modern abilities acquired through education and employment opportunities” (“Indian” 278).

The Silver Platter of Salome

“The People’s Court” raises similar issues by making an effective use of irony and satire. The story is in the form of a mock inquisition in which the protagonist Mable Simon faces a charge for not discharging her “worldly duties faithfully” (“People’s” 58). She is an employed woman and a writer who writes under the pen-name Salome, but that does not hold any value for her family. During his testimony before the jury, her husband Michael Joseph describes that she has been “a very strange girl right from the beginning” who has “her own opinions and theories about everything” and is “not interested in anything a woman ought to be interested in” (58). He blames her because of her preoccupation with reading and her inattention to household chores such as keeping the house cob-web free, making his bed, cooking his favorite dishes, and for not fulfilling her family responsibilities properly (59). In his opinion, she is good for nothing as she does not know basic things like cooking a chicken curry or sambar or making pickles. He goes to the extent of saying that she does not “even know how to deliver a baby in a normal manner” pointing to the fact that their son was born of a Caesarian section (59). Like Sushama’s husband Reghuraman, Michael Joseph also wants her to be a good wife, mother and homemaker without recognising her individual aspirations.

The jury takes a serious note of these accusations and questions her on several things such as whether she understands

the meaning of being a woman, whether she is religious, etc. It bombards her with questions to investigate her knowledge on things like the price of gas cylinder and broiler chicken, household remedy for wasp-bite, the quantity of washing powder used in a month, name of the nearest grocery store, the vegetable used for aviyal, the market which sells fish at the lowest price, etc. (60). When she is not able to answer these questions, the jury comes to the conclusion that her “irresponsible ways” have caused Michael “huge grief and despair” (61). It asks her what she has “done to make [her] ... life as woman meaningful” (61). The reader cannot fail to notice the irony when the jury does not attach any importance to the facts revealed by her about the double-promotion in her office, the money she earns, or the publication of her writings. In the jury’s opinion, these things are of no use to her husband and son, who should be her primary responsibility. The satirical strain which runs throughout the story reaches its climax in the verdict announced by the jury. The jury dictates—

Put down the silver platter of Salome and be only Mrs. Michael Joseph, wife to Michael Joseph and mother to his son. Learn to cook chicken-curry and sambar, his favorite dishes. Wash his clothes. Keep the house clean for him. Look after his son. Treat your career as a mere hobby. Be a good wife and good mother, unto the last day of your life on this earth (61).

The story exposes the patriarchal mind-set of a conventional society. In the words of K. Satchidanandan, this story “sums up the situation of a creative and intelligent woman in a conservative patriarchal society whose norms are reinforced by religion” (21). The unnamed jury represents the written and unwritten codes to be followed by women in such a society. In the verdict of the jury, the husband is considered the centre around which the life of the wife should revolve. Even the child she gives birth to is not considered her own but of her husband.

There is also a hypocrisy lying at the heart of such a mind-set. The jury boasts that they are aware of the likes of Freud and Fromm, and give sexual education to their children from the very start. But as far as their views on women's role in society are concerned, they are still archaic and retrograde.

Mable might not live up to the expectations of her husband or the jury, but she shines in the eyes of the readers for the firmness of her character. She puts up her case resolutely without being subdued by the jury, and registers her protest matter-of-factly against the accusations levelled against her. She is not openly rebellious like Sushma, but her inner strength and independent thinking are at display throughout the story. Balan also draws our attention towards Mable's writerly instinct which, like Sushama's, overtakes her mind when she is alone. However, while in case of Sushama the writerly impulse is kept hidden from the world, whereas Mable is already an established writer under her pen-name, and vividly expresses her creative side in front of her husband and the jury. She tells how her mind is filled with "the state of bliss" when she encounters "the black and terrible beauty of the night", and how "slowly Salome wakes up inside [her]" and "begins her dance ... with a silver platter in hand" (59).

The Sigh of Savitri

"The Fifth One" is again an experimental story in which Balan enters the domestic zone to showcase the loveless and taken-for-granted life of a housewife. The story revolves around the suicide attempt by Savitri who decides to end her life after twelve years of her dreary marriage to Satyanesan. She does not want her family to be involved in "the scandal of suicide", hence plans everything meticulously to make her suicide under the running train look like an accidental death (70). Savitri does not directly accuse anyone for her intended suicide, nor does the narrator tell us anything about it except for the ironical remark

that which woman is not “looking for a means to escape” (71). However, it soon becomes evident that it is her undignified existence which has compelled her to take such a step. The reader witnesses the protagonist approaching towards the moment of her planned death on the railway track, but there is an anti-climax in the end. The train falls off the bridge before it reaches the spot where Savitri is standing, leaving her unhurt. Barring a few indirect hints, Balan leaves it upon the reader to surmise the whole situation. When the train is just about to hit Savitri, a “sigh rises from her unawares, scattering the molecules in the air” (76). Since there was no tornado witnessed by anyone, the train is supposed to have been swept over by the woman’s sigh. Experts presume that some “tornadoes cannot be perceived by the naked eye; just like a sigh” (76).

The author has apparently used suicide as a tragicomic trope instead of a realistic incident. However, the story powerfully divulges the suffocating and loveless environment of the household which can force a woman to take such a step. In contrast to the mythological couple Savitri and Satyavan who are known for their love and devotion to each other, the husband and wife in this story share a monotonous relationship sans any warmth. Though she tries to fulfil her duties as a wife and mother, she is often accused of being “irresponsible” in front of other members of her family. She always remains in the want of love, respect and dignity as an individual. On the day of her supposed suicide, she asks her husband to have breakfast together only to be snubbed in return, “What’s so special about today? Is it time for my obsequies, or yours?” (74). Since it is the last day of her life, she feels a strong desire to touch her husband, the man who “destroyed her virginity...gave her two children in quick succession...[and] then withdrew into his naturally monotonous existence and threw her out into the foul world of duty” (74-5). As Balan’s other protagonists, Savitri too does not openly rebel against society or aspire for “the liberated status of the New Woman”. She only wants to “live in peace with

a fistful of dreams” (75-6), but even that is not granted to her by the patriarchal society.

I Know How to Live My Life

In “The Optical Illusion” too, Chandrika Balan presents similar patterns of patriarchal attitudes towards women. The story revolves around a young unmarried female narrator, belonging to a lower middle-class family comprising four unmarried sisters including the protagonist, their widowed mother and an elder brother who is the head of the family. She is dissatisfied with her family life where her brother constantly reminds her that the sisters are a burden on him. When she is diagnosed with a refractory error, her brother wants her to purchase “a frame with the lowest price” (78). But, going against his will, she buys for herself the best-quality frame – made of the shell of a sea creature – with the money she earned by offering tuitions in the neighborhood.

She is shown as a powerful character whose inner voice bids her to “not hesitate to obey the dictates of [her] mind” (78). She is not the one who is easily subdued by her brother or society. She raises her voice against the head of the family when he tries to infringe on her freedom, “don’t think that you can hold me with reins ... I know how to live my life” (83). But there is another side to her character as well which is reflected when she exclaims, “I don’t want to do anything ... I just want to sleep in the arms of Sudhi [with whom she is betrothed]” (89). Balan gives special place to such eruption of emotions and weak moments when her characters seek love and care from the opposite sex.

This story also operates at the level of fantasy which Balan has deftly dovetailed in the plot. The narrator undergoes a metamorphosis under the impact of the sea-creature in the frame, and is endowed with an unusual power over others. Nobody in

the house or the neighborhood is able to look into her fierce eyes. Anyone who comes under her spell becomes her subordinate. Significantly, the story hints that the metamorphosis is not an external injection of strength but the unveiling of the hidden power inherent in a woman or what is called Shakti. As in “The Fifth One”, in this story too the hidden strength of a woman is hinted at through a creative plot innovation. This is not to say that it is glorified disproportionally. In fact, it is due to Balan’s controlled use of language, deft handling of irony and humor, and creative narrative turns that make these stories achieve the desired effect and leave a powerful impact on the readers.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Balan’s stories portray the dilemmas and struggles of the lower-middle-class Indian females who, despite being educated and strong-willed, could not completely liberate themselves from the fetters of family and society. However, they do put up resolute fights against patriarchy from within, and negotiate their domestic spaces and everyday realities in their own subversive ways. While eschewing the restraining framework of *pennezhuthu*, Balan’s representation suggests that the experiential reality of women is far more complex and variegated, and hence it requires innovative use of language and writing techniques to capture this. Her stories might not be ‘radical’ in the conventional sense of the term, yet they evince a powerful aesthetic of subversion as well as upliftment. On the one hand, Balan’s subtle delineation of the mental anguish of ordinary women compels one to think the gender problems prevalent in society, on the other, the enigma she creates around her characters makes the reader see the dormant potential of a woman. Thus, these stories not only touch the raw nerve of the experience of being women in contemporary India, but also open up gendered spaces of society and raise pertinent political questions.

End Notes

- i Most of this criticism, which came from liberal humanist critics like M Krishnana Nair, Guptan Nair and authors like T. Padmanabhan, G.N. Panikkar etc. was based on conservative and unsustainable accusations like pennezhuthu being an alibi for women writers of ‘low creativity’ to gain easy success, a kind of ‘reservation’ as remarked by Padmanabhan.
- ii Gita Hiranyan’s response to the question whether she is a feminist goes as, “I am the female of the human species. I’m called a woman just as he is called a man. I possess all the emotions and feelings he is endowed with – anger, hatred, love, sorrow, vengeance, contempt, ridicule and the like. I cannot act alike at all times” (qtd. in Nair xv).
- iii The writers who have rejected outrightly or shown reservations towards the label ‘feminist’ for themselves or their writings include such stalwarts like Kabita Sinha, Mahasweta Devi, Sivashankari, Krishna Sobti, Qurratulain Hyder, and Sashi Deshpande, all of whom uphold women’s cause in one way or the other in their writings.
- iv In her analysis of Malayalam literature and literary criticism, J. Devika identifies the presence of what she calls “the male ‘homoaesthetic circles’” – “informal but hierarchical intellectual-cultural networks of literary communication” in which mostly “male critics, authors, readers, publishers ... participate” (9). Over the period of time, many such circles have been formed around particular ideologies or around individual authors and critics, which attempted to “consecrate” successive generations of women writers through various strategies (9-11).
- v In “The Story” there is a foil to Sushama in the character of Shriranjini, who is an employed woman, more assertive and

open. She too writes poems, but they – unlike Sushama’s poems – carry fierceness and anger typical of the feminist writing. Balan’s story however follows the poem of Sushama more assiduously than that of Shriranjini for the reason that the latter has already been recognised and awarded, while the former is not fortunate enough to see the light of the day.

- vi Balan reveals in one of her interviews, “Sometimes life chokes me and I struggle for breath. My writing is a desperate attempt to have a life-giving breath” (qtd. in Nair 2012, xiii).

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Narrating Everyday Violence: Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp and the South Asian Muslim Women's Question

Labiba Alam*

Abstract

Violence is not always visible or explosive; rather, it can manifest in subtle and cumulative ways, which makes it even more difficult to recognise or resist. Trauma is often woven into the fabric of daily life, masquerading as care, duty, and even love. Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, a collection of twelve stories in translation, portrays the emotional attrition, coercive reproductive practices, and gendered violence against women within the Muslim communities in South India. Across the twelve short stories, women's bodies become sites of silent, invisible depletion, corroded gradually by the pressures of patriarchal structures of family, faith, sexual expectation, and reproductive duty. These women are not granted the language of protest or complaint, nor do they have the privilege of naming the pain. Mushtaq's voice here offers feminist testimonies of gendered harm, which is naturalised within formal institutions of marriage, motherhood, and faith. Mushtaq's plain and oral storytelling style mirrors the way everyday trauma operates in the lives of these women, which often goes unheard, or even worse, is dismissed. This paper examines how the stories in *Heart Lamp* offer a critical site for theories like feminist non-Western trauma studies, politics of invisibility, and vernacular trauma, and situates them within the continuum of South Asian women's writing that documents narratives of trauma without spectacle.

Keywords: Body, Coercive motherhood, Faith, Legal system, Vernacular trauma, Domesticity

* Independent Researcher

From Law to Life: The Ubiquity of Gendered Violence

In dominant trauma discourses, pain is often manifested as spectacle, in the form of visible collapse, moments of crisis, or violent revelation. But some South Asian women's writings present secluded worlds that resist such dramatic disclosure of trauma. Instead, it is absorbed in the patterns of everyday life as normalised and often ritualised repetition that is acknowledged as the standard feminine conduct. Banu Mushtaq's 2025 International Booker Prize-winning anthology, *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*, a Kannada collection of twelve short stories translated into English by Deepa Bhashti, offers a poignant archive of what could be termed as vernacular trauma. What I call 'vernacular trauma' should not be mistaken for grand linguistic declarations of violence and atrocities occurring at the state or national level; rather, they are granular, everyday events of local life through institutions of marriage and religion, often narrated through constraints. It is a culturally situated form of gendered pain that emerges in familiar, domestic spaces, often unrecognised by the bearers themselves. Mushtaq's characters like Shaista, Sakeena, Aashraf, and Mehrun become survivors not of spectacular assault but of trauma that is sanctioned and normalised within the bounds of family, community, and religion.

Ethnographic research on Muslim women's experiences of violence in India and in transnational contexts has extensively charted the embodied as well as visible forms of violence: from domestic abuse to state negligence and communal marginalisation. A study conducted in Hyderabad and Seattle shows the ubiquity of violence on women, both spectacular and invisible, operating in "gender and sexual minorities" at the intersections of "class, religion, caste, race, Indigeneity, disability" and how "it is often invisible, systematically maintained, and normalised 'slow violence'" (Piedalue 373-74). Studies also show Muslim women subject to marital violence

which is often manifested by religious leaders who try to keep women confined to “structural and cultural prisons” in the South African context (Rasool and Suleman 39-49). Another study examines “the socio-economic positioning of Muslim women” based in India and the UK and navigates gender-based violence in the contexts of communalism and radicalisation, and approaches it at a structural and interpersonal level (Chantler et al. 163-83). Salwa Mansuri’s article is particularly relevant because it invokes the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005, and exposes police inaction, legal precarity, and trivialisation of domestic violence as a potential reason for low arrest rates in India (Mansuri 1-76).

While these studies examine both reportable and embedded forms of violence, Mushtaq’s *Heart Lamp* assays more internalised and ambivalent forms of injury that defy any form of codification. Her characters do not and cannot speak in legal idioms or pathological registers. Their wounds remain invisible even to themselves. In many cases, the only agency that can be hoped to intervene and solve the gendered violence these women suffer is the *mutawalli* or the trustee of the religious fund (called *waqf*) created by a Muslim patron for the cause of education, charity, and religion, but this agency also fails to acknowledge and provide justice to women on the basis of “theological assumptions on which the superstructure of men’s alleged superiority to women has been created” (Hassan 59). Mushtaq’s voice, though not overtly activist, performs an ethical function by exposing the silenced inner worlds of the marginalised Muslim women, emerging as testimonial literature. A few other South Asian texts that centre Muslim female protagonists serve as a resonant counterpart to Mushtaq’s anthology of short stories in its exploration of women’s lives shaped by familial and religious constraints. Together these texts invite the reader to rethink the relationship between silence and voice, invisibility and narration, and pain and survival. Works like this emphasise the need to consider “Islamic feminism as a discursive

movement” and “on the enormous potential that this discourse obviously has for Muslim women’s agency in general as well as for the emergence of new female subjectivities in India (and elsewhere) which in turn seem to challenge and change secular-national gender discourses” (Schneider 56).

Of Mothers and Daughters: Reproductive Violence and Transgenerational Trauma

While approaching motherhood as a socially constructed normative role, it becomes imperative to integrate the theory of psychoanalysis into feminist sociology. Nancy Chodorow, while revising and repositioning Freud, accepts psychoanalysis as a theory that explains how identity, desire, and repression form in a child, or in short, as an explanation of psychological development in an individual; however, she critiques Freud’s universal claims that psychoanalysis as a theory that could explain the origins of culture and civilisation. She argues that humans may have universal psychic abilities like “splitting, fantasy, repression”, but social structures determine how these capacities unfold. In the context of motherhood, the psychic development of mothering is not only about biology but the indoctrination of the mothering structure, the gendered division of caregiving, and the repetition of domestic roles which “enable the development of an identity which comes to constitute the self, affect the nature of psychic structure formation, and organise sexuality” (Chodorow 51-4); women’s bodies often become convenient sites of religious and state control. Silvia Federici, in her rethinking of capitalism through a feminist perspective, identifies the strategic erasure of “female subjects that capitalism had to destroy”. She recalls the figures of “the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone” as problematic factors in the grand framework of capitalism (Federici 11). While her work focuses on the European context of controlling women’s bodies through institutionalised policing like witch-hunts and their regulation

during the rise of capitalism, it deeply resonates with the patriarchal waqf and mutawalli system that corrode the lives of Muslim women in South Asian societies. The need to control and monitor women and their bodies becomes a religious and political imperative to uphold the grand structure of faith, on one hand, and patriarchy, on the other, although they both, as we shall see, become a singular coercive force that becomes complicit in suppressing female subjectivities. Reproduction, in this context, goes beyond the ambit of biological function and becomes a constructed obligation marked by coercion and induced faith meant to appropriate women as upholders of family honour, social purity, and divine obedience.

In South Asian literature, the theme of coercive maternity is found in Salma's novel, *The Hour Past Midnight*, where a character named Rahima secretly undergoes sterilisation. When her husband, Kader, finds this out, he stops speaking to her because he believes that she had defied the laws laid down by religion thereby validating reproductive pressure through the institution of faith (Salma 71). In contrast to male desire and forced impregnation of women, the novel explores female sexuality, taboo and faith sanctioned by society to keep them under control. An extreme case of societal pressure on women who dare to refute these norms and the resultant honour killing is illustrated through the character of Firdaus, the rebellious daughter of Amina. She gets divorced from her much older husband, an alliance arranged by her brother-in-law, because the prospective groom is rich. When she falls in love with a Hindu married man, their neighbour Siva, and establishes physical intimacy with him, her mother makes her drink rat poison (389-90). Firdaus's refusal to be contained within the social matrix that regulates her movement costs her life. "One of the most iconic of the cultural-legal categories created to describe the deplorable state of women's rights in the Muslim world is the "honor crime," observes Lila Abu-Lughod, and argues that although enforcement of honour through violence is not

restricted to Muslim communities only, “somehow their constant association with stories and reports from the Middle East and South Asia, or immigrant communities originating in these regions, has given them a special association with Islam” (Abu-Lughod 113-14).

In Monica Ali’s 2003 novel, *Brick Lane*, Nazneen’s mother’s suicide (Ali 434-36), her faith in destiny, her paranoia after losing her way in the market and her joy at being able to speak a few words in English for the first time to a stranger, asking for directions (53-61), and her sister Hasina’s independence that comes at a great cost, and Nazneen’s daughter, Shahana, who dares to choose a life of her own are some instances that at once illustrate transgenerational trauma and women’s active participation in breaking the cycle. Convergent with this theme is Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* where the character of Kaukab, the daughter of a cleric, emerges as a radical Muslim in the narrative. The indoctrination of religious orthodoxy is seen in her act of refusing to give breast milk to her infant son during the month of religious fasting. She steadfastly justifies her act before her husband, Shamas, emphasising that even an infant must learn how to fast (Aslam 140-41). The mother-daughter relationship is problematised in her treatment of Mah-Jabin, a victim of domestic abuse inflicted by her husband. She flees from Pakistan where she is married and returns to Britain to her parents. In succeeding episodes, Kaukab’s ruthless behaviour towards her and her holding her daughter responsible for her fate makes Mah-Jabin remorseful towards her mother. Kaukab emerges as a powerful embodiment of transgenerational inheritance who affects the life of her children to the point of estrangement.

Mushtaq, through her women characters like Shaista in “Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal”, vehemently critiques the normalised practice of early marriage and frequent childbirth. Apparently, a loving and caring husband, Iftikhar emerges as a

mindless operator of the patriarchal agency who, under the guise of love and care, is responsible for Shaista's death during childbirth. When she confides in her friend Zeenat that family planning is not truly within her control, and when Iftikhar asserts that she need not undergo the sterilisation she had planned as long as he can provide materially for the family, the narrative exposes a regressive social structure that confines a woman's value to sexual gratification and reproduction. Her death during the birth of the seventh child and Iftikhar's remarriage to an eighteen-year-old woman immediately after the customary forty-day ritual of mourning (fatiha) clearly illustrates the everyday violence against women, often disguised as spousal and maternal duty. The story also exposes transgenerational trauma with the responsibility of all the six younger children falling on the tender shoulders of Shaista's eldest daughter, Asifa, whose educational career is cut short by her father because he believes education is unimportant for girls who are anyway to be married off at an early age. A similar case of infidelity, forced marriage, and deprivation of education to women is seen in the story "Heart Lamp" (Mushtaq 1-22). Mehrun, the miserable protagonist, is denied empathy by her paternal family because it becomes a case of family honour if a married daughter returns to her paternal home. Her husband's decision to get married to a younger woman simply because Mehrun had turned into "an old woman" (Mushtaq 101) after giving birth to five children leaves her with only one solution and that is suicide. Mehrun's desire to pursue a B.Com degree is denied before her second year exams (Mushtaq 108). The story, nevertheless, ends on a hopeful note when she is confronted and stopped by her eldest daughter, Salma, an SSLC exam candidate, at the brink of her suicide and Mehrun decides to live for her children (Mushtaq 111).

Aashraf, in the story "Black Cobra", symbolises gendered harm for birthing female children, another regressive practice of the patriarchal agency. Parallel to her character is the

mutawalli's wife, Amina, who "had borne him seven children in ten years of marriage" (Mushtaq 43). The physical and mental attrition that Aashraf suffers in the hands of her alcoholic autorickshaw puller husband, and the murder of the chronically ill female infant, Munni, as she flings out of her mother's arms after Aashraf is kicked by her husband, highlight the horrors that these women are continuously exposed to. Aashraf endures everything yet she loses her child to domestic violence. The presence of exceptional female characters like Zulekha Begum, who is well-read and explains the Sharia laws clearly to her maid, Aashraf, makes little to no difference in a predominantly patriarchal setup. "...while the rate of literacy is low in many Muslim countries, the rate of literacy of Muslim women, especially those in rural areas where most of the population lives, is among the lowest in the world" laments Riffat Hassan while examining religious assumptions that foster negative attitudes towards Muslim women (57). Towards the end of the story, there is an upsurge of feminist consciousness when the female characters come together in solidarity, and rebel, through sarcasm and public shame, against the *mutawalli*. The final defeat of patriarchy is seen in Amina's decision to get a sterilisation surgery (Mushtaq 60), much to the surprise and disappointment of her husband. Yet, once again, the reader is compelled to look back and ask: At what cost is this sense of female solidarity, awareness, and rebellion achieved?

"A Taste of Heaven" is illustrative of long-term trauma and its effects on women's psyche. Although, it is narrated as a funny story where the old woman, Bi Dadi, is made to believe that she has reached heaven and her granddaughter is a *houri* or an angel, she survives on Pepsi thinking that is it the much-coveted *Aab-e-kausar* or the drink of heaven. We are told that two of her grandchildren mistook her old *ja-namaz* or prayer mat as a rag and used it to clean their bicycle. She had always preserved it as a prized possession. We get a glimpse of her tragic past:

... she was married off as a child. Her husband died just a month after their wedding. Someone said he had died of a snake bite, but she never found out for sure. A year after his death, she got her first period, and while there were no official restrictions in her maternal home, the family did not have a tradition of remarriage. Her body shed its layers every month and became one with the earth. Her body, her mind, her dreams, none were fulfilled. She remained an eternal virgin (Mushtaq 155).

No amount of coaxing, pacifying, and bribing with a brand new mat would bring her peace. She confides later that it was the same mat where her husband had thrown a handful of jasmine flowers as she sat there offering her evening prayers. The handling of the narrative in a matter-of-fact manner and the description of Bi-Dadi's mental state as a regular, albeit tragic, phenomenon that women are often subject to can be seen as Mushtaq's deliberate attempt at critiquing the normalisation of female subjugation. Her gradual descent into a schizophrenia-like state reveals deep-seated childhood trauma and emotional deprivation, thereby reiterating Chodorow's theorisation of identity formation and the role of social structures.

Jurisprudence of Silence: Faith, Gender, and the Failure of Redress

Mushtaq's story, "Fire Rain," begins with an agitated mutawalli, Usman Saheb, at the thought of the presence of his sister, Jameela and her husband in his house. His complacency is disturbed because of Jameela's demand for her share in their ancestral property, which she claims, must be divided equally among the six siblings. She mentions their poor and unfortunate sister, Sakeena, who is a widow and faces difficulty in marrying off her two daughters. The strained relationship between the husband and the wife is underpinned when Arifa, the *mutawalli's* wife, advises him to share with all his four sisters

their father's property. As a man, "Why should he tolerate the words of a woman, burkha-clad, of little value?" (27). He consistently evades morally pressing responsibilities, such as equally distributing his deceased father's property among his four sisters, providing financial assistance to his widowed sister Sakeena, and tending to his chronically ill son, Ansar, who becomes the sole responsibility of his wife. He instead, redirects his attention towards a comparatively trivial matter—the burial of a local drunkard, Nisar, in a Hindu cremation ground by the police. He inflates the communal implications of this incident to garner public attention and bolster his reputation as a protector of religious discipline (23-40).

The *mutawalli's* aide, Dawood, casually invokes the Shah Bano case (34), mocking those women who demand justice as puppets of the Hindu community. Shah Bano's case (1985) became a national watershed moment with a Muslim woman in her seventies approaching the Supreme Court and demanding maintenance after being divorced under triple talaq. The court ruled in her favour under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code, but sparked outrage from conservative Muslim leaders who saw it as state interference in Islamic personal law. The government, therefore, had to pass the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act in 1986, which effectively nullified the court's judgement and limited Muslim women's access to alimony (Agnes 13-14). Dawood's brief but cynical allusion to Shah Bano does not merely indicate a legal precedent but also exposes the ways in which community honour and gender control become entangled, and a woman's pursuit of justice threatens the perceived sanctity of religious integrity.

In "Black Cobra", as discussed in the second section of this article, Aashraf becomes a victim of domestic abuse and deferred justice. The *mutawalli* is approached several times by Aashraf but he always finds a way to dismiss her petition and deny her justice. Yakub, her alcoholic husband, offers him a

bribe in the form of liquor and movie-watching. The mutawalli, by accepting these bribes, acts in direct contradiction to the religious code he claims to uphold. The cold indifference of the mutawalli echoes the biased treatment of the local jurisprudence on the basis of gender. The constant reference to the Sharia laws, their misinterpretation to conveniently justify acts of infidelity, polygamy, and atrocities against women show the hollowness of a system conventionally held in reverence and believed to safeguard women's rights (44, 52). Jacques Derrida, while applying the theory of deconstruction, differentiates between law and justice, identifying the former as "constructible" and therefore, facilitating the "deconstruction" of droit which he translates into "authority, legitimacy, and so on." (Derrida 15) He gestures towards the possibility of a law that contradicts law itself and he uses the phrase "enforceability of the law or contract" and then concludes that all law maintains themselves by force (5), which incorporates violence, adopting Walter Benjamin's term *gewalt*, in the latter's text "*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*" which translates as "Critique of Violence," reiterating the coercive measures that law resorts to for its application and maintenance (6). Derrida quotes Benjamin:

Gewalt also signifies, for Germans, legitimate power, authority, public force. Gesetzgebende Gewalt is legislative power, geistliche gewalt the spiritual power of the church, Staatsgewalt the authority or power of the state. Gewalt, then, is both violence and legitimate power and the supposedly originary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have been authorized by any anterior legitimacy, so that in this initial moment, it is neither legal or illegal—or, others would quickly say, neither just nor unjust. (quoted in Derrida 6)

Derrida's theorisation reveals the inherent instability of legal systems. He argues that while every legal system asserts its authority to punish, it is, at a deeper level, structured by an

inherent bias—one that consistently privileges certain values over others. These favoured values do not remain neutral; rather, they become foundational or self-evident upon which the legal framework continues to operate. In the few short stories discussed above, the legal custodians or the *mutawallis* show preference to the men or the patriarchy, thus nullifying the importance of the women and their grievances as unnecessary, negligible, and even invisible. The *mutawalli's* role as a representation of local jurisprudence is, therefore, not anchored in justice, but in a selective performance of moral and legal authority. The institution of justice here is not only biased but structurally incapable of addressing gendered injustice. It is rooted in what Derrida would call “originary violence”, a foundational framework that privileges male authority as sacred law.

Beyond Catastrophe: Everyday Violence and the Ethics of Listening

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* does not anchor its narratives in large-scale historical catastrophes, the kind of event-based trauma that classical Western trauma theory is generally understood to have emerged from, such as the Holocaust or the 9/11 (Craps 2-5). Instead, it is a testimonial of domestic brutality that happens behind closed doors such as coercive motherhood, gendered institutional neglect, and the quiet burial of infant lives. These forms of violence do not erupt in public memory or leave behind a legal or national trace. Critiquing the influential founding members of trauma theory such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, Stef Craps argues that they fail to address the “promise(d) cross-cultural ethical engagement” on the basis of four main arguments:

they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas (2).

Craps, while illustrating the limitations of an umbrella theory of trauma, discusses Anita Desai's novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* and the incomprehensibility of understanding the condition of various victim groups which cannot be covered under a singular, Eurocentric trauma theory (115—23). Convergent with this text is Veena Das's *Life and Words* which documents her fieldwork experiences in the urban centres of Punjab conducted between 1973 and 1974 where she researched kinship patterns as an anthropologist of Punjabi families after the Partition (Das 2). What emerged was not just the post-Partition variation in the kinship network but silent episodes of violence that marked the lives of women in these regions. She illustrates this with the example of a woman who, in her deathbed, refused to accept the shroud sent by her natal family, particularly her brother. Das reflects, the horrors of Partition "seemed to have disappeared in the distant past" but a ripple or two could be felt suddenly in the otherwise normal setting "without any notice" (11). Another case she records is that of a woman called Manjit. Her memories of the harrowing times of the Partition include her brother "leaving a packet of poison with her while he went out every day, with the instructions that she should not hesitate to swallow the contents if Muslim mobs came to the house" (73). She was barely thirteen at that time.

Das records that she was abducted during the Partition and later rescued by the Indian Army. Her marriage was fixed with a much older man. After marriage, her life was no better and she had to tolerate regular violence from her husband because she wanted to protect her daughter-in-law from the ill-tempered father-in-law, that is, Manjit's husband (81-85). The harrowing images of the Partition horror get recorded in history and public memory, but the granular events of everyday violence in the lives of these women go unmentioned. By incorporating these seemingly disparate narratives of trauma, Das demonstrates how violence is not always registered in the spectacular, but rather in the "recesses of everyday life" (164). Together, Craps and Das offer a theoretical scaffolding that helps to assess the affective landscape of Mushtaq's stories and her female protagonists, and rethink trauma not as eventful, but as vernacular, embodied, and socially sustained. Such an approach is hoped to widen the gamut of trauma studies to incorporate the silenced pain of women of the minorities in South Asia whose grievances may never enter courtrooms or headlines, but who remain as silent witnesses of unacknowledged pain.

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Remembering the Rwandan Genocide through a Survivor's Perspective: Memory and Biopolitics in Consolee Nishimwe's Memoir Tested to the Limit

Bhaswati Bhattacharjee*

Abstract

Written in the context of the Rwandan genocide (1994), Consolee Nishimwe's memoir *Tested to the Limit* (2012) provides a detailed and intimate account of the harrowing events that unfolded during that dark period. While the paper will focus on emphasising the significance of personal narratives by survivors or witnesses of genocides in the field of memory studies as they offer viewpoints often missing from mainstream historical narratives, it will also try to elucidate how Nishimwe's memoir narrativises the biopolitical nature of oppression where institutionalised forms of hatred and discrimination based on ethnic identities and their forced memorialisation give rise to the extreme condition of genocide.

Keywords: Memoir, Memory Studies, Oppression, Rwandan Genocide

Introduction

“Utazi iyo ava ntamenya iyajya!”
(If we don't know where we came from,
we don't know where we're heading)
- Kinyarwanda proverb

Thirty-one long years have passed since the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, one of the deadliest chapters of human history and one of the most horrible episodes of mass slaughter and atrocity since the Second World War. However, the shadow of this

* PhD Research Scholar, Department of English and OEL, Dr Harisingh Gour Central University

cataclysm has not yet left the collective memory of the Rwandans who have still been bearing the ineradicable scars on their minds, bodies, and overall socioeconomic lives. This was an incident where humans had forgotten the meaning of humanity, or Ubuntu as they call it in Kinyarwanda (national language of Rwanda) and, as a consequence, an estimated 800,000 people belonging mostly to the Tutsi ethnic group were killed by the Hutu extremists. As the proverb in the epigraph emphasises the necessity of knowing the past to understand and envisage the future better, the Rwandans have put every effort into making sure that they remember their past and never forget. “Kwibuka”, which is “to remember” in Kinyarwanda, is the name of the national commemoration event in Rwanda that takes place every year from April 7 to July 4, marking exactly the dates when the genocide occurred. However, in the enormity of this multitudinous collective memory, is anyone allowed to have the required space or an opportunity to remember (emphasis added) the trauma that each survivor of this pogrom had to go through? Does memorialising collective trauma overshadow or diminish individual trauma in the context of events like the Rwandan Genocide?

“We talk about millions of Rwandans, Tutsis killed during the genocide, and we seem to forget the individuals. This exhibition is here so that we remember the history of each individual” – said Immaculée Songa, a survivor who lost her husband and two daughters in the genocide (Westergard). The exhibition in question being “Stories of Survival and Remembrance - A call to action for genocide prevention,” launched in April 2023 at UN headquarters. How does this very act of individual ‘*remembering*’ help assemble and reconstruct the collective memory of the violence endured by the multitude? How can it provide insights into a deeper analysis of the incident through different theoretical perspectives? And finally, how can such remembrances be effectively used to prevent such atrocities from occurring in future? This paper will strive to find answers.

Background

During the Rwandan Civil War (1990-1994), the Tutsi people, who were an ethnic minority in Rwanda, constituting about 14 per cent of the total population then, became the target of the Hutus, who comprise the vast majority of the country. Apart from an age-old strife between these two ethnic communities, the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana, who was an ethnic Hutu, on April 6, 1994, helped escalate the collective hatred against the Tutsi minority and the political propaganda of ethnic violence was tactically spread like bushfire. Between April 7, 1994 and July 15, 1994, more than 5,00,000 people (Guichaoua 125) were killed in this “land of a thousand hills” and the majority of them were Tutsi. Rape was used as an active weapon of war and around 2,50,000 to 5,00,000 women (Nowrojee), mostly Tutsis, were subjected to severe sexual abuse, including rape and murder, sexual assault with the use of objects, and deliberate infection with HIV.

Consolee Nishimwe, the eldest daughter of a respectable family in Kibuye, district of Karongi, was only fourteen years old when the genocide began. Her family tried their best to seek refuge in various places but the Interahamwe (Hutu Paramilitary group) hunted them down and she lost her father Andre Ngoga, her three young brothers Philbert, Pascal, and Bon-Fils along with several other relatives and friends. She herself had to undergo severe physical and sexual abuse which resulted in her getting infected with HIV. However, she bravely survived the catastrophe along with her mother Marie-Jeanne Mukamwiza and younger sister Jeanette. Now, Consolee “is a committed speaker on the genocide, a defender of global women’s rights, and an advocate for other genocide survivors” (“About — Consolee Nishimwe”). She wrote her poignant memoir *Tested to the Limit: A Genocide Survivor’s Story of Pain, Resilience, and Hope* (2012) to spread positivity, awareness, and, most importantly, to “educate the world so that history won’t keep

repeating anywhere in the world.”¹ Through the eyes of a survivor who endured various forms of profound biopolitical oppression within her homeland, the book provides a detailed and intimate account of the harrowing events that unfolded during that dark period.

Theoretical Framework

In his celebrated lecture series titled “Society Must Be Defended”, Michel Foucault offers a distinct perspective on modern warfare, which he describes as:

. . . the discourse of a battle that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage. (61)

In this intertwining of biological and political factors, or, in a ‘biopolitical’ context, the survival of a particular religious, ethnic, or political group is seen to have a direct impact on the survival of another similar group, which suggests that the preservation or dominance of one group is perceived as being at odds with the well-being of another. Politically promoted memorialisation of these ‘essential’ differences between two groups may lead to an atmosphere of antagonism and, ultimately to war and genocide. In Rwanda, where biopolitical schemes had a historical precedent in the colonial period when Belgian authorities implemented a system of ethnic identification, classifying the population into Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa categories based on arbitrary criteria such as physical characteristics, it was quite evident that propagating a collective remembrance of Tutsis being privileged over Hutus both during and after the colonial rule would instigate genocidal intents among the mass. Apart from a Foucauldian lens, such biopolitical manipulations can also be explained according to the theory of homo sacer/bare

life, propounded by Giorgio Agamben, who explained how the unrestrained exertion of biopower leads to a denial of individuality as well as humanity and gives birth to a politically unwanted population that can be exterminated at the whims of the authoritative power, and Achille Mbembe, who developed the idea of ‘necropolitics’ defined as the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die in a biopolitical state system. And, all these biopolitical strategies can successfully shape collective memory, which, in turn, can influence political dynamics and responses to governance. Understanding this interplay is crucial for analysing how power was operated and how memories were constructed, contested, or preserved in the sociopolitical context of Rwanda in 1994 and thereafter – and that is what the paper aims to do.

Rwandan Genocide: How a Tragedy Unfolded

A small, landlocked country in the eastern part of central Africa, Rwanda is known for its beautiful landscapes, including rolling hills, lush forests, and numerous lakes. Bordered by Uganda to the north, Tanzania to the east, Burundi to the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west, Rwanda is situated in the converging area of the African Great Lakes region and Southeast Africa. According to the World Factbook Report of 2023, the current population of the country is 13,400,541 (Rwanda - the World Factbook) and, in the 1990s, around 85% of the population were ethnic Hutu, 14% were Tutsi, and 1% were Twa. In present-day Rwanda, “the national census no longer tracks ethnicity, so at least officially, no one knows how many of one or the other there are” (Gwin). After the mayhem, the Rwandan government prohibited the mention of ethnicity in the national identity cards, the very identity cards which played a major role in identifying the Tutsis during the genocide. This ethnic segregation of the Rwandan population had not been there since the primordial history of the country and even after the inception of the idea of different ethnic identities, it was not

socioculturally exclusive and was interchangeable based on cattle ownership. Prof. Howard Adelman, founder and director of the Centre for Refugee Studies, at York University, even refused to identify these people as belonging to different 'ethnic' groups. In the 1997 documentary *Forsaken Cries: The Story of Rwanda*, he says:

There was a precolonial state in which there were mixture of groups. And these groups were classified by so-called ethnicity, but ethnicity is really the wrong term for the difference between the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. They were differentiated by clans. They were differentiated by region. (03:41-04:00)

Historically, the Hutu were primarily engaged in agriculture and made up the majority of the rural population while the Tutsi were often associated with cattle herding and were considered to have higher socioeconomic status and, in some cases, seen as a ruling elite:

Pre-colonial Rwanda was a highly centralized Kingdom presided over by Tutsi kings who hailed from one ruling clan . . . While the relationship between the king and the rest of the population was unequal, the relationship between the ordinary Bahutu, Batutsi and Batwa was one of mutual benefit mainly through the exchange of their labour. The relationship was symbiotic. A clientele system called "Ubugake" permeated the whole society. (About Rwanda – the Embassy of the Republic of Rwanda – USA)

Social and marital intermingling between the two groups was not rare and, by acquiring more livestock, Hutus often elevated their status in this hierarchical system. J. J. Carney, in his 2014 book *Rwanda Before the Genocide*, explains:

Despite their central importance in Rwanda's tragic postcolonial history, the categories "Hutu" and "Tutsi" are

not easily defined . . . If there is a narrow consensus, it holds that Bantu-speaking groups later associated with the Hutu arrived in Rwanda beginning around 1100 AD as part of the broader Bantu migrations that shaped so much of Iron Age history in Africa. Although they worked in both agricultural and pastoralist work, Hutu were more associated with the former . . . Hutu and Tutsi mixed more frequently in central and southern Rwanda. (10)

But, the origin of the Tutsi in Rwanda is more controversial as their immigration to the country has been viewed (by European theorists and Hutu extremist historians) in terms of military invasion (Carney 10). However, Hutu and Tutsi lived peacefully in Rwanda until the onset of colonialism in the country, which played a significant role in exacerbating and codifying the divisions between the two ethnic groups.

Rwanda, as well as the neighbouring Burundi, became German colonies in 1899. After World War I, in 1918, these two German colonies were placed under Belgian mandate by the League of Nations according to the Treaty of Versailles and were administered under two Tutsi monarchs (Keane193). Between 1926 and 1933, the Belgian rulers intensified the practice of ethnic divisions in Rwanda by issuing ethnic identity cards, making these distinctions more explicit and codified. By applying the pseudoscientific conjecture of biological racism that was used to ‘examine’ and ‘identify’ racial superiority and inferiority by measuring human skulls, nose structures, and heights, and detecting eye and skin colour, the Tutsis were declared to be racially superior to the Hutus. The Tutsis were viewed by the colonisers as “somehow less African (Black) and more European (White) and, by extension, superior (more human) to their Hutu fellow countrymen and women” (White 473). For the foreign colonisers, befriending the existing rulers of the country was more diplomatically beneficial, which could easily be strengthened by asserting their racial closeness with the

Europeans: “In order to strengthen their control, the Belgians imposed the rigid system of racial classification, and divided Rwanda’s ethnically mixed clan structure into three distinct groups, Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa” (Forsaken Cries: The Story of Rwanda 04:08-04:22). The Tutsis were described as Hamites or black Aryans or proto-Europeans who “had come down from the north, possibly Ethiopia, into the dark and savage lands in the heart of Africa to impose their superior civilization” (Keane 13). Besides, they were also ‘diagnosed’ to be taller than other Rwandans and, as famous American journalist John Gunther says in his description of Tutsis, this ‘tallness’ was perceived as “the symbol of racial exclusiveness and pure blood” (Keane 14). Consequently, the Tutsis were granted preferential treatment in education, employment, and administration, and also favoured by the Christian Missionaries, which stoked resentment among the Hutu majority and ultimately gave rise to the formation of PARMEHUTU (Party for the Emancipation of the Hutus) in 1957, when the country was still under colonial rule.

After the death of the first Christian Tutsi king (Mwami) Mutara III Rudahigwa in 1959, the country saw the first large-scale uprising and violence against the Tutsi elites, as a consequence of which a great number of Tutsis fled and sought refuge in Burundi, Tanzania, Zaire, and Uganda. In 1962, Rwanda gained independence from Belgium, and the Hutu majority, led by Grégoire Kayibanda’s Hutu nationalist PARMEHUTU took political power, marking a reversal of the previous hierarchy. The divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi persisted as the Hutu-led government continued to emphasise the Hutu identity and promoted Hutu nationalism and this sustained hostility became the source of ethnic violence, including killings and forced migrations. The exiled Tutsis in the neighbouring countries, especially in Burundi, now started attempting homecoming through military invasions, which triggered more massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda between 1963 and 1967 and the numbers of Rwandan refugees escalated rapidly in

different African nations. Before Army Chief General Juvénal Habyarimana seized power in 1973, promising to restore peace and order, the Tutsis were already getting expelled from educational institutes offering higher studies and were also systematically persecuted and killed. During Habyarimana's one-party regime, the pro-Hutu sentiment was carefully nurtured under the façade of maintaining the peaceful coexistence of both groups. In October 1990, the Tutsi-controlled rebel organisation Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda from its northern borders, which resulted in the intervention of French and Zairean troops to aid the Rwandan government. The conflict apparently ended with the signing of a ceasefire on March 29, 1991 but it was the time for the Rwandan government to prepare a militia group named Interahamwe, which roughly translates to "those who stand together" in Kinyarwanda, with radical members of the youth wing of the ruling National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (MRND) party. For the next three years, hate speech against the Tutsis, dehumanising them by calling them cockroaches (*Inyenzi*), separate incidents of massacres of Tutsis, political murders and various other forms of violence and discrimination were rampant throughout the country. As Dr. Gregory Stanton elucidates in his "Ten Stages of Genocide", the first five stages of genocide, namely, Classification, Symbolisation, Discrimination, Dehumanisation, and Organisation were noticeably taking place in the pre-genocide Rwanda (page no.. The society was already divided between 'us and them' i.e., Hutu and Tutsi, the identity cards helped identify the targeted group, the Tutsis were discriminated in academic and professional sectors, they were dehumanised by being called 'cockroaches' by the extremists, and finally, the militia group was well-prepared to carry out the mass slaughter at any given time.

In November 1992, Léon Mugesera, an ethnic Hutu and a prominent member of MRND, allegedly delivered an infamous speech, which, according to Philip Gourevitch, "laid the

groundwork for the carnage that was to follow two years later” (“Alleged Rwandan War Criminal Must Leave Canada: Top Court”). As Gourevitch himself elaborates in his 1998 book *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, the Hutu Powerⁱⁱ ideologue called on “Hutus to send the Tutsis back to Ethiopia by way of the Nyabarongo River”, a euphemism that literally happened when, in “April of 1994, the river was choked with dead Tutsis, and tens of thousands of bodies washed up on the shores of Lake Victoria” (Gourevitch 53). After a renewed attack by the RPF in February 1993, international mediators, including the United Nations, Organisation of African Unity (now the African Union), and regional African leaders, facilitated negotiations between the Rwandan government, led by President Juvénal Habyarimana, and the RPF, led by Paul Kagame. At Arusha in Tanzania, the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Rwanda, commonly known as the Arusha Accord, was signed on August 4, 1993. It outlined a comprehensive peace agreement that addressed numerous issues, including the sharing of political power, the integration of the RPF rebels into the Rwandan Armed Forces, the return of refugees, and the disarmament of militias. As a part of this, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda or UNAMIR was established by the United Nations Security Council through Resolution 872 on October 5, 1993 to administer the implementation of the Arusha Accord. However, despite the presence of 2,500 UN peacekeepers under the supervision of Canadian Major General Roméo Dallaire, the implementation of the peace agreement faced several obstacles, including resistance from hardline factions within the Rwandan government and the military, increased training of the militias, and unrestrained broadcast of hate speech from the extremist radio station Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM). On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying President Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaryamira, the president of Burundi, was shot down before its landing at Kigali Airport. According to some

governmental reports published in post-genocide Rwanda, the Hutu extremists, who anticipated the president's ultimate surrender to the agreements of the Arusha Accord, were behind the assassination (Holland). Whoever the assassin was, the radicals used the news as proof of the Tutsis' treachery and exhorted the Hutus to precipitate the 'final solution' against them. Thus, began the genocide.

Biopolitics and a Collective Memory of Hatred

Rory Stewart, in his introduction to *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, says: "At the heart of the genocide was repetition, which is so often the enemy of understanding" (Gourevitch viii). As the field for the pogrom was being prepared in Rwanda much before the time when it actually took place, a forced repetition of an age-old collective memory of discrimination and hatred was widespread throughout the country. The gullible common people became the easiest target of the anti-Tutsi propaganda which compelled the mass to 'remember' the 'oppressive' Tutsi monarchy, the anti-Hutu and pro-Tutsi sentiment of the colonisers, and the century-old 'suffering' of the Hutus. And, to fuel the already brewing resentment against the Tutsis, the well-calculated use of media and public entertainment forms was strikingly extensive. Let us consider, for example, the lyrics of a few popular songs by Simon Bikindi, the notorious musician and composer:

"We have put the monarchy behind us/The evil feudal and colonial yoke have both departed" ("Making Violence Ordinary" 89)

"Remember the whip, remember the harsh labour, /Remember the days you spent working for the chief without any compensation!" ("Song Lyrics with Translation")

“If I could have a daring child and another with fast feet,
/So that I can send them to Muhinzi, he who saved the
farmers /By chasing away the cattle breeders of Mwima
and Muschirarungu.”ⁱⁱⁱ (“Making Violence Ordinary”
91)

Though the lyrics are carefully composed using elliptical language and were open for different interpretations (as Bikindi pleaded himself not guilty by claiming that his songs were being misinterpreted), three songs by this famous singer were reckoned staunchly political and they were played every day by RTLM repetitively. As Bill Berkeley remembers in his 2001 book, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full*:

“Defend your rights and rise up!” a voice on the radio was singing . . . A popular crooner named Simon Bikindi was beseeching his fellow Hutu – the bene sebahinzi, the sons of cultivators – to carry on the slaughter without delay. “Defend your rights and rise up against those who oppress you! . . . The Tutsi are ferocious beasts, the most vicious hyenas, more cunning than the rhino,” he cooed. “The Tutsi inyenzi [cockroaches] are bloodthirsty murderers. They dissect their victims, extracting vital organs, the heart, liver, and stomach.” (qtd. in “Making Violence Ordinary” 93)

Before looking for references to Bikindi’s songs in Nishimwe’s account, one must look at what other Rwandans, both survivors and perpetrators, had to say about them^{iv}:

“Bikindi was awakening the Hutus “to work” [meaning, to kill], because the enemy was the Tutsi . . . He had a purpose, even though he was only playing music; he knew the genocide would occur . . . Truly, I know that [his songs] influenced Hutu to kill others.” – Beata, a young woman whose father and brother were killed

during the genocide; a Tutsi (“Song Lyrics with Translation”)

“What I’m telling you is that if I did participate in those killings, it is because of the teachings or what I learnt from Bikindi’s songs.” – ICTR Prosecution witness AEY, testifying against Bikindi; former Interahamwe member, incarcerated in Rwanda; a Hutu (“Song Lyrics with Translation”)

Consolee Nishimwe, a teenage schoolgirl at this time, similarly recalls how they “continued to hear personalities such as the well-known singer Simon Bikindi singing songs of hatred against Tutsis on the RTLM radio airwaves” (Nishimwe 29). In the third and fourth chapters of her memoir, she vividly describes how the collective hostility against the Tutsis was gradually being institutionalised by portraying them as past oppressors, invaders, and an unwelcome group in Rwanda (Nishimwe 14, 15, 17, 21). Even children were systematically indoctrinated into believing that their fellow Tutsi children were harmful to their existence (Nishimwe 22). “The Hutu memories of preindependence Rwanda had been passed down through the generations, and Hutu children could recall at length the sins the Tutsi had committed against their forefathers” (Power 337). General Dallaire, in his personal reflection on the genocide *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2003), recounts the same incident:

At the tail end of February, one of our African MILOBs [Military Observers] . . . noticed the teachers . . . were registering the ethnic identities of their pupils and seating them according to who was Tutsi and who was Hutu . . . As he visited other schools, he discovered that the same procedure was taking place. We mistakenly assumed that this was just another example of ethnicity at play in Rwanda. (198)

Probably there is no country in the entire world that does not have a history of class hierarchy and oppression. But, using that history manipulatively against a particular group and compelling people to ‘remember’ that history as a means to doubt and hate that group gives birth to racial/ethnic/religious/regional segregation and hostility. In the words of Foucault: “Racism first develops with colonization, or in other words, with colonizing genocide” and, to justify genocide by applying biopower, separatism in the name of evolutionism becomes essential (*Society Must Be Defended* 257). Instigating people to remember that Tutsis were originally immigrants from Ethiopia, that they misruled Rwandans for centuries, and that they were on their way to enslave the Hutus once again was the stimulus for the genocide: “Tens of thousands became infected . . . by an anti-Tutsi psychosis; they were convinced through newspapers, radio and the frequent public speeches of Habyarimana’s closest supporters that the Tutsis were going to turn them into beasts of the field once again” (Keane 9). This is an acute example of how memory can be employed to create or exaggerate perceived threats to a population and can be selectively used to implement oppressive biopolitical strategies by shaping and manipulating historical narratives. In a biopolitical regime, as Foucault elaborates in the fifth part of *The History of Sexuality*, the “entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity” because the biological existence of that population is seen as in danger because of the existence of another population. People are taught to kill because they are made to believe that it is the only way to live (“Right of Death” 137). It is, as Foucault describes in *Society Must Be Defended*, “a way of improving one’s own race by eliminating the enemy race” because the enemy represents a sort of “biological threat” to their existence (257). A close reflection of this can be seen in Nishimwe’s memoir where she recalls the yells of the militias in their killing spree, immediately after they slaughtered her three toddler brothers: “Hutu Power! Hutu

Power! We have exterminated some little cockroaches and saved our people the trouble of having them grow up to cause problems!” (Nishimwe 87). And, this “pathological hatred of the Tutsis” that rendered them a threat to Rwanda was caused precisely because of the forced memorialisation of all “the stories of oppression and humiliation that had been handed down from their parents” and “all the conspiracy theories of the government” (Keane 165-166).

This outrageous killing of the Tutsis was not only made inevitable but was also justified, which was again a direct effect of the long-nourished memory of the oppressive Tutsi rule. As Giorgio Agamben explains in his 1998 book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, in contemporary political systems, there exists a state of exception where a person can be reduced to ‘bare life’ and become subject to violence and exclusion without any legal protection (9). Drawing from ancient Greco-Roman law and political theory, he relates this condition to that of *homo sacer*, or sacred man, “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (Agamben 8). This refers to individuals who can be killed with impunity but cannot be sacrificed in a ritualistic or religious sense, thus leaving their chances to live at the hand of the divinity, and hence, ‘sacred’. Agamben critiques how modern governments utilise biopolitical techniques to manage populations and create conditions where people can be reduced to bare life. He argues that the state’s power is grounded in the ability to define who falls into this category of bare life and who does not. In the Rwandan Genocide, the Hutu extremist government systematically dehumanised the Tutsi population and the process stripped the Tutsis of their legal and political rights, rendering them as a form of “bare life” in the eyes of the Hutu regime. Similarly, as Agamben’s theory of “bare life” emphasises the state of exception, where the normal legal and political order is suspended, in the Rwandan context, the government declared a state of emergency and exploited it to carry out mass killings.

This dehumanisation, which, according to Dr. Stanton's "Ten Stages of Genocide", constitutes stage four, manifests in Nishimwe's memoir where she remembers the ranting through the loudspeakers: "We don't want Tutsis around us, they are snakes! Kill them all and don't forget the small ones!" (Nishimwe 28); "We need to exterminate all of those Tutsi cockroaches from young to old! . . . Kill them big, Kill them small! . . . Kill them all!" (Nishimwe 38). She also remembers her neighbours telling her that her community did not have the right to live:

"The government is giving orders that every Tutsi in the country must be searched for and killed wherever they are!" (Nishimwe 33)

"I don't know why you are hiding; . . . you don't deserve to have a life and you will all be exterminated anyway" (Nishimwe 58)

"Tutsis do not have the right to live among us!" (Nishimwe 78)

Here, one might refer to Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics which he defined as the biopolitical authority over the lives of people and "the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die" (Mbembe 66). Additionally, he also says that

War is, after all, a means of achieving sovereignty as much as a way of exercising the right to kill. When politics is considered a form of war, the question needs to be asked about the place that is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular when it is wounded or slain). (Mbembe 66)

In Rwanda, the state, media, and political elites played a pivotal role in orchestrating and inciting violence against the Tutsi

population and, the normalisation and inevitability of death in this necropolitical context demonstrates the state's exercise of sovereign power over life and death.

In the history of almost all genocides recorded in the modern world, the use of rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon to perpetrate genocide has always been pervasive. Rwanda was not an exception and, here also, a forcibly implanted collective memory of Tutsi women being seductive, arrogant, and spurning Hutu men “whom they considered ugly and inferior” (Nowrojee) played a significant role in organising the systematic mass rape. And, again, these women are portrayed as potential “biological threats” (Society Must Be Defended 61) for the entire Hutu population because, as it was propagandised, the Tutsi women were “femme fatale” and “seductive agents of the enemy” (Nowrojee) who, by using their sexual prowess, could manipulate Hutu soldiers and politicians and even the UN peacekeepers in favour of the RPF leaders. As Foucault elaborates on the “biopolitics” of the human race” in *Society Must be Defended*, one can understand the political justification of the mass rape because, in an oppressive biopolitical regime, “after a first seizure of power over the body” there comes “a second seizure of power that is not individualizing but...massifying” (243). Past memories of the supposed ‘arrogance’ of some Tutsi girls were used to create the collective hostility against all the females of this community en masse and defiling their bodies became synonymous with destroying their pride, thus, securing a way to victory over their entire community. Rape was used as a form of genocide where Tutsi women (including Nishimwe) were deliberately infected with HIV (rape squads were formed with HIV+ Hutu patients who were all released from hospitals) to expose them to a “slow, inexorable death” (Drumbl 574). This intersectional form of oppression is reflected in Nishimwe’s account of her rape, where she painstakingly mentions the verbal abuse she endured, which shows how her ordeal was caused not only because of her gender

but also, and primarily because of her ethnicity: “I tried to resist . . . but he put the sword to my neck and kept insulting me saying that we are snakes and cockroaches” (Nishimwe 91).

The Labyrinth of Oppression and Memory

In Rwanda, memory was formulated, fabricated, and then disseminated that finally led to the 100-day nightmare of 1994. In post-genocide Rwanda, none of these past memories can be traced anymore; there are no identity cards and asking someone about their ethnicity is almost a crime. But, “[n]ational memory is remembrance through the lens of present-day circumstances by those who are currently in power” (Fox 7). What impact does the memory of the genocide itself have on the individual and collective psyche? The Rwandan government has meticulously preserved the national memory of the genocide by observing Kwibuka every year and by erecting six memorials in the country including one in the capital Kigali itself. Is this ritual of ‘remembering’ very healing for the survivors? In the words of Consolee: “In addition to the psychological trauma which we had suffered, a large percentage had also experienced varying types of physical trauma that left them with visible scars, serving as a grim reminder to them every single day” (Nishimwe 156). At the mention of going back to the place where they once had their lovely home, she responds: “. . . we don’t want to see that place anymore! . . . I am scared to go back and relive those bad memories of what happened to us!” (Nishimwe 135). She remembers how another girl of her age shared her feeling: “. . . I couldn’t control the bad memories which constantly flooded my brain . . . ” (Nishimwe 157). Even while receiving treatments for HIV infection in the US, Consolee could not avert her memories: “The reality of being on that hospital bed brought back painful memories of how I was raped and reminded me that it was the cause of me lying there with that

illness” (Nishimwe 171). As an HIV+ patient, every day she has to re-experience her traumatic past and this act of uncontrollable recollection undoubtedly exacerbates her pain instead of alleviating it. The tragedy that was caused by a forced, somewhat false memory gives birth to another painful, unforgettable memory, which becomes a tragedy again in itself.

Conclusion

The memorialisation of man-made disasters like genocide is necessary to make the world learn from past mistakes so that history does not repeat itself. However, individual experiences, memories, and repercussions get somewhere lost in the multitude. Probably no government-run genocide memorial in Rwanda mentions Consolée’s baby brothers or her brave father. The world will never know the names of the individuals whose grimacing skulls, as their last remains on this earth, are lying in Murambi Genocide Memorial Centre merely as proof of the darkest 100 days of the country. Besides, as Nicole Fox tries to explore in her book *After Genocide*, such memorialisation may not always bring positive consequences for every individual:

Anitha feels deep shame about being raped during the genocide, explaining she will never marry because of it. While she values the memorial, declaring that it brings her much needed peace, she also feels that Rwanda’s remembrance processes have left her behind because she is poor and the victim of trauma and rape. (Fox 5)

By coining the term “stratification of collective memory,” Fox explains “how memory projects in particular, in both process and outcome, can serve to reinforce previously existing

hierarchies and their attending ethnic, gender, or socioeconomic cleavages” (Fox 6). Besides, this “stratification can lead to civic disengagement and nonparticipation as well as further violence, pain, and social isolation” (Fox 6).

As this article is being written, numerous people across the world are struggling hard to keep their individual memory of the atrocities committed against them alive and bring justice. Similarly, numerous others are equally struggling to cope with those very memories that still haunt them and compel them to relive their trauma every other day. National memorialisation of the collective past is almost always carried out from the perspective of an authoritative body that holds power; selective individual memories only get a foothold there when they cater to that national agenda, without besmirching the image of the country. While collective remembrance serves as a powerful mechanism for preserving historical lessons and fostering societal healing, it is in the personal narratives and recollections of survivors and witnesses that one can find the most intimate and unfiltered accounts of the human experience of genocides. As this multifaceted interplay between personal and national memory continues to be explored by researchers and policymakers, it becomes increasingly evident that the preservation of both is essential to the vital mission of ensuring “never again” is not just a slogan, but an enduring commitment to human rights and the prevention of future crimes.

Endnotes

- i. As Consolee herself said in an interview with the author of this paper. Details can be found at: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1UDbDQHK2c0OqV7GJ-UD7ZES4PV4UBZI9?usp=sharing>

- ii. An extremist ideology propounded by Hutu extremists and widespread during the 1990s in Rwanda, promoting racial and ethnic supremacy by claiming the superiority of the Hutu ethnicity and justifying their domination and even the brutal violence against the Tutsis
- iii All songs are originally in Kinyarwanda and the translations are by Jason McCoy
- iv All quotations and their details are from the website bikindiresearch.com, created by Jason McCoy, Ph.D. Musicology

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**Ecologies of Belonging: Tracing Place, Precarity and
Environmental Justice in *Borderlands: Travels
Across India's Boundaries***

Renuka K* and Jenisha T†

Abstract

Space and place are more pivotal to people living in the borderlands than to mainland residents. These borderland people live in precarious landscapes, navigating blurred boundaries in their daily lives. Notably, they often exhibit 'a sense of preference' for these uncertain and liminal spaces. This essay will situate Pradeep Damodaran's travelogue *Borderlands: Travels Across India's Boundaries* (2017) along the lines of the emerging area of place attachment under 'Environmental Humanities' in the wake of a putative 'spatial turn' in arts and humanities discourse. Exploring the preference for precarious landscapes among borderlanders offers a unique platform for literature to engage with contemporary environmental issues, which have largely centered on the relatively stable mainland. Damodaran's work reveals that the border dwellers' attachment to the place is complex, politically charged, and deeply implicated in environmental justice. Despite living in a malleable landscape, they gain a sense of protection, and the value of preference seems to cluster around a topophilic preference for the borderlands, which emerge in distinctive ways. This research examines the aspect of 'place attachment' and also aims to argue that everyday practices such as residing in precarious geographies can function as tactical forms of resistance that subvert dominant spatial orders in society.

Keywords: Borderland, Place, Preference, Space, Topophilia.

* PhD Research Scholar, School of Humanities and Social Science, Department of English, Central University of Tamil Nadu

† PhD Research Scholar, School of Humanities and Social Science, Department of English, Central University of Tamil Nadu

Introduction

In 2005, Halttunen, in her presidential address to the American Studies Association, posited that “Space and place have never been more analytically important than they have recently become in the humanities and social sciences, demonstrating that globalisation – with its acceleration of border crossings – has made place more important, not less” (2). The advent of the spatial turn at the latter end of the twentieth century tended to re-emphasise the social nature of space. It demanded a movement away from seeing space as absolute, contained, static, and unchanged, but the concept of place was slowly abandoned. Extensive debates about space and place, their similarities and differences, have engaged scholars since the time of Aristotle. While some scholars have used ‘space’ and ‘place’ interchangeably in their writings, others, such as Edward Casey and Yi-Fu Tuan, who primarily focus on place, have clearly distinguished between them, particularly through their phenomenological and affective dimensions.

Casey has explored the confluence between place, identity, and placelessness, offering critical insights into the phenomenological and existential dimensions of being placed and unplaced. His notion of “placescapes” (25) and the function of lived or embodied experiences in transforming space into place is analogous to Tuan’s postulations, emphasising the notion that places are more than mere geographical locations. Furthermore, Casey also argues that the concept of place is concrete and inextricably linked to action and thought. Therefore, through his exposition, it can be understood that, although place is often relegated to a subordinate position beneath time and space, in everyday lived experience, it holds a central and indispensable role. “Place is a *primus inter pares*, a first among equals; and the same holds for the relationship between place and space,” for Casey (13). Thus, for him, place

is not a passive backdrop but is an active, generative force that shapes human experience, perception, and memory.

In *Getting Back into Place: Toward A Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Casey states, “Even when we are displaced, we continue to count upon some reliable place, if not our present precarious perch, then a place-to-come or a place-that-was” (ix). Further, he argues that “Being guarantees place. As a result, the idea of the void is voided out” (xi). This idea resonates in the context of borderland inhabitants who, despite being situated in precarious or marginal geographies, refute the notion of spatial void. Their tenacity in living and dwelling in the liminal zones reiterates Casey’s contention that being guarantees ‘place,’ that existence itself imbues space with meaning, thereby refuting dominant discourses that frame these lands as vacant, perilous, or contemptible of habitation. Here, Casey’s notion of being and place resonates with Tuan’s concept of topophilia, which examines how space converts into place through familiarity and emotional attachment.

Tuan looks at the human bond of place or topophilia in three ways: the ways in which humans respond to the environment, the familiarity and awareness of the past to topophilia, and the impact of urbanisation on the countryside. He also mentions that to understand one’s environmental preference, one should delve into the aspects of biological heritage, upbringing, education, job and, most importantly, the physical surroundings. When a group, on the whole, prefers a place, it is necessary to dissect the group’s cultural history. Thus, for Tuan, culture and environment overlap. He argues that while even the visitor might have a fleeting viewpoint, the native “has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment” (63). Topophilia differs greatly in intensity, subtlety and mode of expression. The most difficult feelings for Tuan to express are those of home since it is the locus of memories. While topophilia may not be one of the most intense emotions, it can carry

emotional events or be seen as a symbol when reinforced. While Casey touches upon the sensory dimensions of corporeal place, Tuan expands his concepts by exploring various ways of perceiving a place. Exercising this concept among people living on the borders of the Indian subcontinent, particularly, becomes an exciting task to undertake.

Between Nations, Beyond Logic: Precarious Preferences in Damodaran's Borderlands

Space and place are more significant to people living in the borderlands than to mainland residents. The early 21st century saw a spate of studies dismantling the conventional border definitions due to the number of migrants and refugees crossing the borders. While many traditional scholars think of borders as the line of physical contact between nations, Wastl-Walter delineates that borderlands are creative and functional spaces that aid people on the border in developing specific cross-border economic, social, and cultural activities, which at the same time can also be perceived as a peripheral space characterised by a geographical marginality, the limited presence of state institutions, large proportions of Indigenous populations or ethnic minorities, and a weak socioeconomic structure (373). Thanachate Wisaijorn interprets the border as an in-between zone where two cultural territories intersect and form a single unit, which he terms the “borderland” (58). The heart of the discussion among border scholars is to argue that they become a territorial, dislocated, displaced entity and can be found in-between and everywhere. The notion that borders no longer have demarcated lines and can be found ‘everywhere’ has been widely explored in scholarship (Balibar; Balibar et al.; Konrad and Brunet-Jailly; Shachar). Only recently have articles challenging this notion by reintroducing the spatial dimension to border theory begun to appear (especially in the work of Peña). The renaissance of space brought concepts such as diverse notions of space, including spaces of place, non-places,

relational space, spaces of flows, striated space, smooth space, and liminal space, to the forefront. Yet, much of the scholarship above, largely conducted by geographers and humanists, focuses on urban landscapes, thereby virtually erasing or diminishing the presence of borderlands and their inhabitants. Hence, rather than imposing or duplicating the concepts derived from the mainland on borderlands, learning the nuanced “tactical” and everyday life practices is needed than the dominant “strategic” (De Certeau xix).

While place as a concept has been analysed and widely published in many areas, including environmental psychology, sociology, community psychology, human geography, and cultural anthropology, the idea is still nascent when it comes to borderland as a domain under travel literature. With the publication of works like *Gazing at Neighbours: Travels Along the Lines that Partitioned India* by Bishwanath Ghosh and *Midnight's Borders: A People's History of Modern India* by Suchitra Vijayan, Indian travel writing has seen the emergence of what may be called “border travelogues.” This essay will situate Pradeep Damodaran’s travelogue *Borderlands: Travels Across India's Boundaries* in the wake of a putative ‘spatial turn’ in arts and humanities discourse by analysing the stories of people who live on the fringes. Among the travel books about India, Damodaran’s book is a unique collection of stories about people living on the borderlands. The book was the result of his extensive travels across India’s boundaries over 18 months between 2015 and 2016, and it was shortlisted for the 15th Raymond Crossword Book Award in the non-fiction category. His travel to the borderlands, living amongst them and collecting their stories, is an archival oddity, especially considering the Indian subcontinent’s diverse landscape, from sharing borders with countries to an island that marks the end of the nation. He presents an intriguing description of the residents of ten tranquil towns, lonely villages, and pristine islands, which stand or are positioned on the edges of Indian territory. Through his

encounters with the inhabitants, it is made clear that these regions often share deeper socio-cultural and linguistic ties with neighbouring countries than with their motherland, India. Damodaran mulls over in his preface that, in his imagination, the boundaries of a nation were inhabited by people who preferred to lead free lives on the fringes, unhindered by the border regulations or societal obligations of a particular nation, with the choice of walking/swimming over to other countries whenever the urge struck them. His observation essentially implies that the places far away from our own should be virginal and removed from the troubles of the mainland, making these destination spots for the general populace of India.

Curiously, when Damodaran visits ten such sites (a village or even an island), a pattern emerges: people complain about living on the fringes, and they still thrive there despite the odds. The reader is left baffled after almost every story narrated by the borderlander, whom we deem a spectral presence. Damodaran's "trivial, often mundane observations that reveal the identity of a place in subtle ways" (Pati and Longkumer 3–4) raise an important question: Why do they resent the place and continue to live there? To this end, the present research analyses why people choose to rebuild their homes in the exact location where they had experienced contemporary environmental issues such as habitat loss and severe weather changes. It also seeks to answer the question of why people remain in relatively underdeveloped and isolated villages with limited employment prospects, even after attaining higher education, by analysing the factors that entice people to live in places bound by spatial-temporal constraints. This study focuses on the affective attachment humans have towards a place that deplores logic through Tuan's concept of *Topophilia*.

Despite living in a malleable landscape, the borderlanders gain a sense of protection, and the value of preference seems to cluster around a 'topophilic' preference for the land and do

justice to the place. Exploring the preference for precarious landscapes among borderlanders offers a unique platform for literature to engage with contemporary environmental issues, which have largely centered on the relatively stable mainland, especially significant given that these regions are already marked by geopolitical precarity and now face the added burden of ecological vulnerability. Subsequently, this paper will analyse such selections from Damodaran's book, exploring their 'sense of preference' for dwellings facing environmental crises and trace the topophilic sentiment, a fortiori, that sustains them. It also argues that by choosing to stay in the noxious regions, borderlanders engage in a form of resistance, an essential subterfuge against standard ideals.

Tracing the Topophilic Sentiment in Precarious Landscapes

Dhanushkodi

Although modern weather forecasting systems can be useful in anticipating cyclones, they cannot be controlled. The multiplicity of factors, ranging from speed, pressure, and humidity, is just a few of the factors that control their landfall. Their end can be catastrophic at times, which reminds humans of their minuscule presence. "“You do believe me now, don't you?” my guide went on. ‘A place like this exists in 21st century Tamil Nadu’” (Damodaran 7). Nothing has changed for the people of Dhanushkodi in Tamil Nadu since the deadly cyclone in 1964. The place had been left to rot while the rest of the state had seen much progress. The place has the barest minimum of the basic necessities that we take for granted – electricity, food, healthcare, and education. They defer buying milk packets because they have no electricity for a refrigerator. Thus, it is unsurprising that a stranger's presence (Damodaran's visit) is a spectacle among the residents who crowd to stare at him. But the place was once booming and well-connected by road and rail until the devastating 1964 cyclone. Following the 1964

cyclone's devastation of the entire area, the then-state government declared Dhanushkodi unsafe for permanent habitation. Even though the government allotted new land for them, several fishermen relocated to their ancestral town of Dhanushkodi and continued to live there with their kids. Damodaran notes that, apart from being their ancestral home, the place is situated at the confluence of two oceans, making it a lucrative fishing spot. The people of Dhanushkodi, who have known one place and one job all their lives, do not worry about isolation. The act of relocating even after the catastrophe and the lingering presence of impending danger anytime, some 250 families of people shifted back after living in shelters for a short time because Dhanushkodi is their home, guaranteeing their being.

Apart from the cyclone, political issues too have contributed to the insolation of the region. The roads, which were wide enough to have full-fledged bus services, are now abandoned after the civil war broke out between the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the Sri Lankan authorities. Given the proximity of Dhanushkodi to Sri Lanka, the area has suffered significantly, and most of the 250 families do not possess a ration card and have been neglected by successive governments. On the other hand, the place still grapples with a precarious environment. Damodaran recounts the story of how he was overcome by a sudden, fierce depression when he visited Arichal Munai, the extreme point of Indian soil closest to Sri Lanka, technically the borderland. Visiting the place early in the morning, along with this local guide, what seemed to be a stillness before dawn broke into a squall. As he and his local guide ran for cover, the guide warned that the shifting sands beneath them might disappear, leaving them stranded. But just as quickly as it arrived, the storm passed, revealing a calm sea and the rising sun. This incident underscores for both Damodaran and his guide the inherent unpredictability of the region. However, upon their return, they observe the town

resuming its daily rhythms, with fishermen casting their nets and life unfolding as usual. The acceptance and integration of seasonal or devastating cyclones typical of their region have enabled the community to live with them.

Bachelard describes home as our “first universe” (4), a microcosm where we find security and familiarity. Even when disconnected from global affairs, individuals derive solace from their homes, transforming this intimate space into their entire universe. In this sense, the home becomes synonymous with one’s perception of the wider world, offering a profound sense of belonging and continuity, which is visible in the inhabitant’s narration. Even though the lament of the resident is ubiquitous throughout Damodaran’s book, one can decipher after reading a few pages that the resident’s outcry is only a call for a better quality of life, not a protest against the place. An elderly tea shop owner keeps his shop open only for his familiar, long-time customers, still rising early each day to serve tea to the fishermen, for whom his shop marks the first stop before their long day at sea. If he does not wake up and get his shop ready, a significant part of their routine will collapse because his shop is the only one for the entire community. Even though the tea shop owner comments to Damodaran that running a tea shop is like being in jail, he continues to wake up before even the fishermen.

As Chrystopher J. Spicer writes, “Storytellers continue to reveal and re-affirm relationships between the catastrophe and the community, between their place and their culture” (13). The communal cohesiveness of Dhanushkodi, the last land of India, is an indication of the regional love that the community shares, a story of a catastrophe that they met with resilience and tenacity, and came back to their original place. The incessant roar of the waves and the turbulent gusts of wind are the constant companions for these families, but they alone find solitude from them. The story of 1964 is a tale that tested their spirits, one that later became a shared reality. Sharing the same trauma and chaos

might unite people around a cause that celebrates uniqueness and individuality, making them different from those who do not. However, these people return to clear the ruins and rebuild their lives in the place they know. The residents embrace the primordial abode, appreciating the humdrum routine, and prefer to live in the isolated land while patiently waiting for the government to notice them. The sense of familiarity felt by these people is a highly complex one, especially after their homes were ravaged by the cyclone and they returned to build from scratch. The reluctance to part with old ways is akin to some people's attachment to an old slipper or worn-out dress. Hence, Dhanushkodi becomes a preferred place, protecting them from the bewilderment of the outside world and offering them a sense of comfort that no other place can possibly provide.

Minicoy

Islands signify a small tract of land surrounded by water, which makes them detached from the mainland. The general assumption that islands are defined by their isolation, offering them as "natural laboratories" (Quamman 18), has been disproven by many scholars. Elizabeth Deloughrey also argues that tropical islands, as an isolated and ahistorical space separated from world-making, were an intrinsic aspect of British colonial ideology (305). It is thus surprising that Tuan, who is renowned for his works on environment and topophilia, imprisons the island in an imaginative realm:

Unlike the tropical forest or the continental seashore [the island] cannot claim ecological abundance, nor—as an environment—has it mattered greatly in man's evolutionary past. Its importance lies in the imaginative realm.... In numerous legends the island appears as the abode of the dead or of immortals. Above all, it symbolizes a state of prelapsarian innocence and bliss,

quarantined by the sea from the ills of the continent.
(118)

Tuan fails to capture the significance of the island as a lived environment, one where humans can belong. By drawing on evolutionary history and mythology to support his point, it appears that he has undermined his concept of topophilia by overlooking the people who live on islands. By claiming that islands exist only in the imaginative sphere, he compromises the sense of place of islanders. While numerous pieces of literature exist on islands being the place for castaways, exiles and even prisoners and have been a source of inspiration for many writers, as Massey rightly points out, any given place can still have a character of its own (153). Tuan, at the beginning of the chapter titled “Environment and Topophilia,” writes that certain environments can provide the necessary stimuli for humans to perceive topophilic feelings, and these sensory stimuli are infinite (113). While he regards the seashore and the valley as great stimulators, he confines the island to the human imagination, viewing it as a temporary escape from the high-pressure environment on the continent (120). It is thus highly likely that in his romanticised depiction of islands, Tuan overlooks the lived experiences of islanders themselves. It is, hence, coherent to derive the same reasons that Tuan lists as the descriptors of an island – a dearth of ecological wealth and seclusion from the pretentiousness of city life helps the islanders, as a community (spatially bound), to sustain and thrive, as is visible in the story of Minicoy.

Minicoy, a spatially isolated island, has been a part of India’s neglected history. This is visible in a local resident’s recollection that many Minicoy natives were unaware of India’s independence from British rule until 1951. Administratively, it is a census town in the Indian union territory of Lakshadweep. According to the 2011 Indian census, the island of Minicoy had a population of 10,447. The island is blanketed with coconut

trees, and naturally, the coconut business seemed lucrative. However, the indifference of successive governments toward promoting the local industry has led the islanders to buy even coir ropes from the mainland. Lately, the only popular profession is studying to become a sailor and waiting for a call from a shipping company. Despite receiving little to no support from the mainland, the people of Minicoy have successfully created a self-sustaining community and take pride in being the largest contributors of sailors to the Indian Navy.

Hassan, a Minicoy resident, claims that the entire community flocks to help those in need. These lines witness the spirit of community quarantined by the sea: “Nobody in this island is ever alone or homeless people” (Damodaran 55). Although officials complain that islanders feign illness to obtain permits and visit the mainland, they often resort to sightseeing and aimless roaming. The mainland is, for them, a tourist destination to observe the ills of the continent. “We don’t ever consider leaving our island because here, we are one close family,” Hassan declared, reiterating their unity, while Nizam nodded in agreement, “It is our great asset. Elsewhere, I would have had to struggle for a living alone, with no support whatsoever from the community” (Damodaran 56).

Essentially, they have cultivated a sense of place and identity, ultimately achieving contentment with their delicate circumstances. The lack of natural luxuriance kindles the enterprising spirit in the islanders, who learn to respect their immediate environment and make use of it judiciously. They have created a story there, and the spatial imprisonment does not seem to be an issue, as they prefer the island over the mainland. The ability to call the entire island a family showcases the recondite affair of their ‘sense of preference’ and uncovers the topophilic sentiment among the inhabitants who consider the island their greatest shared asset. Although they share a collective bond, it is, in fact, the particular experiences and

singular happenings that consolidate the sense of belonging, resulting in preference.

Campbell Bay

“Those ten years of our life were completely wasted,” recalls Shankar, one of the surviving residents of Campbell Bay in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, after the devastating tsunami of 2004. A National Geographic publication on the Indian Ocean Tsunami notes that the “earthquake in the ocean triggered tsunami waves that raced towards the shores of a dozen countries along the Indian Ocean. Some locales were struck by waves 110 feet tall – the height of an 11-story building” (Fradin et al. 92). Damodaran also notes how the residents were unaware of the word tsunami before the tragedy struck. Until 2004, the residents of Campbell lived peacefully in a lush green environment, with the place blessed with natural abundance. While some people left for the mainland after the tsunami destroyed everything they knew, many returned to their homes after enduring hardships in the shelter bases. When Damodaran visited the place, the residents were conducting and organising meetings to rebuild the place, but as Shankar notes, there is not much they can do without the government’s help. These are the same people whose playtime involved little hunting trips, fishing in the freshwater, and playing hide and seek in the forest. For the children of Campbell Bay, the forest was their companion, their playmate, but the tsunami took them away. By rebuilding the same place, the people want their children to enjoy the same merriment of forests, lakes, beaches and sea without any fear, “seeing it as a creature of destruction but also a source of nourishment” (Rastogi 144). The tsunami, as always, is headlined around the world as taking place on a particular date is not just a temporal event. It is essential to recognise it as an unfinished story rather than considering it as a singular event that has occurred. As William Wright notes, “things do not go

‘back to normal,’ but rather what is considered normal, ordinary and part of the everyday fundamentally changes” (6).

An interesting form of topophilia lingers in some of the older residents of Campbell Bay. While we have seen so far that people attached to these borderlands are natives, around 300 families migrated from the mainland to Campbell Bay under the Indira Gandhi-led government. The then-government’s resettlement policy offered them land, money to build their homes, vessels, furniture, livestock, and even free rations. These families tilled and worked on the land, and started seeing the results of their labour. While this was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the residents, after surviving the tsunami that had taken away everything, raised a rather simple question: “What is left there for us to return to?” (Damodaran 373), referring not to the tsunami-ravaged lands but to the mainland. These older residents came to Campbell in their younger days, worked hard, and created a family in an ecosystem that has become a part of their lives; thus, the idea of returning to the mainland for a better life seems an alien concept. The neglect of the successive governments towards Campbell Bay is evident in many of the residents’ stories, whose narration makes the tsunami the centerpiece. For the residents, life before and after the tsunami represents a profound turning point, marking not just a moment in history but a deeply personal narrative of loss, resilience, and strong community-building. Their children, who grew up in a pristine environment, eating nature’s offerings, also do not wish to go to the mainland and find it “suffocating” (Damodaran 372). The politics, communal disharmony riots, traffic and pollution are all non-native concepts on an island like Campbell Bay, where people from multiple communities and religions co-exist and identify themselves as one group. Yet, there is a lack of viable transportation facilities for even residents like Sephal Majumdar, a beach lifeguard at Campbell Bay, whose only son secured a spot at a prestigious residential school on Car Nicobar Island but fell ill in the first month. Sephal could not meet his

son for a week since there were no ships or helicopters available to go to Car Nicobar. His vivid recollection of this incident serves as a call for improved infrastructure in the area that was devastated by a historic tsunami. With a sense of belonging, all these residents prefer Campbell Bay and long for a better quality of life in their homeland.

Conclusion

While topophilia fuses space and time, the debate over which of the abstractions takes precedence is hard labour, as the range and intensity of the feeling takes the fulcrum. The inhabitant is not an impassioned entity but rather a subject intimately tied to the place. They live in spaces that they have made meaningful themselves. They are all spaces to which people are attached in one way or another. Although the people have their share of tragedies from living on the outskirts, the connectedness to the place they live, where they find their space, is firmly ingrained. The argument developed thus far seems to be captured in its entirety in Tawang, an extremely cold border town in Arunachal Pradesh when Damodaran asks a resident ““Why would an educated young man live in a godforsaken place like Tawang, which can barely manage four or five hours of electricity every day and lies a good fifteen hours away by road from the nearest railway station or airport?”” (Damodaran 230). The young man replies he did try living on the mainland for a while, but he was not happy and moved back to Tawang, where he feels the comfort of a home (Damodaran 231).

The borderlanders from Dhanushkodi, Minicoy, Campbell Bay and Tawang choose to stay in the peripheral geographies that are consistently threatened by ecological degradation, cyclones, and governmental neglect, depicting their defiant attachment to place, challenging the urge for relocation and the dominant logic of disposability that often renders such regions invisible in the national consciousness. This act of ‘staying put’

challenges the dominant state narrative that frequently renders borderlands as peripheral, insecure, or expendable zones requiring surveillance, militarisation, or abandonment (Jones 126–45). As scholars like Michel de Certeau argue, everyday practices such as residing in precarious geographies can function as tactical forms of resistance that subvert dominant spatial orders in society (xix). Likewise, Eyal Weizman expounds how spatial politics, particularly in conflict zones, operate through the control and reconfiguration of land, yet the people who remain assert a counter-claim to space and belonging (7–9). Their persistent presence transforms into a kind of daily resistance, where sustaining in the same place is not only necessary but also an attempt to demonstrate one's identity, sense of belonging, and historical continuity. Even as authority produces space by cutting it up, differentiating between parcels of space, and abusing borders and markers, these communities resist the logic of fragmentation by embodying a continuity of presence (Pile and Keith 3). Moreover, Razack argues that peripheral geographies often become repositories of resistance precisely because they challenge spatial technologies of domination that seek to control movement and visibility (158). Thus, the borderlanders, through their embodied practices of endurance and emplacement, reconfigure these spaces not as voids but as lived geographies that defy state-imposed meanings of disposability and marginality.

Place, according to Massey, is a synthesis of space and time, essentially to be seen “as spatio-temporal events” (130). Criticising the time-space compression concept, she calls for a progressive sense of place where factors apart from capital are also taken into account, since not all social groups are equally placed in the power geometry. While space and time are coterminous to aid one in developing a sense of preference for a place, it seems that for Borderlanders (if we call them a

community), this sentiment towards a place is not reactionary due to their sense of dislocation from the mainland but is to be located among the kernel of uniqueness that is parroted in the story of every borderland. Rather than recognising places as areas bounded by boundaries, it might be helpful to think of them as articulated moments within networks of social relations and understandings. Thus, on a wider scale, this act of recognition makes the Borderlanders witness their place not as mere lines drawn on maps but as places capable of simultaneously orchestrating the conventional system of spatial dividers—by linking them with other places—and also developing a sense of preference towards them amongst the chaos and disorder internally.

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Influence of Mythological Names on the Construction of Societal Roles in Kamrupi and Goalpariya Oral Narratives

Runjun Devi*

Abstract

Human cultures revolve around their oral traditions, through which they communicate their gathered experience and wisdom from one generation to another. In these traditions, most prominently in Indian culture, we often observe a tendency to name certain societal roles from historical or mythological contexts. This practice bears meaning beyond just labelling and cementing people's roles or actions within the societal context. This is more than a simple practice and bears deep cultural meanings within the threshold of oral tradition and cultural consciousness. In this study, we explore how Kamrupi and Goalpariya oral traditions in Northeast India assign mythological names to social roles, creating a system that encodes cultural knowledge and delineates roles within established parameters. When we examine the repertoire of folksongs, lullabies, ceremonial wedding songs, or biyanaam, we notice a pattern referencing mythologies. When mythological figures like Krishna appear in love ballads, Ram and Sita in wedding songs, or ritual participants are addressed as Yashoda or Devaki, these names immediately invoke specific social expectations regarding status and behaviour, guiding individuals toward culturally recognised roles. By combining insights from linguistics, memory studies, and sociology, this paper examines how mythological naming functions as a powerful cultural language that bridges the past with the present through shared cultural threads.

Keywords: Folksongs, Goalpariya folksongs, Kamrupi folksongs, Mythological naming practices, Oral traditions.

* PhD Research Scholar, Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University

Introduction

Human cultures fundamentally depend on their languages and dialects to communicate and convey meaning that extends beyond lateral communication. These linguistic systems are precursors to oral traditions designed for trans-generational communication as they impart valuable wisdom and experiences from one generation to another. Within this process of cultural communication, we see the ingrained practice of anchoring societal roles by designating community positions with names drawn from well-accepted and familiar contexts such as history, mythology, or even local legends.

We discuss this practice, which is a unique and all too prevalent aspect of Indian culture. For instance, while it might be a taboo in other countries to even mention or hint at the name of Hitler or the Nazi party, Indians have no compunction at using these names in their everyday speech. In India, it is possible for a young protagonist of a movie to exclaim, “kaun kambakht kehta hai Hitler mar gaya” (which rascal says that Hitler is dead), just because his boss is a tyrant and rules with an iron fist. Yet such films get approved without any such dialogue being censored. This is not the only example; adolescents are often seen referring to their parents, the patriarch of the family in particular, imposing strict rules upon them, by the name of Hitler; the young beau of a girl referred to as Romeo or Majnu—both characters from beloved texts; traitors being christened Bibhishan, Mir Jafarⁱ, or Badanⁱⁱ, all three referencing a mythological or historical betrayal.

This practice of drawing names from mythological or historical contexts for social roles does not simply offer linguistic convenience, but also constructs a semiotic system that translates and signifies cultural values and behavioural expectations. This paper examines how, in Indian culture, mythological texts permeate rites, customs, and everyday life,

beginning with an exploration of mythological naming practices within a community, culture and folklore.

When a social role is associated with a mythological figure, it becomes associated with communal understandings that predefine its responsibilities and social standing. The community, recognising these mythological references, immediately grasps the role within their shared cultural memory, enabling the people to act with the appropriate expectations.

Oral narratives serve as the primary repositories of cultural knowledge in most traditional societies, especially in communities in which written documentation or scripture has historically been limited. These narratives, such as myths, folktales, proverbs, songs, and ritual recitations, function as cultural archives to preserve knowledge, experiences, and metaphysical concepts that shape the community. These oral narratives are dynamic, hence, capable of accumulating more knowledge over time while preserving fundamental elements of culture and worldview.

Studying oral narratives creates a unique understanding of the worldview and cultural progression of a community. These narratives reveal underlying concepts such as cultural contexts, assumptions, values, and moral codes that shape how community members perceive and interact with the world. An analysis of recurring motifs, character archetypes, narrative structures, and linguistic patterns in oral traditions allows us to reconstruct a community's understanding of nature and society. This approach is especially important in contexts where historical documentation is scarce or filtered through colonial perspectives.

The Goalpariya and Kamrupi oral traditions of Assam offer us an opportunity to examine how mythological naming practices construct social relationships and cultural memory.

Developed within the culturally diverse region of Lower Assam, these traditions have retained distinctive narrative forms despite modernising influences. By examining how these communities assign mythological names to social roles, we gain insight into their social organisation and value systems. When a naughty child is referred to as Kanai—the young lord Krishna, who frustrated the entire population of Gokul with his shenanigans—it offers social boundaries and moral responsibilities as well as expectations of behaviour that come with the name. This practice of mythological association offers an explanation as to how societal roles exist in their current form and, at the same time, reinforces how individuals in these positions ought to behave. This offers the community a chance to adhere to the olden codes and open new avenues as per the time demands, simultaneously.

Theoretical framework

The practice of designating mythological names to social roles can be examined through a multidisciplinary theoretical lens that combines semiotics, memory studies, depth psychology, and sociological theory. Mythological naming is not merely a stylistic or narrative device, but a culturally embedded semiotic system that codifies social meaning and behaviour. When a culture invokes a mythological figure to describe a person or role—calling a devoted wife to be Parvati or a cunning trickster to be Narada, it is a way of establishing a metaphor that reflects and shapes the collective understanding of social norms and identities, leading us to Roman Jakobson's concept of Metaphor. According to Jakobson, metaphor is essentially substitution, where a concept or an object is replaced by another object with which it shares a semantic similarity (55-82). When, in an oral narrative, the beloved is metaphorically referred to as Radha, it is not simply a literary flourish. Instead, it is a categorical substitution that communicates the need for a general set of values and expectations. This metaphor compresses the entire set

of values, expectations, and understandings into a single term. It enables listeners to immediately understand the role being played, the values being represented, and the potential consequences of such behaviour. In this sense, mythological naming is a semiotic strategy that maximises interpretation.

Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory analyses how mythological figures function as stable reference points within a society's semiotic understanding. Cultural memory refers to the long-term, collectively shared knowledge that a society maintains across generations through rituals, texts, and symbols (Assmann 36). Mythological names, in this context, would serve as figures of memory which are the iconic carriers of meaning that transmit the entire concept of ethics, behavioural patterns, and societal expectations. These names belong to what Assmann calls the "cultural canon," a specific collection of symbols and narratives that translates to the society's foundational values. Thus, by designating social roles with mythological names, a culture ensures the continuity of its morality and worldview, reinforcing metaphysical concepts such as loyalty, heroism, sacrifice, or treachery. Such naming practices are thus not only narrative tools but mechanisms of ideological reproduction.

Naming also functions as a social framing device, a concept drawn from the sociological theories of Erving Goffman and subsequent scholars. Frames are interpretive structures that allow individuals to understand "what is going on" in any given situation (Goffman 21). When a mythological name is applied to a person, it acts as a frame signal, cueing the audience to interpret the person's actions, status, and meaning within a predefined narrative. The name effectively scripts behaviour and expectation: to be named "Lakshmi" is to be read as auspicious and nurturing; to be called "Narada" is to be positioned within a frame of ethical grey area or mildly malicious gossiping. Through this framing, mythological naming not only reflects a

perceived social reality but also contributes to its ongoing performance and negotiation.

Discussion and Analysis:

In the oral traditions prevalent in Kamrup and Goalpara, we see such practices in abundance. Use of mythological names to define social roles is an accepted and encouraged practice in oral narratives. The researcher speculates that the cause of this is rooted in the folk belief of using one's name. In many cultures, of which Assam is also one, belief assigns a huge importance to the name of a person. In the Lower Assam area, it is said that too much usage of one's name saps their vital forces. At the same time, referencing relatives for the purpose instead of using one's name is not perilous. Therefore, people are usually referred to as so-and-so's father, so-and-so's mother, so-and-so's wife, etc. Thus, the usage of mythological names in place of the actual name allows the people to avoid this evil omen.

A simple folk belief certainly does not explain the widespread tendency of the Kamrupi and Goalpariya culture to designate mythological names to societal roles. For this, one needs to delve deep and scrutinise the usage of mythological naming in oral narratives.

An examination of oral narratives from Goalpara reveals that this practice is widespread and well established. Of course, the Goalpariya oral traditions also show the use of Bondhu (Goalpariya dialect meaning "friend") to refer to friend/paramour/ beloved. Other terms used in a similar context are Sonar Bondhu (golden friend) / Sakha (friend) / Chengra (boy) / poraner bondhu (friend of my heart) / poti (Husband) / potidhon (precious husband) / bondhujan (friend), and others. The feminine counterpart is represented in the songs through terms such as Sokhi (female friend), Kanya (girl/bride), sojoni (beloved friend), nari (woman).

However, we also see mythological characters making appearances, Kanai or Krishna as the eternal beloved and the feminine counterpart as Radha, the beloved sacred feminine.

Oho re, kemone jaibo nodir oi pare/ Aami satar nahi jaani re.

Oho re, nodir oi pare pare/ Kanai (Kala in other versions) bajai mohan banshi re.

Translation (mine): Oh, how do I cross this river, I don't know how to swim. Oh, on the other bank, my beloved is playing his mesmerising flute (Nath 382).

Tor ei madhur banshir sur re/ Laaj bhoi mor naai re.

Oho re kemone bajan Kala re/ sur sunong mui kanere.

Translation (Author): This sweet melody of your flute/ has taken away my inhibitions. Oh, my beloved, how you play the flute, it reaches straight to my ear (Nath 382).

Hai re hai, saak tulite joubon korim daan, oho dhon kanaiya re.

Translation (Author): Oh, I'll gift you my youth when I leave to gather green leaves, oh my beloved (Nath 385).

Here, we see Kanai or Kala is used to refer to the singer's beloved.

Oho kala, aar nabajan banshuri, banshir sure radha mui roite na pari...

Translation (Author): Oh, beloved, don't play your flute anymore. Your flute doesn't let your beloved rest (Goswami 140). Here, the singer asks her beloved not to play his flute anymore as she can't rest hearing the melody. The singer

also refers to herself as Radha, and her beloved is referred to as Kala. We can also point out the anthropomorphisation of the moon as one's beloved in these haunting folksongs of love, desire, and despair. The names usually seen being used are Chand (moon), Sonar Chand (the golden moon) as the masculine term referring to one's beloved, and Chandmoni (the moon gem) and Chander Sokhi (the beloved of the moon) as the feminine term. There are also instances where the characters are called by their professions in the oral narratives. Thus, we see the words Moishaal (buffalo herd), Mahut (elephant keeper), Sadhu or Saud (merchant), manjhi (ferryman), Doiyaal (dairy merchant), haluwa or Sasha (farmer). Some such instances are as follows,

Aakashote chondro uthere manjhi, oho Manjhi songe loiya taara.

Aar koto kaal roibo Manjhi, sathi haara hoiya, Manjhi re.

Translation (Author): The moon rises in the sky, oh my ferryman, with the stars. How long do I wait, my ferryman, without a consort? (Nath 437)

Oho mor hai hastir konya re, khaniko daya nai mahutok *lagiya re...*

Translation (Author): Oh, my maiden of elephants, take pity on this poor mahut (Goswami 135).

Khata khuta mahut re tur gale chap dari, sotyo koriya kon re mahut konba deshe bari re

Hostire norang, hostire chorang, hostir paaye beri, sotyo koriya koilam konya gauripure bari re.

Translation (mine): Oh, short, short-statured mahut, you sport a beard on your cheeks. Tell the truth, where is your home? I move the elephant, I herd the elephant with chains

on their legs, I tell the truth, girl, my home is in Gauripur (Nath 442). As we see, the two lovers call each other mahut and kanya.

Similar practices are also observed in Kamrupi folksongs. However, this trait of mythological naming is not limited to songs of love and despair, where the only characters are two lovers. Other social roles are also designated with names from mythological contexts. The folksongs sung during Anna-prashanna, the first ritual rice eating of a newborn, is one such example. The ritual demands that the maternal uncle of the baby feed it the first bite of rice. As ritual demands, the annaprasoner geet (the ritual song of Anna-Prasanna) asks,

Oho re chawar mama- krishna mama oi,

Anna khuwate lage Sajiya aayre tui.

Translation (Author): Oh, the maternal uncle of the child, oh Krishna, you need to feed the rice, get ready, and come (Nath 572).

Similar instances are seen in the Churakoroner geet, the ritual song of cutting a baby's first hair.

Jonomer chuli thoise bhage bhage, bamuner bakye chuli felowa lage.

Yashodar kolat thoi Nandai bhagai chuli, mamai je katite laage.

Translation (Author): The baby's hair from birth is parted with care, the priest asks to cut it off. Put the baby on the mother's lap, let the father part the hair, and let the maternal uncle cut it off (Nath 272). This song calls for both the father and the mother, who are referred to as Yashoda and Nanda, the parents of Lord Krishna. Thus, the social role of the father and mother of the child is filled by the mythological

context of Krishna's parents. Notably, this ritual calls for the maternal uncle as well; however, since in the context of the myth, the maternal uncle is evil, the uncle is not named and is just referred to as mama.

It must be reiterated that Krishna or Kanai is not limited to only one societal role. In the stories, he is not just a lover. He was also known as a naughty child, a devoted husband and friend, and a devoted maternal uncle to Abhimanyu. Thus, depending upon the context of the oral tradition, the societal role depicted by the name Kanai or Krishna would vary.

Amar kanai hashe, sonar nupur pawot diya jhumur jhumur nache.

Translation (Author): Our child smiles, wearing golden anklets, our child dances (Nath 46-47).

This is a lullaby, where the child is referred to as Kanai. However, in the Bhomra geet, we find,

Krisna aar tumi oli ekoi soman, pratifule pori tumi koro modhu paan.

Translation (Author): You honeybees are just like Krishna; you taste honey from every flower (Nath 39). Here, Krishna is depicted as the eternal lover who had affairs with many women. In the examples above, we have also seen Krishna or Kanai fulfilling the role of the good maternal uncle and the devoted lover wooing his lady with his melodious flute. In some of the songs, we also see a back-and-forth dialogue between two amorous singers, who usually refer to themselves as Krishna and Radha. Studying these songs, folklorist Dwijen Nath observed, "... using dialogues inside the song is a notable trait of Goalpariya folk songs" (459).

While Krishna is portrayed as either the beloved or the naughty child, once the marriage ceremony approaches, the societal role changes, and so does the character. In both Kamrupi and Goalpariya oral narratives, the bridegroom is usually referred to as Ram, and the bride is referred to as Sita or Janaki. However, we also see Shiva and Parvati in the same context. Similarly, the bride's father is referred to as Janak. We don't see a mention of Janak's wife, Sunaina, in such oral narratives.

Aaier haater kata guwa ram nakhai laaje

Hatot dhorī sifal kore somajer maaje

Translation (Author): the groom does not eat betelnut cut in the mother-in-law's hand; he keeps holding it among the crowd (Sarma 57-58). Here, we see the groom being referred to as Ram, but the bride's mother is simply referred to as aai.

Other examples include,

Sobe bole ramor biya, anandito hoiya, raaijok matiya anise, tamulpaan diya.

Translation (Author): People say, today is Ram's wedding, everyone is invited with betelnut and leaves (Sarma 57-58).

Doi maser bhar re, kataya guwa paan re, kiba sajane janakir, Joran aahil re

Translation (Author): Shoulderfuls of curd and fish, cut betel leaves, and nuts. Is Janaki ready yet? Her Joron is here (Sarma 63). These examples show the bride and groom being traditionally referred to as Ram and Janaki. In Kamrup, the folksongs sung during various rituals of the wedding ceremony are extensive. There, we note that the bride and groom are almost always imagined as Ram and

Janaki or Shiva and Parvati. In scattered examples, Radha, Rukmini, and Krishna also make appearances.

What is of note about these songs is that they do not describe the marriage ceremony of, say, Ram and Janaki. Rather, these songs describe the rituals wherein the bride and groom are referred to by the names of their corresponding mythological characters. This observation gains further traction when, in the same Biyanaam, the mother and father of the groom are referred to as Yashoda or Daivaki and Nanda or Vasudev, respectively, while the bride and the groom are still being referred to as Ram and Janaki.

The song with reference to this observation is sung during “Pani tola.”

Maruwa... jiliki aahise, maruwa... Ramchandra re

Maruwa... Jiliki aahise ting

Maruwa... pani tuli aahe maruwa... Daivaki Sundari

Maruwa... haatot muthikharure chin.

Translation (Author): The groom is coming upon a boat that has a shining front. The groom’s mother is coming with the water, wearing bangles in her hands (Sarma 48). Here, the groom is called Ram, while the groom’s mother is called Devaki. Another panitola geet shows social roles being named after mythological figures that fit individually but come from different mythological stories.

Ehhate chati loi ulale Daivaki, joloke kamona kori o

Uthore Sankar, o Gouri, Digambar, Parvati gangake jai o.

Kaaxe ghot lua raadhe, oi ram, mathe lua mala he

Jamunak jaba lagi, oi ram, nokoriba hela he.

Translation (Author): Daivaki leaves with an umbrella in her hand to get water. Oh, young groom, get up, your bride also leaves for the river. Take a pitcher, blushing bride, wear a garland on your head, you're going to the river, do not tarry (Goswami 121). Here, the song describes the mother of the groom (as Daivaki) going to the river for the *pani tola* ritual. However, the groom is referred to as Sankar and the bride as Parvati. In the very next stanza, the blushing bride is painted as the amorous girl who wishes to wed her beloved, and hence, she is now referred to as Radha.

Nonetheless, conscious efforts to align mythological characters in these oral traditions can also be observed. In songs where Shiva and Parvati are the characters, the father of the bride is referred to as Hemavanta and the mother as Menaka, which tallies with the mythological context. Similarly, we see mentions of Bhishma and Janak as the fathers of the bride, where the bride is referred to as Rukmini and Janaki.

Thus far, in view of the linguistic and anthropological theories, the study has shown that oral narratives adopt different approaches in assigning social roles. The paper shall now discuss what this tendency of naming such roles from a mythological context has achieved.

Establishing context through mythological reference, Mythological names in Goalpariya and Kamrupi oral traditions function as cognitive shortcuts that efficiently communicate complex character attributes and expected behaviours. When narratives employ names like Radha or Parvati, they immediately evoke the archetype of a beautiful maiden experiencing first love, complete with emotional landscapes and behavioural expectations. Similarly, Krishna or Kanai references instantly conjure the beloved archetype characterised

by playful mischief and romantic pursuit. Figures like Shiva or Ram represent powerful masculinity, tempered by devotion and duty, demonstrating how mythological naming stratifies archetypes into distinct modalities with specific behavioural scripts.

This transmission of contextual information through mythological naming preserves narrative economy, ensures accessibility across varying levels of cultural literacy, and reinforces shared cultural references that strengthen community bonds. It also establishes continuity between mythological context and present experience, thereby suggesting that certain things, such as expectations from a societal role, are eternal.

Names from a mythological context can script behavioural expectations for both ritual participants and narrative characters. In ritual contexts such as the *Biyanaam* (wedding songs), participants are temporarily assigned mythological identities that guide their actions. When the groom's mother is referred to as Yashoda or Devaki, she is expected to embody these roles and perform according to their mythological precedents.

Anthropomorphisation of abstract concepts also takes place. The naming practices in these traditions frequently render philosophical and emotional complexities accessible through personification. Kanai (Krishna) invokes not merely a character but the embodiment of romantic love itself, while Yashoda concretises the concept of maternal love, giving form to universal emotional experiences.

This anthropomorphic function allows these oral traditions to explore complex emotional terrain through character-driven narratives rather than abstract discourse. By encoding concepts like devotion, sacrifice, and desire within mythological figures, the narratives create accessible entry points for engaging with profound cultural values. Community members develop

affective relationships with embodied concepts more readily than with abstract principles, strengthening cultural transmission through both emotional and cognitive channels.

The selection of specific mythological names from among potential alternatives signals moral judgments about societal roles. This selective deployment is particularly evident in the portrayal of kinship relationships such as the maternal uncle (mama), where multiple mythological options exist but carry distinct moral valences. When oral narratives represent the maternal uncle as Krishna (Abhimanyu's maternal uncle), they signal positive expectations for the role as protective and supportive. Similarly, references of Kamsa or Shakuni, maternal uncles with malevolent mythological precedents, immediately mark the character as untrustworthy or harmful.

This naming practice demonstrates how mythological references function as a cultural metaphor, communicating ethical inclinations without explicit commentary. By consistently associating positive portrayals of maternal uncles with Krishna and negative portrayals with Kamsa or Shakuni, the oral traditions establish and reinforce cultural expectations regarding appropriate behaviour within this relationship, creating a set of moral instructions encoded within a narrative.

Conclusion

The analysis of mythological naming practices in Goalpariya and Kamrupi oral narratives reveals sophisticated mechanisms through which these communities maintain cultural continuity while efficiently transmitting complex social knowledge. By designating societal roles with names with mythological contexts, these traditions create multidimensional frameworks that simultaneously provide context, script behaviour, personify abstractions, and signal moral valence. This naming system functions as a form of cultural language that allows performers

and audiences to access rich networks of association with minimal linguistic investment.

As demonstrated through Assmann's cultural memory theory, these practices go beyond simple labelling to become a medium to communicate values, expectations, and worldviews. The mythological names serve as an aide-memoire that connects present experiences to foundational narratives, establishing continuity between mythology and reality. This communication of memory reinforces cultural identity while providing a pre-determined way of navigating social relationships.

In an era of rapid cultural change, understanding these naming practices offers valuable insights into how oral traditions maintain resilience through symbolic efficiency. The Goalpariya and Kamrupi oral traditions demonstrate how mythological naming allows cultures to encode vast repositories of social knowledge within compact linguistic references, ensuring cultural preservation while facilitating adaptive interpretation across generations.

End Notes

- i Mir Jafar was the general who betrayed Siraj-ud-Daulah in the battle of Plassey in 1757, which led to the first threshold of East India Company rule in Bengal.
- ii Badan Barphukan was an advisor and general of the Ahom kingdom. He is known for his defection to the Burmese empire and the subsequent Burmese invasion of Assam.

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**Recreating the Green Imaginarie through the
Environmental Aesthetics in the Akam poetry
of Illanko Atikal's Cillapatikaram**

Manjeera G*

Abstract

Classical Tamil poetics contain within them an elaborate and extensive interplay between the natural and the human elements, which seem to co-exist and reflect in each other. This paper aims to map the different elements of nature and environment that the trope of Akam gives rise to in Classical Sangam poetry in Illanko Atikal's Tamil epic poem Cillapatikaram, or the Tale of the Anklet. The paper would like to contend that nature here serves not only as a mere literary device via which human emotions are expressed and personified but bears a more complex interrelation that unites the two elements without binarism, creating an eco-social zone where the two co-exist. Cillapatikaram, following the rubric created by Tolkappiyam, a guidebook of ancient Tamil literary arts, creates a highly detailed natural landscape with specific flora and fauna, presenting an organic relationship of natural elements with the human (Parthasarthy 286). This paper would like to briefly attempt the recreation of the ancient bio-ecological landscape, as created by the coded genres or *tinais* of Akam poetry. It concludes by extending the arguments of S. Murali, suggesting that in a re-envisioning of this environmental aesthetic in classical myths and epics, new greener imaginations can be revived, and the man-nature link reconfigured. It argues that the reconfiguration of detailed natural landscapes documented in the text has great ecological potential and can serve to enrich and rebuild the contemporary imagination of nature. Organically developed green imagination for the future's ecology in the context of the Indian sub-continent is unlikely to emerge from the Western modules, instead this paper attempts to make a case that

* PhD Research Scholar, EFLU, Hyderabad

the reconfigured ecology of the past can help present a more plausible landscape.

Keywords: Ancient Ecologies, Ancient Indian Poetry, Climate Change, Ecocriticism, Environmental Aesthetics, Literature.

Introduction

Classical Tamil poetics is marked by an elaborate interplay between nature and human life, where the two exist in mutual reflection rather than opposition. This paper explores the environmental and natural elements produced through the Akam trope in Classical Sangam poetry, focusing on their articulation in Ilanko Atikal's Cillapatikaram (The Tale of the Anklet). It contends that nature in the epic exceeds its role as a symbolic or expressive backdrop for human emotions and instead participates in a non-binary, interdependent relationship with the human. In accordance with the poetic principles laid down in the Tolkappiyam, Cillapatikaram presents a richly textured landscape of flora and fauna, emphasising an organic continuity between the natural and the social worlds (Parthasarthy 286). These natural elements form a system of correspondence where eco-systems become signifying sets. This paper attempts the recreation of the ancient bio-ecological landscape by utilising poetics in Cillapatikaram, as shaped by the coded genres or *tinais* of Akam poetry. It concludes by extending the arguments of S. Murali and Lawrence Buell, suggesting that in a re-envisioning of this environmental aesthetic in classical myths and epics, new greener imaginations can be revived and the man-nature link reconfigured. It argues that the reconfiguration of detailed natural landscapes documented in the text has great ecological potential and can serve to enrich and rebuild the contemporary imagination of nature.

The rich heritage of natural landscapes and elements of nature found in early Classical Tamil epics originate in guidelines that classify the different elements of Sangam poetry

in Tolkappiyam. The Tolkappiyam is the oldest surviving extant piece of Tamil literature that contains rules of grammar and the arts, dating back to 4th century C.E. (Takahashi 15). The chronology of Sangam poetics is not linear; it is very much possible that some of the main composite epic poems and literary pieces were penned before the conventions were laid out as they were developing in parallel. The third book of Tolkappiyam details the conventions of the art of poetry and divides poetry into two segments, the Akam and the Puram (Ramanujan, "Form" 197). The Akam strain involves the 'feminine' domain, dealing with the concepts of love and domesticity, whereas the Puram talks about heroic glory and war, the so-called 'masculine' realm. Within the rubric of Akam poetics, there is a complex relation between the natural elements and the human, including specific seasons, times of the day, natural landscape, flora, and fauna. The first element belongs to that of "time and place," the mutal; the second is the karu, or the "native elements," both of which interact with the final element of the sequence, the human element called uri, and vice versa (Ramanujan, Poems 237). Different stages of love, which are part of the human component uri, are evoked and represented through specific aspects of "natural" elements, i.e. the mutal and the karu. For example, the union of lovers, the 'kurunji' state, is always supposed to be represented in the dead of night, during the start of the cold season in the mountains. This is a unique tradition that has created a system of correspondences, or as A.K. Ramanujan puts it, "a whole language of signs," where natural landscapes and eco-systems become signifying sets (Poems 241). The environment itself becomes intricately linked with human emotions and they gain semiotic equivalence.

All these different landscapes and their associated types of love are identified according to the dominant fauna; Tolkappiyam maps five major tinais or phases, Kurinji for union, Mullai for patient waiting, Marutam for sulking and unfaithfulness, Netyal for lamentation and anxious waiting, and

finally Palai, for separation from love or parents (Ramanujan, “Form” 205). These eco-zones, as various critics term it, are not merely limited to the expression of the biosphere but also indicate forms of social organisation. The natural elements do not contest with the human ones and the Western binaries between Man and Nature do not exist in ancient Tamil Poetics. For instance, in the following verse, poetess Avvaiyar illustrates the “eco-social and political impacts” of bountiful land:

As the ridge of field raises, its capacity to hold water will raise;

As the water capacity raises, the crops will grow well;

As the crops grow well, people will live a better life;

As people live a better life, the Kingdom will prosper;

As the kingdom prospers, the King

himself will rise to a great prosperity. (qtd. in Anamalai)

As all classical Tamil epics are supposed to, Atikal’s Cillapatikaram also comprises this complex taxonomy of interrelationships between humans and nature. These ‘eco-zones,’ as various critics term it, not only provide an in-depth glimpse of the natural world across various regions of South India but also reflect on the forms of social organisation (Parthasarthy 9). Tamil Sangam Literature can be considered, hence as one of the earliest ecocritical models in world literature (Nachiya 951). Mapping this is an important and essential project, as it has the potential to highlight a unique ecological space based on the state of the natural environment in Ancient Sangam period. While certain elements of this natural world have long perished and the dynamic between humans and the natural world has drastically changed, a recreation of this landscape (which can be brought into existence or re-created via

literary texts now), can be indispensable to provide a unique eco-critical understanding.

This paper will now elaborate on the tropes of Akam poetics in Tolkappiyam by tracing the different elements of nature and environment, and their corresponding tinai in Illanko Atikal's Tamil epic poem Cillapatikaram, or 'The Tale of the Anklet.' This epic poem was written approximately during the fifth century C.E, by a Jaina monk Ilanko Atikal and details the tragic story of Kannaki and Kovalan (Parthasarthy 5-7). This story was originally a popular Tamil mythological tale that Atikal adopted and converted to an epic poem set in the context and background of his contemporary cultural and political changes. The original myth is a love story ending in tragedy, where the perfect blessed couple Kannaki and Kovalan's relationship breaks apart when the latter falls in love with a courtesan named Matavi. Kovalan is subsequently falsely accused of a crime and executed; and Kannaki takes revenge against the injustice by ripping one of her breasts from her flesh and flinging it at the city which burns out. Atikal follows the genre configurations of the Tolkappiyam as he claims to have talked about "the five phrases of love and other kinds" in his work at the end of "The Book of Pukar" (Parthasarthy 106). Each stage of love in Akam poetics corresponds to a particular landscape, with a corresponding flora, landscape, time of the day and season associated with it, created as the paper mentioned earlier, a new system of signs and significations. A.K. Ramanujan provides a detailed charted table in his collected anthology of Tamil poems, which has been borrowed here for reference. Each individual author might alter some minute elements of this codification, depending on their particular local environments, and might also mix the different elements, engaging in a "fusion of tinai" to depict complex human emotions (Parthasarthy 286).

Table 1: Some Features of the Five Landscapes

	Lovers' Union	Patient Waiting, Domesticity	Lover's Un- faithfulness 'Sulking Scenes'	Anxiety in Love, Separation	Elopement, Hardship, Separation from Lover or Parents
Characteristic flower (name of region and poetic genre)	<i>kurin̄ci</i>	<i>mullai</i> (jasmine)	<i>marutam</i>	<i>neytal</i>	<i>pālai</i> (an evergreen tree)
Landscape	mountains	forest pasture	countryside	seashore	waterland (mountain or forest parched by summer)
Time	night	late evening	morning	nightfall	midday
Season	cold season early frost	rainy season	all seasons	all seasons	late frost, summer
Bird	peacock, parrot	sparrow, jungle hen	stork, heron	seagull	dove, eagle
Beast (including fish, reptile, etc.)	monkey elephant horse, bull	deer	buffalo freshwater fish	crocodile shark	fatigued elephant, tiger or wolf, lizard
Tree or plant	jackfruit bamboo, <i>vēnkai</i>	<i>konrai</i>	mango	<i>atumpu</i> <i>pungai</i>	<i>ōmai</i> cactus
Water	waterfall	rivers	pool	wells sea	waterless wells stagnant water
Occupation and people	hill tribes guarding millet harvest, gathering honey	ploughman	pastoral occupations	selling fish and salt, fisherfolk	wayfarers bandits

Table 1: The sign system of Akam poetry—Five landscapes and their corresponding uri, mutal and karu elements
(Source: Ramanujan, A.K., "Form in Classical Tamil Poetry" 205)

According to A. Mariaselvam, the uniqueness of the Akam poetics can be found in its detailed natural topography and biodiversity (116). As the paper furthers its elaboration of the different tinai, we see the rich natural environment of ancient Chola Kingdom emerge. The first phase of love, the Union of lovers, is called the 'Kurinci,' or the Kuringi tinai. The flower this phase of love is named after is a local one, Neelakurinji, and its habitat is very particular to the regions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The Kurunji flower belongs to the genus *Strobilanthes*, with a blooming period ranging from four to 12 years that grows only in the Western parts of the Eastern Ghats (Chaudhary). There is no substitute for this flower in English, which leads to the translators often referring to it simply as the "blue flower," or "violet blue blossom," as it goes from blue to violet near the end of its bloom. The time of its bloom corresponds to the season the tinai assigns, near the end of the rainy season and early frost. This flower is referred to as the "rain flower" in the "The Round Dance of the Hill Dwellers," in Canto 24 of Cillapatikaram. The hill dwellers sing a song, describing their surroundings, the loud

waterfalls where the maidens bathe and the bounty of the hills on which they can survive happily, ending with a short interlude where a man from a neighboring village wants to marry the hill maiden (211). This union of the couple anticipates the union of King Cenkuttuvan, Atikal's brother for whom he penned this epic, with his queen.

Kannaki and Kovalan's union in the "Book of Pukar" also exemplifies the Kuringi tinai. On the day of their marriage, girls were dressed in finery, riding elephants to spread the news of the union. The moon was high in the sky, and they were married under the "bright star Arundhati" (Parthasarthy 27). The time of the day, the setting as well as the elements of flora and fauna come together to build this romantic scene of a grand union. A swarm of humming drones and bees enter the "lattice window" which is adorned with pearls and blue lotuses (29). Several outer plants, like the red and purple water lilies, screw pine, champak, matavi among others highlight this sensuous scene. As the lovers lie on the bed, the bees gorge on the flowers strewn around. Kovalan wears a jasmine wreath and Kannaki dons the red lilies; the wreaths themselves admitting to the desire that interlaces their bond.. The narrator accompanies this with divine praise of Kannaki's beauty where she is compared to peacocks, swans and a green parrot.

This theme, Kuringi tinai, is quite evident in other classical Tamil anthologies as well— for example, verses from Ainkurunuru (the 500 short poems) each belonging to a dominant tinai, detail the 'blue' hills or the 'sapphire' hills (Ramanujan, Poems 11). The Kuringi flower is often described in these classic texts as turning the hills blue, covering the vast expanse of the Ghats. A country girl speaks about her beloved, saying that "his mountain, that blue sapphire, is never out of sight" (13). The detailed environment— the aromatic mangoes of summer, green-skinned jackfruit, swaying bamboo that is used to make alcohol, the millet fields, jungle hens, deer and the

roaming elephants— is brought to life by the rich language of the verses (19). Unfortunately, we cannot often witness the wondrous sights described in these texts anymore as the hills where the flower usually bloomed have been taken over and converted into tea and spice plantations, erasing them from within the modern imagination (Chaudhary). They exist sparsely and within protected areas, unlike what is described in early Tamil poetry, where the hills are blanketed in blue, a thousand years ago.

Magade, citing Buell's seminal text *Writing for an Endangered World* (2003) talks about an "environmentally oriented" literature, where the author's interaction with nature is not a mere reflection or an observation, trying to "inspire awe or evoke deep emotional responses," but it is a more organic representation where the "human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest." The nonhuman environment in a way is often presented through the human centered lens, and Buell argues that it should not be a mere narrative or framing device. Human history should rather be "implicated in natural history" without the reinforced dichotomy (1208). This paper would like to posit that the *tinais* of Sangam poetry, following the *trifecta* of *mutal*, *karu* and *uri*, create unique eco-zones in their literary representation that do not inherently separate the human from the natural. The poetic codex's handling of the elements makes it clear that they consist of and impact each other; rather, the environment is intricately linked with the social and cultural organisational systems. The details that Akam poetry employs in recreating the environment and weaving in the myths and the folklore along with the human narratives can make a strong case that these narratives do not originate from the human perspective but they, following the poetic code, aim to represent the various elements of the environment together. For example, the people of the hills, the local tribals or the *adivasis*, in Canto 24 exist in harmony, not as an outsider to the eco-system, but as a constituent.

Though Cillapatikaram depicts all the five phases in detail, this paper will only cover a few of them in detail. In the “Book of Pukar”, Canto 4, “The Praise of the Evening,” Kolavan and his mistress Matavi’s story is introduced by a mythical framing of the Queen Earth missing her husband, the Sun. Atikal mixes in local folklore about the turning of the day to night; the setting sun is transformed into the Sun god who has been separated from his longing wife, the Mother Earth. The city of Pukar at this time is filled with mourning, where cowherds are playing the “ragas of parting” with their flutes and wistful wives separated from the husbands’ sigh in sorrow (41). Matavi, the courtesan, is waiting impatiently for her lover Kovalan, with her couch sewn full of mullai, or musk jasmine, which can be identified as the subspecies *Jasmiinum auriculatum*. Atikal sets the scene of the entire city and its surrounding landscape while introducing the Mullai tinai, before slowly moving into the bedroom, where Matavi is waiting in a pool of petals. When the lovers eventually unite, Matavi drowns herself in Kovalan’s presence, sometimes playfully quarrelling or burning with passion. The four corners of the Tamil kingdom are highlighted, as the lovers put out the “incense made of white resin/From the western hills and black agar/From the eastern” (42). They anoint themselves with the sandalwood paste from the southern mountains which they had ground on a lustrous flat stone from the northern caves. There is a bio-regional emphasis on this scene, where the different elements from the various landscapes and tinai intermingle, indicating that even though that the tinai are frameworks in poetry that create distinctions between various eco-zones, the actual elements of nature were more permeable in society.

The phrase of lover’s lamenting or anxiety in love, Netyal, is named after the *Nymphaea alba*, the Indian white lily according to some sources (Mariaselvam 116). Sometimes this flower is referred to as the blue lotus or the blue lily, making it closer to the *Nymphaea caerulea*, or the blue water lily. Both of these varieties of flowers are abundant on the coast and edges of

the Kaveri River in Tamil Nadu. The Netyal flower stands as a symbol of anxiety in love and is always accompanied by images of the seashore as the prominent landscape. Other flora, like the tiger claw tree (*Erythrina variegata*), more commonly known as the Indian coral tree, also features in this *tinai* (Ramanujan, Poems 39). The fauna was not only marked by the local breeds of fish, but dolphins, crocodiles and coastal birds.

Atikal presents the Netyal *tinai* in a unique way, Matavi and Kovalan sit on the seashore, happily in love, after the festival of Indra, singing love songs to each other. It is the content of the songs, about betrayal in love and lamentation, they are singing that occupy the theme of Netyal. With the use of brilliant literary interplay, Atikal substitutes the pain of the lovers in the songs to Matavi and Kovalan, who misunderstand each other in the duration of the singing and believe they have betrayed each other. Kovalan abandons Matavi, solidifying this theme. The original canto, “The Love songs of the Seaside Grove” begins with an atmosphere of festivity, but by the end, the desolate landscape of the seashore, transferred from the songs they were singing, serving as text-within-text, dominates. Matavi and Kovalan in their songs describe the great power and force of the river Kaveri as it merges with the Bay of Bengal. The city of Pukar, where the story is currently set, is located on the delta basin of Kaveri where most of the trade and livelihood of the people is based. The paper quotes a passage here to illustrate the description:

Conches with echoing lips,
Tossed about by the huge, swirling waves,
Swept and hurled on the shore,
Plow over and wreck the sandhouses sir,
Made by the girls on the wrinkled sand.

...

In the seaside grove thick with the odor of flowers
A girl keeps watch over fat, dried fish,

And pretends to drive the hovering birds away.
She holds a fetid cassia in her hand.
Round it hum and whirl a swarm of bees.
(Parthasarthy 67–68)

As illustrated from the above-cited example, the *uri*, or human element is seamlessly mixed with the *karu*, or the natural elements; the sandcastles made by little girls are getting swept by the ocean and the young girl drying fish in the seaside grove filled with water lilies. Again, narratives of women and descriptions of domestic activity dominate Akam poetics. These women and their activities seem to naturally co-exist with the order of the environment, whether it is the *adivasi* hill dwellers from the Kurunji *tinai* or the girl drying fish here. The long descriptive passages on the fierceness of the sea, the life of the fisher folk, the odor of drying fish, boats and nets, the scuttling crabs, the blue water lilies opening in the dead of the night all aid to create this beautiful landscape of the seashore. This is not simply idealised or romanticised, the hard work of the fishermen and the risks they take in the sea are not amiss but characterise the anxiety and the trepidation this genre offers. Critics have argued that it is this realism that Sangam poetry offers that, painting the picture of life and environment, make it so unique and popular (Gros 33). Similar harmonisation, where the *uri*, *mutal* and *karu* elements meet and interact, is displayed by almost every *tinai* of Cillapatikaram.

By tracing the different features of the Akam phrases of love with their corresponding bio-ecological elements, the paper wanted to recreate the natural ecology of the Ancient Tamil world. It depicted in detail the landscapes, along with their different components including the season, plants, animals and human interactions surrounding the landscapes. There is a set of rules laid by Tolkapiyyam, but the lyric poetry is more open-ended, for example, in several cantos of Cillapatikaram, we see the mixture of several *tinai*s. As illustrated, Akam poetry is not

a simple appropriation of nature and a mouthpiece for personified human emotions; it is more detailed than that. It engages in what Francois Gors describes as in-depth “realism”, creating detailed ecological landscape and imagery (32–33). The objects of nature become semiotic signs that dominate an entire array of human significations, as depicted in the Canto 24 of Cillapatikaram, the lovers who were not originally anxious, gain on the tone and emotion of anxiety by singing songs and physically being present in the netyal landscape. Apart from mapping the complexity of the ecological system and the natural relations human beings bear with the environment, since they are a part of the ecology not removed from it, the Akam poetry preserves the image of the natural landscape of ancient South India.

Thus, nature serves not only as a mere literary device via which human emotions are expressed and personified but bears more complications. They indeed serve as semiotic signs governing a field of human emotion at a mythological and literary level, but they give rise to a holistic environmental aesthetic, according to S. Murali, in his essay “Environmental Aesthetics Interpretation of Nature in ‘Akam’ and ‘Puram’ Poetry, which has been lost in the contemporaneity (161). He proposes that within the creation of the landscapes and stories within the system of Akam poetry we see the creation of a biosphere, where the human and the natural elements are intertwined and in natural progression (160). Murali interestingly uses postmodernist environmental ethics to defend his position and seems to suggest that a reconfiguration of modern environmental aesthetics is required. I will be extending his argument here, by suggesting that a re-envisioning and recreation of the environmental aesthetic present in ancient myths, especially that of Sangam poetry will enrich our own ‘green’ imagination and provide an alternative to break from the dominant Western way of perceiving environmental aesthetics and ecology. According to Arran E. Gare in his book,

Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis, there is a necessity to replace the grand Western narrative with “contextual discourse” that serves as a “bioregional narrative” (Gare 94). I argue that the Tamil Sangam poetry can achieve exactly this, by recreating its own dense and rich environment that contains unique biodiversity and ecological elements. These texts contain within them an environmental consciousness, that, as Lawrence Buell stated, does not create a binarism between the human and the non-human, but rather implicates them in the same world. Buell says that there is a need for the “reorientation of human attention and values” that makes the world a better place for both, taking in stride the anthropocentric concerns as well (6). There is a need for literature that is not merely eco-critical while enabling the distinction between the human and the non-human, but is conscious that the society needs to develop in a holistic way, where social organisation and environmental growth correlate proportionally. The Akam poetry can be a site where the recreation of the environmental landscapes is possible.

As we realised in the case of the Kurinji tinai and the dominant flower, the ancient Tamil world still contains landscapes that are unique and have yet to be mapped, and this is exactly where a new bioregional narrative can emerge. It becomes crucial to preserve these imaginative landscapes as the current environmental degradation and constant onset of ecological crises heralded by the post-industrialist capitalist world brings about a slow extermination of the local environment, especially the native flora species. This does not just amount to a mere physical elimination, but it is an extermination of an environmental aesthetic and eco-culture binding that region. For example, as mentioned earlier, the Kurinji flower of the hills possesses a unique bio-geographical marker—they grow only above thirteen hundred meters and are restricted to certain regions in the ghats. The flower and its synchronous blooming every 12 years have become a local

phenomenon, a connection that links the present to the ancient past, creating a seamless connection that has inspired more than the ancient Tamil poetics. The Paliyan tribe of hunter-gatherers in the southern Western ghats utilized the ‘12-year’ blooming phenomenon as a way to measure their age (Kielty). These very flowers now are at risk of being lost and have been declared as a threatened species under the IUCN Red list (International Union for Conservation of Nature).

Thus, it becomes abundantly clear that there is indeed a need to preserve not just the current ecology, but to recreate and restructure the lost ecologies from the past. The Akam poetry is but one site of evidence that provides extensive detail about the detailed natural topography and biodiversity of the past— and it is with a re-reading and popularising of these texts that we can bring back a kind of ‘green imagination.’ These sets of flora and fauna that were dominantly present in the past, characterising motifs in aesthetic theory and literature, create alternative imaginative landscapes that challenge the ecological coercion brought in by the ‘for-profit’ capitalist modules that aim to exploit natural resources. The bio-regional narratives can also be created by the revival of the ancient ecologies, and they are necessary for the multiplicity of narratives of nature to emerge that Arran E. Gare mentions. These “alternative thought systems in non-Eurocentric situations” are very much necessary for revival of greener imaginations so that the man-nature link can be reconfigured (Murali 162). A project to preserve and enhance our ecosystems can begin with a reconstruction of environmental aesthetics which I view as essential to ‘reimage’—a reimagining we very much require to not only preserve the local ecology that has yet to be destroyed but also reconstruct lost ecosystems. Moreover, while preserving the essence, this literature allows us to glimpse a world where the human and non-human distinction is not set in stone, which ecocritics like Buell argue is essential to the environmental imagination of the future. The paper would like to conclude by

saying that alternative sources of ecological imagination, apart from the dominant Western ones must be imagined, and Tamil Akam and Puram poetics, which possess a codified system to map the natural elements, should be recognised as important avenues that contain great eco-logical potential to reimagine an ancient era's green landscapes and enrich the contemporary imagination.

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Eastern Shakespeare: Macbeth, Hamlet, and Othello and Their Modern Film Adaptations in the East

Fardun Ali Middya*

Abstract

Shakespearean reinterpretation of the Aristotelian tragic hero prioritises psychological truthfulness, moral complexity, and existential nuance, producing a basis for enduring relevance in different cultures and media. In *Macbeth*, rash ambition overcomes restraints of morality; *Hamlet* considers inaction in terms of intellectual and moral analysis; and *Othello* lays bare vulnerability in trust under love, jealousy, and racial dislocation. All the heroes demonstrate a departure from classical determinism, prioritising Renaissance humanist ideals of inner conflict. Contemporary Eastern film adaptations have revived these plays by cultural transposition and visual imagination. Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* transposes *Macbeth* to feudal Japan's samurai world, using Noh aesthetics to explore existential despair. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* projects *Hamlet* into Kashmir's politics of conflict, portraying an intertwining of individual loss and collective trauma. *Omkara*, his *Othello*, transposes racial tension into caste-based dislocation in Indian social hierarchies. These films preserve Shakespeare's thematic core, ambition, identity, and betrayal, while shifting the tragic hero to new historical and sociopolitical contexts. The adaptations affirm the tragic hero as a lasting signifier of moral degeneration and human vulnerability, provoking modern viewers to consider recurring concerns about power, morality, and identity in changing contexts.

Keywords: Ambition, Culture, Eastern Adaptation, Shakespeare, Tragedy

* Department of English, Behala College, University of Calcutta

Introduction

Tragedy, as a dramatic and literary form, has encapsulated the essence of human conflict, suffering, and moral inquiry across centuries. From its ritualistic roots in ancient Greece to its Elizabethan transformation and subsequent reimagining in modern cinema, tragedy continues to probe humanity's fraught relationship with destiny, ethics and agency. The word tragedy comes from the Greek word *tragōidia*, or "goat song", a term which arose from the choral performances and sacrificial rituals of Dionysian festivals. In its earliest forms, tragedy served both a ritualistic and didactic purpose, evolving into a sophisticated dramatic genre during the classical period. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, defined tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude", designed to elicit catharsis, a purgation of pity and fear (Laird 152). M. H. Abrams describes tragedy as "a profound engagement with the human condition, exploring the moral and existential dilemmas inherent in suffering" (128). The double aim of emotional response and intellectual investigation has helped tragedy survive the barriers of culture and time. The roots of tragedy can be traced to the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, who explored themes of divine justice, moral conflict and human fallibility. These Greek dramatists established conventions that defined the genre, including the hamartia (tragic flaw), the inevitability of fate and the cathartic resolution. For instance, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is a representation of the classical tragic model, where the protagonist's downfall is both inevitable and tied to his moral and intellectual errors. The Roman playwrights, Seneca in particular, assimilated Greek tragedy through infusions of rhetorical grandeur and Stoic philosophy. It was this variant of tragedy that heavily influenced the Renaissance English dramatists to intermingle principles from antiquity with those from the medieval morality play, eventually creating a distinctive form of Elizabethan tragedy. Harry Blamires states, "Elizabethan tragedy combined the formalism of classical

tragedy with the self-exploratory tendencies of medieval allegory, contributing thus to the emphasis of the Renaissance on individualism and moral investigation” (Blamires 91). Shakespeare alone redefined the genre as infused with psychological depth and complex characterisations and formed the quintessence of an Elizabethan dramatic innovation. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the tragic hero is identified as a noble person whose downfall is brought on by a hamartia or mistake in judgment. It is a classic archetype meant to create pity and fear in the reader or observer so that the dramatic effect of catharsis may be achieved. Against the determinism of Greek tragedy, the Elizabethan tragic hero is seen within the Renaissance’s theme of personal responsibility and moral dimension. Shakespeare’s protagonists, Macbeth, Hamlet, and Othello, evolve from the Aristotelian model; not just victims of fate but an active party to their downfall, they confront ambition, doubt, and jealousy. Harold Bloom states, these characters “map the internal landscapes of modern man, portraying the conflicts of self-awareness, morality, and destiny” (54). Their human struggles cross borders of their times to reveal universal insights into human nature.

In the cinematic adaptations of Shakespearean tragedies, the tragic hero is reimagined to resonate with contemporary audiences. Directors reinterpret these classic works by employing modern settings, visual storytelling, and innovative narrative techniques. For instance, Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957), Roman Polanski’s *Macbeth* (1971), and Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (2015) emphasise the psychological deterioration of the protagonist through atmospheric tension and symbolic imagery. Similarly, Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* (1996) exploits the cinema space for the existential predicament of the protagonist; on the other hand, Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* (2014) offers compelling interpretations of this archetype, based within the Indian cultural milieu. Oliver Parker’s *Othello* (1995) uses this expansiveness of cinema to underline the racial and

emotional dimension of the play, while Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* (2006) is another adaptation of *Othello*, set in the contemporary context of rural India. Andrew Laird notes that modern adaptations "transpose the moral and emotional core of Elizabethan tragedies into contemporary contexts, creating new pathways for understanding the timeless themes of ambition, jealousy, and existential despair" (152). These adaptations, then, not only preserve the very essence of Shakespearean tragedy but also demonstrate the adaptability of the genre, with themes and characters remaining timeless. Still a metaphor for human nature, the tragic hero as posited by Aristotle and reinterpreted through Shakespeare, is the axis around which this study has unfolded the history of tragedy, from its origins in classical tragedy to its Elizabethan resolution and reinterpretation in contemporary films.

The Tragic Hero in the Texts of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the tragic hero emerges as a complex figure moulded by ambition, external manipulations, and moral introspection. The play is about the intertwining of fate and free will and places Macbeth as a man of enormous potential whose flaws are the source of his destruction. The first prophecy made by the witches in Act I Scene III of *Macbeth* defines the direction of Macbeth's tragic path: "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! Thane of Cawdor! That shalt be king hereafter!" (Line 49–51). Initially wary, he asks, "Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?" (Line 108), implying discomfort with unearned titles. But his aside later in the same scene reveals the stirrings of ambition: "If good, why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair" (Line 134–35). Here, Shakespeare contrasts Macbeth's latent ambition with his moral hesitation. According to Wilson Knight, this marks the starting point of Macbeth's inner conflict: the prophecy is "acting as a mirror in which his hidden desires echo" (Knight 162). The

soliloquy of the “dagger scene” in Act II Scene I [“Is this a dagger which I see before me?” (Line 44)], delineates Macbeth’s fragmenting psyche. The visionary dagger symbolises both fortune and his will to kill. Critics such as Michael Neill highlight how Shakespeare uses this moment to externalise the inner turmoil of Macbeth, which is a pivotal moment where ambition has outstripped morality (437). Knight continues by relating the imagery of blood and violence to the growing obsession of Macbeth, arguing that the soliloquy shows a “metaphysical struggle between his conscience and his overpowering ambition” (164). Macbeth’s encounter with Banquo’s ghost during the banquet exposes his unravelling. While he previously navigated his ambition in secret, in Act III Scene IV his guilt now manifests publicly: “Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake / Thy gory locks at me!” (Line 50–51). This pivotal scene marks Macbeth’s transformation into a tyrant whose paranoia alienates allies and solidifies his isolation. According to Claire McEachern, the ghost is an expression of Macbeth’s guilt: he cannot reconcile what he does with his conscience (67). In Act V Scene V, when he hears of the death of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth makes one of Shakespeare’s most moving observations on the futility of life: “Out, out brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow” (Line 23–28). This soliloquy shows that Macbeth has finally reached the anagnorisis, i.e., “awareness”, that his ambition has only brought destruction. Knight says this is the “moment when Macbeth fully confronts the emptiness of his pursuits, achieving a tragic awareness that resonates universally” (166). Unlike classical tragic heroes such as Oedipus, whose downfall is predominantly shaped by fate, Macbeth embodies the Renaissance notion of human agency. The witches act as instigators rather than controllers, leaving Macbeth to navigate his path. His moral decline, shaped by ambition and manipulation, aligns with the Elizabethan belief in the corrupting influence of power; Claire McEachern notes,

“Macbeth’s tragedy lies not in his ignorance of fate but in his conscious decisions to pursue power, even at the cost of his humanity” (69). In contrast to conventional Elizabethan tragic heroes like Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, who embrace ambition without introspection, Macbeth’s downfall is marked by his acute moral awareness. This deviation underscores Shakespeare’s psychological realism, offering a nuanced critique of unchecked ambition. Macbeth by Shakespeare is distinct for the exploration of moral ambiguity and psychological depth. Macbeth is both the perpetrator of ghastly acts and the victim of his conscience. According to Michael Neill, “Shakespeare’s genius lies in presenting Macbeth as both villain and victim, forcing the audience to grapple with the complexities of human ambition” (440). Knight further emphasises the interplay of time and fate in Macbeth’s tragedy, pointing out that the imagery of blood and darkness transcends the narrative to symbolise the universal consequences of moral corruption (163).

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is a tragic hero characterised by introspection, moral dilemma, and intellectual complexity. Unlike the traditional tragic heroes who are motivated by extrinsic forces or impulsive passions, Hamlet’s tragedy is highly internalised around his indecision and questioning philosophies. In his first soliloquy [Act I Scene II of Hamlet], “O, that this too too solid flesh would melt” (Line 129), Hamlet reveals his deep sorrow and disillusionment. Fighting with his mother’s speedy remarriage and his father’s death, he laments the “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable” state of the world (Line 133). This scene establishes his introspective nature and moral idealism, both hallmarks of his character. G. Wilson Knight interprets Hamlet’s melancholy as more than personal sorrow, viewing it as “the burden of universal disillusionment” (17). By linking Hamlet’s grief to existential despair, Shakespeare elevates his tragedy beyond the individual. Hamlet’s famous lines in Act II Scene II, “What a piece of work is man! How

noble in reason, how infinite in faculty” (Line 303–4), articulate his dual admiration for humanity’s potential and his disappointment in its failures. This scene underlines the intellectualism of Hamlet and the struggle between thought and action. Michael Neill writes, “Hamlet’s internal conflict constitutes a ‘metaphysical rebellion against the expectations of revenge tragedy’” (390). The “To be or not to be” soliloquy captures the existential crisis that faces Hamlet as he deals with the fear of the unknown after death. His question in Act III Scene I, “To die, to sleep – / To sleep, perchance to dream” (Line 64–65), reveals his paralysis in the face of mortality. Catherine Belsey observes that this moment “distinguishes Hamlet as a modern tragic hero, whose conflict is rooted in psychological depth rather than external adversity” (qtd. in McEachern 124). In the climactic duel in Act V Scene II, Hamlet displays the shift from paralysis towards accepting: “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (Line 233). He reaches a point that suggests acceptance of fate and mortality in life, based on the Aristotelian anagnorisis approach. According to G. Wilson Knight, Hamlet’s last act is a “gesture of tragic dignity affirming the inevitability of fate” (338).

Aristotelian tragic heroes, like Oedipus, suffer due to hamartia or mostly by fate. Hamlet diverges from this model by embodying a distinctly Elizabethan concern with introspection and moral ambiguity. His hesitation, rather than hubris or ignorance, drives the plot, reflecting the Renaissance fascination with the complexity of human thought. McEachern observes, “Hamlet’s delay is less a plot device than an observation on the conflict of action and contemplation” (69). This transformation reconfigures the classical model to fit the heroic introspect. As was often the case with tragedy in Elizabethan England, Hamlet’s problem centres on external conflict but gets internalised. The play’s emphasis on soliloquies and philosophical discourse distinguishes it from contemporaries like Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, where revenge is pursued with

relentless determination. Shakespeare's Hamlet is unparalleled in its depth and complexity. His soliloquies provide a window into his psyche, revealing a character simultaneously grappling with personal grief, moral dilemmas, and existential questions. Catherine Belsey emphasises that "Hamlet's tragedy lies in his heightened awareness of human fallibility, making his journey as much philosophical as emotional" (122). Unlike the traditional revenge heroes, Hamlet is well aware of the moral consequences of his actions, and hence his tragic end is more pathetic. Knight points out that this self-awareness makes Hamlet a symbol of the human condition, torn between reason and emotion (22). Shakespeare brings out a tragic hero whose downfall is the result of vulnerabilities both from himself and external exploitation. In Othello, a man of godly nobility and achievement succumbed to jealousy and insecurity, to catastrophic ends. The opening scenes of Othello establish the character in a dignified and moral context. His eloquent speech before the Venetian Senate, in Act I Scene III where he details how he wooed Desdemona ["She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them" (Line 167–68)], reflects the moral character of the individual and the mutual respect with which he approaches his wife. G. Wilson Knight writes, "Othello's speech lifts him into the rank of the Aristotelian tragic hero, whose greatness of character and high station make it all the more dreadful that he shall fall" (109). In this scene, another issue related to Othello's racial identity that was already prevailing in the society is presented, suggesting what vulnerabilities Iago will seize on later. In this critical scene, Iago instils seeds of distrust in Othello's mind about Desdemona's fidelity. Othello's initial resistance in Act III Scene III ["No, Iago; I'll see before I doubt" (Line 190)] gives way to torture as Iago plays him on the strings of suggestion. The demand for "ocular proof" in Act III Scene III (Line 360) means Othello's moving from reason to passion and marks the beginning of his psychological fall. This is where, according to

Michael Neill, the play reaches a “point of crisis” where “Othello’s nobility is undermined by his inability to reconcile his love for Desdemona with his growing suspicion” (405). The “handkerchief” has turned into a physical representation of trust and betrayal. Iago has managed to enmesh Othello deeper into his web with the symbolic handkerchief. His downfall accelerates during this scene because Iago continues pushing him to a public show of anger. His loss of composure and striking of Desdemona as “Devil!” in Act IV Scene I (Line 244), is in stark contrast with the dignity he exhibited earlier in the play. According to Claire McEachern, this is the moment when Othello’s “internal conflict finds external expression as he transmutes into a jealousy-ridden human being” (104). Othello’s final act was one of misplaced justice and deep regret. Having strangled Desdemona, his revelation of her innocence in Act V Scene II [“O cursed, cursed slave! Whip me, ye devils” (Line 275)] completes the Aristotelian action of anagnorisis. His suicide in the same scene is at once punishment and vindication, “I took by the throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him thus” (Line 352–53). This makes his death a tragic reconciliation with identity and, in the final words spoken, a desire to replace the nobility lost because of his deeds (Knight 113).

Most traits of the Aristotelian tragic hero are possessed by Othello: high birth, a flaw that caused his downfall-jealousy, and tragic fallibility that evokes pity and fear. However, his tragedy differs from classical norms in that it integrates issues of race and cultural alienation. His status as an outsider heightens his vulnerability to Iago’s manipulations and adds a sociopolitical dimension to his tragedy. Ian Smith emphasises the fact that “Othello’s racial identity transforms him into a tragic figure whose greatness and fall are inextricably tied to societal prejudices” (qtd. in Neill 406). This integration of race into the tragic framework is a departure from the classical model. Unlike other tragic heroes of Elizabethan plays, Othello’s defect is not due to an ambition or moral weakness but because of his

emotional vulnerability compounded by his alienation. His willingness to accept Iago's trust shows him to be noble yet unable to envision evil: that is his difference from his contemporaries, like Macbeth, whose crimes are deliberate. Shakespeare's Othello is special in its treatment of themes like jealousy, love, and racial identity. So, while Othello is noble, his fragility adds poignancy to the fall. Michael Neill outlines the duality of tragic focus within the play, between personal and societal tragedy, thereby pointing out that Othello's downfall is as much a failing of himself as it is of others in terms of bias (407). He underscores the poetic intensity of Othello's speeches and their reflection on the hero's emotional extremes. The juxtaposition of love and jealousy in Othello's character creates a tension that drives the tragedy (Knight 111).

In all three plays, Shakespeare infuses his tragic heroes with a fatal flaw that sparks their downfall. Macbeth's unbridled ambition, Hamlet's paralysing indecision, and Othello's corrosive jealousy are the driving forces behind their narratives. However, Shakespeare takes these flaws beyond character defects to psychological and existential dimensions. As observed by Wilson Knight, soliloquies from every hero reveal windows to the soul where not only are the weaknesses exposed, but profound self-awareness of fates also exists (162, 338, 113). An essential aspect of such tragedies is the progressive isolation of the protagonist. Macbeth's paranoia alienates him from his wife and allies, Hamlet's philosophical musings isolate him from court and family, and Othello's jealousy distances him from Desdemona and his Venetian peers. This alienation deepens their tragedies, as their inner conflicts become mirrored by their estrangement from the external world. That this was a trajectory from admired, victorious warrior to nihilistic despot is the very paradigm for the perils of unchecked ambition - his moral awareness puts the play's villain beyond standard depictions of evil and places within us a horror where once there was pity. Claire McEachern suggests that Macbeth represents a

“cautionary tale about the psychological costs of power” (69), whereas Hamlet’s problem lies in his intellectualising and inability to reconcile his actions with his thoughts. Shakespeare deviates from classical revenge tragedy conventions, providing a hero whose interior conflict is the greater struggle than exterior forces. According to Catherine Belsey, Hamlet is a “modern tragic figure whose downfall reflects the complexities of human thought and morality” (qtd. in McEachern 124). Othello’s fall differs in combining personal weaknesses with societal preconceptions. He has outsider status; as a ‘Moor’ in Venetian society, he is a vulnerable figure who becomes susceptible to Iago’s manipulations. Smith says that the tragic downfall of Othello shows sociopolitical facets, with Ian Smith stating that “his greatness and downfall are deeply intertwined with racial and cultural tensions” (qtd. in Neill 405). Shakespeare redefines the tragic hero by fusing classical archetypes with Renaissance individuality. His heroes are not mere victims of fate but active participants in their downfall, struggling with moral dilemmas and existential questions. Michael Neill describes this innovation as a shift toward psychological realism, where the tragic hero’s internal conflict becomes the central focus (437). In addition, Shakespeare’s use of language enhances the emotional and philosophical depth of his characters. The soliloquies in Macbeth, Hamlet, and Othello reveal insights into the human condition that cannot be rivalled, thereby making these tragedies timeless and universal. Although each hero has different characteristics and themes, their stories together explore the fragility of human grandeur. Macbeth’s ambition, Hamlet’s indecision, and Othello’s jealousy highlight the destructive power of human flaws if not checked. At the same time, their self-awareness and final recognition of their failures make their tragedies significant to all mankind. Their journeys invite audiences to confront fundamental questions about power, morality, and identity.

The Tragic Hero in Eastern Modern Film Adaptations.

Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), a cinematic masterpiece, restyles Shakespeare's *Macbeth* within the samurai ethos of feudal Japan. The film, titled *Kumonosu-jō jō* (Jap. "Spider's Web Castle"), translates the Bard's tale of unchecked ambition and inevitable downfall into a haunting exploration of human entrapment and existential futility. In using Noh theatre aesthetics, Kurosawa depicts Washizu as a tragic hero caught in the web of fate and ambition. Through intricate symbolism, evocative visuals, and cultural recontextualization, *Throne of Blood* offers a fresh yet profoundly Shakespearean interpretation (Watson 7-8). In comparison, Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) offers a starkly different vision, blending Shakespeare's original text with a gritty realism reflective of the turbulent era in which it was produced. Polanski's adaptation underscores the raw brutality and nihilism of *Macbeth*'s ambition, diverging from Kurosawa's more stylised, fate-driven narrative (Henderson 177). The tragic arc of Washizu is heavily reliant on Kurosawa's visual storytelling and stark settings. The opening scene situates viewers in a desolate, mist-enshrouded landscape, where the ruins of Spider's Web Castle evoke impermanence and futility, encapsulating Washizu's doomed pursuit of power. The film opens with a chorus chanting about the folly of human ambition, setting a sombre tone that echoes Buddhist notions of *mujōkan* (impermanence). Similarly, the Polanski version also starts with a bleak, wind-swept beach in which the "Weird Sisters" enact their incantations. This setting transports the audience to a world under the control of dark supernatural powers, much like the theme of fate and predestination in Kurosawa. Washizu's fateful encounter with the "Forest Spirit", an analogy of Shakespeare's "Weird Sisters", underscores his susceptibility to ambition and prophecy. The enigmatic warnings by the Spirit are given in a hauntingly sparse setting, a thatched hut merging into the forest. The contrast between the prophecy scene, where there is no elaborate theatricality, and

Shakespeare's verbose witches highlights nature's nonchalance about human struggle. When Washizu rides through the labyrinthine forest, Kurosawa juxtaposes dynamic tracking shots with static images of the encroaching wilderness as a metaphor for Washizu's entanglement in the web of destiny (Watson 9-13).

Kurosawa's adaptation is far removed from Shakespeare's text, focusing more on existential entrapment than on theological determinism. Washizu's world does not have divine morality or an order of redemption. Rather, he is trapped in an indifferent natural world—a world of impenetrable tangles and relentless mist. The film replaces the verbal introspection of Macbeth with stark visual cues—the rigid posture and mask-like expressions of Washizu, inspired by Noh performance (Watson 14-16). Conversely, in Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015), one can see a psychological depth of character that unfolds Macbeth's mental unravelling through the visceral, war-torn landscapes and hallucinatory sequences. Kurzel's work combines elements of realism and surrealism, emphasising the internal conflict of Macbeth and the destructive power of unchecked ambition. What stands out in *Throne of Blood* is how it unifies Shakespearean themes with Japanese culture in its adaptation. The eerie, ritualistic quality comes from Kurosawa's use of Noh theatre techniques, such as stylised movements, symbolic props, and minimal dialogue. The climactic duel is replaced by a very harrowing scene in which Washizu is pierced by arrows from his soldiers, reminiscent of Macbeth. This sequence, with Washizu thrashing about desperately and then collapsing, epitomises the futility of his ambition and underlines his dehumanisation. The forest, a recurring motif, symbolises the omnipotence of nature and its ultimate victory over human desires. Anchoring the story in Sengoku, a period of social uprisings and *gekokuujō* (overthrow of higher-ups), *Throne of Blood* draws parallels between Washizu's fall and the cyclical nature of history. Noël Burch describes it as Kurosawa's "finest achievement", while T.

S. Eliot reportedly admired its portrayal of Lady Macbeth (Asaji), who epitomises restrained malevolence through her Noh-inspired demeanour (qtd. in Watson 25-27). However, some critics, such as Judith Buchanan, argue that the film's emphasis on destiny diminishes the moral complexity of Shakespeare's tragedy. Yet such criticisms notwithstanding, *Throne of Blood* is a landmark in both Shakespearean cinema and Japanese film, offering an impressionistic reflection on the themes of ambition, fate, and humanity at large (Buchanan 45).

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014) is an Indian reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, weaving the tragic elements of the original play with the sociopolitical realities of conflict-ridden Kashmir in the 1990s. The protagonist, Haider Meer, is a young man grappling with existential crises, familial betrayal, and the moral ambiguities of vengeance. Bhardwaj retains the essence of Shakespeare's tragic hero but enriches it with a context where the narrative is contextualised in a region marked by violence, oppression, and fractured identities (Javed 2). In contrast, Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) takes on a more traditional, full-length adaptation that highlights the psychological profundity and complexity of characters in a historical setting which still holds the grandeur of the original Danish court. The transformation of *Hamlet* to *Haider* is seen in the scenes that echo doubt, betrayal, and revenge themes. After the disappearance of his father, Dr. Hilaal Meer, Haider returns to Kashmir to find himself at Elsinore. The opening sequence brings forth the serene façade of the valley with its undertones of violence. Haider's disappointment becomes even more profound when he finds his mother, Ghazala, in a celebratory mood, apparently unconcerned about her husband's fate. This scene defines the central conflict of filial and moral responsibility. The ghost in Shakespeare's play is reimagined through Roohdaar, a militant who reveals the truth about Hilaal's betrayal by Khurram. The scene where Haider meets Roohdaar is pivotal as it transforms Haider from a grieving son

into a vengeful force. Roohdaar's cryptic dialogue: "Revenge. Vengeance from the serpent of a murderer", echoes the ghost's command to Hamlet, grounding Haider's internal conflict in the political landscape of Kashmir (Javed 3-5). Haider's famous soliloquy in the ruins of his home serves as a cinematic counterpart to Hamlet's "To be or not to be". Here, Haider contemplates the futility of vengeance amidst the tragedy of Kashmir. Bhardwaj emphasises Haider's psychological unravelling through fragmented editing and haunting visuals, blurring the line between madness and calculated defiance. The film's climactic confrontation between Haider and Khurram (Claudius) departs from Shakespeare's original by foregrounding the personal cost of vengeance. Unlike Hamlet, who succumbs to his tragic flaw, Haider chooses to break the cycle of violence, leaving Khurram to face divine justice. This subversion of the revenge trope reflects Bhardwaj's critique of Kashmir's perpetual bloodshed (Ibid. 7-9).

Unlike Hamlet's existential ruminations on mortality, Haider's tragedy is rooted in the tangible horrors of war and betrayal. In Branagh's *Hamlet*, the introspective soliloquies and moral dilemmas of the protagonist are highlighted by the film's lush cinematography and meticulous period details in contrast to Bhardwaj's gritty, contemporary portrayal of Haider's struggle in a war-torn landscape. It also redefines family relationships. Ghazala (Gertrude) is portrayed with greater agency and complexity. In short, it is not only an act of betrayal but a strategy to survive within the oppressive environment. This makes the character go beyond the passive subalternity often attached to Shakespeare's women. Her setting for Haider in Kashmir is something that lends political depth to her narrative: Kashmir has gone through decades of insurgency and military rule. The state of Kashmir itself is an allegorical representation of the corruption of Denmark, its decaying social and political fabric mirroring Hamlet's observation, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark". Furthermore, Haider's transformation

from a grieving son to a revolutionary figure symbolises the struggle for identity and justice in Kashmir. This enables Bhardwaj to condemn not only personal greed but also the institutional violence that arises through nationalistic and separatist ideals. The cinematography of the movie and its soundtrack set it apart from other regular adaptations. The song “Bismil”, performed in a folk-theatre tradition, serves as a “play within a play”, recreating the scene of how Haider accuses Khurram, thereby capturing the communal anguish of Kashmir. This innovative blending of Shakespearean and Kashmiri storytelling traditions underscores the universality of the tragic hero’s plight. In contrast, Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000), the protagonist returns to a modern, corporate New York, emphasising the pervasive corruption and moral decay in modern society, it uses modern technology and settings to reflect the protagonist’s alienation in a contemporary urban environment, illustrating how the timeless themes of Shakespeare’s play can be adapted to different cultural and temporal contexts. *Haider* has been celebrated as a landmark in Indian cinema for its bold exploration of political and personal tragedies. Fatimah Javed praises Bhardwaj’s ability to “amalgamate the 16th-century characters with the current scenario of Kashmir”, emphasising the film’s nuanced portrayal of Haider’s psychological and moral struggles (4). Yet, politically charged controversy surrounds the movie due to the perceived political bias of the movie. Bhardwaj’s sympathy with Kashmiri separatism outweighs the complexities in the context of the Kashmiri conflict.

Another of Vishal Bhardwaj’s adaptations, *Omkara* (2006), reimagines Shakespeare’s *Othello* within the sociopolitical landscape of rural Uttar Pradesh, India. The themes of jealousy, betrayal, and honour in *Othello* are transformed by Bhardwaj into a tale of caste politics, personal ambition, and loyalty, within which the tragedy is reframed. *Omkara* Shukla is a tragic hero who rises to power and becomes undone by his

vulnerability to manipulation and self-doubt. In comparison, Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995) features a more traditional approach, staying close to Shakespeare's text while exploring the racial dynamics and psychological depth of the characters within a historical Venetian setting. The plot of *Omkara* follows the tragic structure set by Shakespeare but infuses characteristics of an Indian setting. The movie opens with Langda Tyagi, the Iago-like figure, attacking a wedding procession as an expression of the lawless environment *Omkara* exists in. Omkara's first appearance as a powerful man establishes his character as a leader who is respected for his power and feared for his cruelty. This opening scene is a direct reflection of *Othello*'s position in Venice as a man of power and respect. In contrast, Orson Welles' *Othello* (1952) begins with a dramatic, expressionist scene of *Othello*'s funeral procession, immediately establishing the tragic end of the protagonist and setting a sombre tone for the film (Henderson 198). This crucial moment arises when Omkara chooses Kesu over Langda as the one to be his successor, which sets Langda on his manipulative ways. Saif Ali Khan, as Langda Tyagi, projects hurt pride and scheming intent, which he uses to take advantage of Omkara's insecurities about his relationship with Dolly (Desdemona). His susceptibility to the insinuations of Langda is already set into the pattern of his trusting relationship with loyalty (Henderson 38). Desdemona's handkerchief takes the form of a kamarbandh (waist chain), which becomes the key symbolic object that precipitates Omkara's descent into jealousy. He schemed its disappearance by planting it in Kesu and fabricated Dolly's adultery. It was the kamarbandh, a family heirloom as well as a token of love, that made the situation so emotionally charged, and Omkara's distrust more believable and devastating. And all this climaxed when it was shot in such isolation that Omkara goes with Dolly to find some truths about her alleged deception, and, like *Othello* killing Desdemona, his inner turmoil kills the innocent Dolly. Stark and dark shadowed lighting and close-ups

create a strong scene, emphasising emotional intensity. In the case of Omkara, the moment of enlightenment comes too late, leaving him a tragic hero fallen to his weakness (Henderson 39).

Although Bhardwaj retained the basic themes of Othello from Shakespeare, he moulded them according to the socio-cultural context in which he set up the tale of Omkara. This film translates racial dynamics in the play to caste-based hierarchies. Omkara is a half-caste, hence, is placed in an ambivalent position within his political and social circle. This shift positions Othello's alienation within India's rigid systems of hierarchy, making Omkara's insecurities both culturally specific and universally relatable. Parker's Othello, however, places attention on the racial tensions and prejudices within Venetian society, as Othello fights to maintain his honour and dignity amidst such general discrimination. Dolly (Desdemona) is a far more empowered character than her Shakespearean counterpart. Her eloping with Omkara against the wishes of her family shows her strength of character. However, the ultimate end that awaits her, death at the hands of Omkara, highlights the tragic inevitability of their story, underlining the restrictions placed on women in both Shakespearean and Indian contexts. Langda Tyagi is a multi-dimensional villain whose motivations go beyond personal ambition. Saif Ali Khan's nuanced performance catches up with Langda's resentment and his desire to exact revenge on Omkara. Unlike Iago, this character is not always described as an evil-doing man, but his interests get deeply involved with societal place and personal grievances. In Omkara, through the corrupt political system of Uttar Pradesh, Bhardwaj explores the nexus of power, loyalty, and betrayal. The rustic Hindi dialogues in the film add to the authenticity and emotional value of the story. A line like "*Bahubali, aurat ke charitra ko kabhi mat bhoolna*" or "Never forget the treacherous nature of women" echoes Othello's internal conflict while grounding it in Indian patriarchal attitudes. At the climax, when Omkara confronts Langda, this adaptation strays from

Shakespeare by not specifying the fate of Langda. The undefined ending of the film mirrors the message of Bhardwaj, that systemic corruption and violence can never end.

Conclusion

Eastern Modern adaptations, like *Throne of Blood*, *Haider*, and *Omkara*, by transposing Shakespeare's tragedies into culturally specific but universally resonant frameworks, redefine the tragic hero for today's audiences. They keep the heart of the originals but further endow Shakespeare with new cultural, political, and social dimensions. Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* changes *Macbeth* into an existential exploration of human entrapment within the samurai ethos of feudal Japan by highlighting existential futility using the aesthetics of Noh theatre. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* brings *Hamlet* to a very charged political landscape: Kashmir, and weaves in a story of personal as well as collective suffering. Similarly, Bhardwaj's *Omkara* recasts *Othello* in the context of caste politics and personal ambition in rural Uttar Pradesh, India, highlighting the intersections of power, loyalty, and societal pressures. Each of these adaptations provides a new reading of Shakespeare's themes, yet each one is very connected to the source material. *Throne of Blood* and *Haider* both foreground the inescapability of fate and the destructive force of ambition, but in two distinct cultural contexts, Japanese samurai culture and the Kashmiri conflict, respectively. *Omkara* focuses on the destructive power of jealousy and betrayal within the framework of rural India, transforming racial dynamics into caste issues. While Kurosawa uses minimal dialogue and stark visual elements to convey the theme of *Macbeth*, the dialogues and settings in the films *Haider* and *Omkara* by Bhardwaj are rich and local, making Shakespeare's narrative relevant to contemporary Indian concerns. Both *Haider* and *Omkara* deviate from mainstream Shakespearean adaptations with modern political contexts, allowing a contemporary approach to issues such as revenge,

ambition, and jealousy. Beyond these three major adaptations, numerous other films have successfully reinterpreted Shakespeare's works. Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) and Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015) offer gritty, realistic portrayals of ambition and madness. Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) and Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) provide contrasting settings, historical and modern, while exploring Hamlet's existential dilemmas. Future studies could further investigate how Shakespeare's plays continue to be adapted across various cultures and media. Investigating the effect of digital technology on such adaptations, like CGI and modern cinematography, could open deeper insights into the ever-changing nature of Shakespearean cinema. Further, analysis of adaptations from non-English-speaking countries and how they reimagine Shakespeare's themes within their specific cultural contexts could bring a more global scope to his influence. Understanding audience reception and the educational use of these adaptations could also provide potentially valuable insights into the ongoing relevance of Shakespeare's works in modern society.

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Neurodivergent Embodiment in Posthuman Media: Towards A Soft Aesthetics of Cognition

Martine Mussies*

Abstract

This article explores the intersections between neurodivergent embodiment and posthuman media, arguing that sensory-sensitive and nonlinear cognitive styles—often stigmatised in dominant discourses—offer unique aesthetic and epistemological contributions to emerging soft models of cognition. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as posthumanism, affect theory, and soft computing, the article includes case studies of neurodivergent artistic practices that reconfigure what thinking and sensing can be in media art. The soft aesthetics of the cognition framework developed here suggests concrete directions for inclusive media design: interfaces that support associative navigation, algorithms that preserve sensory complexity, and interactive systems responsive to affective rather than purely cognitive input. As a creative proposition, it offers new possibilities for human-machine collaboration, aesthetic experience, and embodied knowledge.

Keywords: Affective aesthetics, Alternative epistemologies, Embodiment, Neurodivergence, Posthuman media, Soft computing

Introduction

Recent scholarly discourse increasingly foregrounds the intersections of neurodiversity and posthumanist philosophy, inviting a vital re-examination of embodiment and cognition beyond humanist paradigms. Yet this convergence entails theoretical tensions: the posthumanist project's decentring of the subject risks subsuming the specificities of neurodivergent embodiment, while emphasising these particularities challenges

* PhD Research Scholar, Maastricht University

posthuman universalism. To navigate this dialectic, this study situates itself genealogically within an anti-dualist lineage, drawing on Spinoza's immanent ontology—where mind and body are conceived as attributes of a single substance (Part II, Proposition 2 in *Ethics*)—and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic ontology, which privileges multiplicity, non-hierarchy, and connection over fixed identity (27). This grounding enables a conception of 'soft aesthetics' as a dynamic assemblage of sensorial, affective, and temporal modalities, reflecting both immanence and multiplicity without resorting to reductive binaries.

The article's intervention is further distinguished by its explicit posthumanist lens, which extends disability, mad, and crip studies through a critical engagement with technocultural mediation and media aesthetics. While these critical traditions highlight social and political dimensions of embodiment and cognition, the posthumanist approach here emphasises the entanglement of neurodivergent cognition with material-technological assemblages, exploring how 'soft' cognitive modalities unfold within and through media artefacts and practices. Epistemologically, neurodivergent modalities are posited as potent mechanisms destabilising entrenched binaries such as mind/body and human/machine. This claim is carefully contextualised alongside overlapping anti-dualist critiques, recognising both affinities and divergences. The article invites empirical and dialogical refinement to delineate the specificity of neurodivergent epistemic contributions.

Methodologically, the study enacts its dialogical ethics through a reflexive, participatory approach to case study selection and analysis, foregrounding neurodivergent agency and self-representation while remaining critically attuned to the politics of interpretation and difference. Analytical frameworks combine formal media analysis with phenomenological description, ensuring transparency and responsiveness to the

complexities of neurodivergent embodiment in posthuman media contexts. This study therefore asks: How might neurodivergent embodiments enact a nuanced, ‘soft’ aesthetics of cognition that both challenges and extends posthuman conceptions of embodiment and media? Through theoretical reflection and artistic case studies, it aims to enrich the discourse on cognitive multiplicity within the evolving technocultural landscape.

Conceptual Clarifications

This study employs several key terms that require precise definition. ‘Soft aesthetics’ designates not gentleness but flexibility—an aesthetic mode that privileges gradation over boundary, relationality over hierarchy, and multiplicity over singularity. Unlike traditional aesthetics, which often seeks formal coherence and categorical clarity, soft aesthetics embraces what appears as ‘noise’ within normative frameworks as generative complexity.

‘Cognitive multiplicity’ extends beyond neurodiversity’s emphasis on different cognitive styles to encompass the fundamental multiplicity of all cognition. Where neurodiversity advocates for inclusion of different minds, cognitive multiplicity argues that mind itself is multiple, relational, and creative rather than singular, bounded, and computational.

‘Minoritarian universalism’ borrows from Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming-minoritarian, describing how specific differences can illuminate universal principles without sacrificing particularity (Laurie and Khan 3-4). Neurodivergent cognition thus offers insights into the relational nature of all perception whilst maintaining its distinctiveness as lived experience.

Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism, Soft Computing, and Neurodivergence

This study interrogates the reconfiguration of cognition and embodiment within posthuman media through three interconnected arguments: first, that posthumanism's decentring of the autonomous subject creates space for understanding neurodivergent modalities as distributed rather than deficient; second, that soft computing principles provide a productive analogy for neurodivergent cognitive processes without reducing them to computational models; and third, that this convergence enables a reconceptualisation of aesthetics as sensorial-affective practice rather than representational form.

Posthumanism, broadly understood, decentring the autonomous human subject, emphasises distributed agency and relational ontologies (Hayles 2-4). It problematises entrenched binaries such as mind/body and human/machine, proposing a flattened ontology of assemblages and flows. Soft computing—a concept from computer science encompassing fuzzy logic, neural networks, and probabilistic algorithms (Zadeh 338)—offers a compelling analogy for these modes of cognition. It foregrounds gradation, uncertainty, and context-dependence over rigid dichotomies, resonating with neurodivergent experiences characterised by sensory layering, non-linear processing, and affective nuance. However, this metaphor demands careful handling to avoid technological reductionism; cognition is not reducible to computation, but rather should be understood as embodied, embedded, and enacted within socio-material assemblages. Here, the soft computing analogy serves as a heuristic device, illuminating cognitive multiplicity without collapsing into mechanistic explanations.

Neurodivergence—encompassing autistic sensory processing, synaesthesia, ADHD-related attentional dynamics, and other cognitive variations—constitutes a lived embodiment

of such ‘soft’ modalities. Phenomenological accounts detail experiences of sensory amplification, temporal asynchrony, and affective complexity, which invite reconsideration of epistemic norms. Empirical research, for example on autistic sensory integration, indicates processes akin to fuzzy categorisation and probabilistic perception, supporting a tentative empirical grounding of this analogy (Robertson and Simmons 569).

Recent neuroscientific research provides substantial empirical support for conceptualising neurodivergent cognition through soft computing analogies. Bayesian theories of autism suggest that atypical predictive mechanisms underlie autistic sensory processing, with neuroimaging studies revealing alterations in hierarchical predictive processes during perceptual inference (Fazioli et al. 2; Sapey-Triomphe et al. 1) These findings indicate that autistic cognition operates through what might be understood as probabilistic rather than categorical processing—precisely the mode of operation characteristic of fuzzy logic systems. Twin studies demonstrate significant associations between synaesthesia and autistic traits, particularly within the domain of attention to detail and altered sensory sensitivity (Van Leeuwen et al 1), providing material evidence for the kind of cross-modal processing that characterises both conditions. Brain activation patterns show similarities between synaesthetes and autistic individuals, particularly in regions associated with sensory processing and integration, supporting the theoretical framework of distributed, relational cognition proposed here.

Neurophysiological studies using EEG, MEG, and fMRI reveal that autistic individuals process auditory, tactile, and visual stimuli through alternative neural pathways, with particular differences in multisensory integration (Marco et al 2). These findings suggest that what appears as ‘atypical’ processing actually represents sophisticated alternative strategies for managing sensory complexity. Rather than

representing dysfunction, these sensory differences may constitute adaptive responses to different neural architectures (Haker et al), challenging deficit-based interpretations and supporting the soft aesthetics framework's emphasis on neurodivergent cognition as generative rather than diminished.

The implications extend beyond individual processing to systemic understanding. Research demonstrates that autistic individuals show 'suboptimal but intact integration of Bayesian components during perceptual decision-making' (Fazioli et al 1) —a finding that reframes apparent cognitive differences as alternative rather than deficient approaches to information processing. This empirical evidence supports the theoretical claim that neurodivergent cognition embodies fuzzy logic principles, operating through gradation, probability, and contextual sensitivity rather than rigid categorisation.

Philosophically, this framework is rooted in anti-dualist ontologies. Drawing on Spinoza's monism (2/I,2), where mind and body are inseparable attributes of a single substance, and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic ontology privileging multiplicity and non-hierarchical connectivity, cognition is conceptualised as a distributed assemblage of sensorial, affective, and technological components. This approach circumvents both reifying essentialisms and reductive relationisms, recognising neurodivergent cognition as dynamically emergent rather than statically defined. Integrating insights from critical disability, mad, and crip studies (Goodley 67; Kafer 4, 25), this study foregrounds the political and ethical dimensions of embodiment. Yet, it advances these perspectives by highlighting neurodivergent agency as embedded within technocultural media assemblages, positioning neurodivergent subjects as active co-constitutors of cognitive ecologies rather than passive recipients. This stance acknowledges the risk of depoliticisation inherent in some posthumanist accounts,

advocating for a nuanced dialogue between social justice and technomaterialist perspectives.

Methodologically, this theoretical synthesis calls for analytical practices attuned to multiplicity, contingency, and reflexivity. Empirical analysis must integrate phenomenological description, formal media analysis, and participatory approaches that centre neurodivergent self-representation. Assemblage thinking prompts attention to relations and flows rather than isolated entities, complicating traditional categorical methods and encouraging adaptive, iterative interpretation.

In sum, this theoretical framework brings together multiple conceptual threads into a coherent and generative lens through which to approach neurodivergent embodiment in posthuman media. It synthesises posthumanism's decentring of the human subject and its embrace of relational ontologies; it mobilises soft computing not as a literal model of cognition, but as a heuristic for gradated, probabilistic, and embodied thought, carefully sidestepping the pitfalls of computational reductionism. Neurodivergent cognition is understood here as a phenomenologically rich and epistemically productive mode, whose specificities illuminate broader questions of media, embodiment, and aesthetics. These ideas are further grounded in anti-dualist ontologies, particularly Spinozist monism and Deleuzian rhizomatics, which conceptualise cognition as an immanent, distributed multiplicity. Finally, the framework integrates the political urgency of critical disability studies, particularly its emphasis on agency and structural critique, while also drawing on media theory's attentiveness to technocultural mediation.

While this theoretical synthesis articulates a novel and coherent framework for understanding neurodivergent cognition as a soft, distributed assemblage, its genealogical foundations merit further elaboration. The concept of soft computing

originates within the broader historical trajectory of cybernetics and systems theory—fields which, since the mid-20th century, have challenged classical mechanistic and reductionist models of cognition and control. Soft computing inherits this legacy by modelling uncertainty, adaptability, and emergent behaviour, thus resonating with contemporary critiques of linear, hierarchical epistemologies. Situating soft computing within this genealogy deepens its conceptual purchase beyond metaphor, linking it to a sustained intellectual tradition interrogating the nature of mind and system complexity. Moreover, explicitly positioning this posthumanist approach alongside existing frameworks in neurodiversity studies sharpens its critical edge. The medical model, which pathologises neurodivergence, and the social model, which emphasises societal barriers and oppression, provide vital critiques but often retain humanist assumptions of the bounded individual subject. In contrast, the posthumanist lens decentring the human subject and highlighting entanglements with technology and environment opens novel avenues for theorising cognition and embodiment as relational, dynamic processes. This distinction underlines the added value of this approach in expanding neurodivergence discourse beyond binaries of normal/pathological or individual/social.

Finally, the empirical grounding of the soft computing analogy benefits from further expansion. The referenced study by Robertson and Simmons on sensory processing in autism, which evidences graded and probabilistic perceptual mechanisms, is a critical starting point (569). Complementary research in neurophysiology, affect theory, and cognitive science—such as probabilistic models of perception (Friston 127) and embodied affective neuroscience (Barrett)—can enrich the evidentiary base. Integrating such studies will strengthen the claim that neurodivergent cognition exemplifies ‘soft’ modalities, reinforcing the dialogue between theory and lived experience.

Having established the theoretical framework linking posthumanism, soft computing, and neurodivergent cognition, the following section examines how these principles manifest in lived experience through synaesthetic epistemology.

Neurodivergent Aesthetics: From Noise to Softness

Neurodivergent modes of perception often unfold in forms that neurotypical models may misread as noise—disruption, overload, disorder. Yet, as demonstrated in first-person accounts and phenomenological studies, these experiences can also be described as layered, rhythmic, textural, or relational. Rather than filtering information, neurodivergent perception often intensifies and crosswires it, producing richly entangled sensory experiences that exceed normative categorisation. This is where the aesthetics of softness emerge: as a practice of attunement to these entanglements, rather than their suppression. One compelling illustration comes from synaesthesia—an experience shared by many neurodivergent individuals, including the author. I have always lived in a world where the senses do not obey the taxonomies of neurotypical perception. My cognition is layered, associative, and richly sensorial—an architecture shaped not only by autism but by synaesthesia, dyslexia, and an unrelenting affection for patterns. For me, the concept of a ‘soft aesthetics of cognition’ is not an abstraction but a lived epistemology, grounded in the sensory and affective textures of daily life.

Synaesthesia, as I experience it, is not an added quirk but a structuring principle of how I relate to language, sound, space, and memory. In my blog post *Synaesthesia – an essay on the adjacency of the sense of hearing and the other senses*, I describe my world as one in which “Monday is a red falling minor third,” and where “my cat smells like freshly baked apple pie.” This sensory fusion is not metaphorical—it is the bedrock of my thought.

This aesthetic extends into my academic and artistic work. In my master's thesis (Mussies, "Lolita"), I examined Nabokov's bilingualism through the lens of synaesthetic sensitivity, noting how his lexical choices were often shaped not only by semantic value but by the "colour" of sound—an affinity I shared. Nabokov's stylistic synaesthesia became a way for me to understand my own: language not as symbolic code, but as textured, coloured, and resonant matter. Meaning emerges not in spite of, but because of, sensory layering. In my work on autism and pedagogy (Mussies, "Autism and Feminist pedagogy"), I describe a moment in a university classroom where I used a custom ActionScript programme to show my classmates the colours I see when I hear piano notes. "The seminar room was suffused with the scent of old books and nervous anticipation," I wrote. And in that sensory theatre, for a fleeting moment, my 'Otherness' ceased to be deviant—it became a bridge. Through sound, colour, and code, I invited others into my sensorium. That, to me, is the beginning of a soft aesthetic: one that translates rather than flattens, that layers rather than isolates.

These experiences challenge the neurotypical hierarchy in which clarity, linearity, and singularity are often privileged. My thinking is not linear—it loops, repeats, fixates, returns, folds back on itself. This might be read as 'noise' in traditional epistemologies, but in a soft aesthetic framework, it is generative texture. My repetitions—so often pathologised—are rhythms. My fixations—dismissed as special interests—are constellations of meaning, deepening rather than narrowing thought. In terms of sensory processing, this aesthetic resists hard borders. I often think I do not have "five senses"—I have one, which receives multiple modalities. Sounds shimmer, letters hum, names taste. As I explained in *Inside the Outside*, I perceive the adjacency of the senses not as anomaly but as architecture. My experiences mirror fuzzy logic: graded rather than binary, contextual rather than categorical. When I encounter a word, its colour may shift

depending on context, language, or emotional tone. This is not confusion—it is nuance.

This synaesthetic epistemology finds echoes in artistic practice. In music, I do not only hear tonalities—I see and taste them. Composing is therefore not simply sonic but spatial, chromatic, and affective. I search for what I call “perfect matches”—instances when sound, colour, emotion, and concept align. This pursuit drives both my academic and artistic production. And while such matches are rare, when they occur, they offer a sense of cohesion I otherwise lack in a world designed around neurotypical logics. A soft aesthetic is thus not merely ‘gentle’—it is structurally different. It resists the hard edges of taxonomical thinking and embraces instead what Barad might call intra-action (128): a dynamic relationality in which perception, thought, and expression co-constitute one another. My neurodivergence is not a deviation from cognition; it is cognition. Not metaphorical. Material. Not accidental. Foundational.

Through this lens, cognitive multiplicity is not a deficit but a design principle. The softness of this aesthetic is not weakness, but flexibility, relationality, and openness to complexity. In a media ecology increasingly defined by datafication, quantification, and automation, neurodivergent sensoria remind us of the value of ambiguity, nuance, and embodied resonance. This soft aesthetics of cognition, as lived and enacted, is both a personal survival strategy and a critical epistemological gesture. It insists that thinking is not separable from sensing, and that expression is always already entangled with perception. It challenges the division between noise and signal, between inner world and outer representation. And it proposes, quietly but firmly, that another way of knowing is not only possible—but already here.

This experiential grounding provides the foundation for examining how soft aesthetics can materialise in artistic practice through human-AI collaboration.

Case Study: “Fuzzy Boundaries” (2025) – a Synaesthetic sound-mapping

“Fuzzy Boundaries” emerged from a deliberate experiment in human-AI collaborative composition, designed to materialise the theoretical principles of soft aesthetics within musical practice. The compositional process itself enacted the posthuman entanglement of neurodivergent cognition with technological assemblages—my synaesthetic, autistic sensibility co-evolving with AI’s probabilistic generation to produce what neither could achieve independently. The compositional brief to the AI explicitly invoked soft computing principles: “gradual transitions instead of clear shifts, layered textures without hierarchy, probabilistic variations, and sensory adjacency.” This directive was not metaphorical but methodological—a translation of my lived neurodivergent epistemology into algorithmic parameters. The AI became an extension of my cognitive ecology, responding to instructions that mirrored how I naturally process sensory information: through fuzzy categorisation, layered simultaneity, and generative repetition.

The AI’s response to these instructions demonstrates genuine human-machine cognitive hybridisation. When prompted to create ‘sounds that taste light blue and fragile’ (‘hoe klinkt iets wat lichtblauw en breekbaar is?’), the algorithm generated timbral qualities characterised by high-frequency resonances, reverb-heavy textures, and dynamic instability. This is not mere metaphor but material translation: my synaesthetic categories becoming algorithmic parameters, producing sounds that genuinely embody the requested sensory qualities within both human and artificial processing systems. The

compositional process reveals distributed agency in action. Where traditional human-AI collaboration often positions technology as a tool, this methodology enacts genuine cognitive assemblage—neither my creativity nor the AI's processing dominates, but together they generate aesthetic possibilities unavailable to either alone.

The composition's architecture resists traditional Western musical hierarchies in favor of what I term “textural relationality.” Rather than verse-chorus progressions or harmonic development, the piece unfolds through overlapping vocal layers that enter and exit according to their own temporal logic. This mirrors the non-hierarchical connectivity of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic ontology, where meaning emerges through connection rather than structure.

The lyrics themselves perform this soft logic. The opening lines—“Monday tastes of copper rain / falling through a minor third”—immediately establish synaesthetic adjacency as the organizing principle. Monday is not metaphorically associated with taste; for me, it literally tastes of copper. The “minor third” is not merely musical interval but spatial-emotional topography—it falls because that is the phenomenological reality of how I experience that sound-colour-emotion complex. The pre-chorus enacts what I call “generative repetition”—the word “loops” literally loops with microvariations, embodying rather than describing the autistic cognitive pattern. This is not ornamental but fundamental: repetition as the engine of meaning-making, each return slightly different, probabilistic rather than mechanical. The AI's setting responded to this by creating actual audio loops that shimmer and shift, translating my neurodivergent temporal experience into sound.

The composition's most radical gesture lies in its “shimmer/glitch/shimmer/shift” moments—designated spaces where acoustic sound transforms into electronic texture. These

transitions embody what I theorise as cross-modal triggers: moments when one sensory modality bleeds into another, creating what Barad might call “intra-active” - phenomena where boundaries between human/machine, acoustic/electronic, sensation/cognition become indeterminate (151, 207, 336). During the collaborative process, I instructed the AI to “include moments of cross-modal synaesthesia, where a sound subtly changes its emotional or sensory ‘flavour’ through electronic shimmer or timbral mutation.” The resulting composition creates sonic spaces where my voice—speaking the words “shimmer/glitch”—literally triggers digital processing that transforms my acoustic presence into electronic texture. This is not representation but enactment: my neurodivergent perception becoming materially entangled with algorithmic processing.

The bridge section contains perhaps the composition's most explicit theoretical statement: “They call it noise / this layered choice / to feel in multiplicities.” This directly addresses the central tension of neurodivergent aesthetics—how what appears as “noise” to neurotypical perception reveals itself as “symphonies” within a soft aesthetic framework. The musical setting supports this through what I call “conversational polyphony”—multiple voices entering and exiting not in harmonic support but in genuine dialogue, creating meaning through difference rather than unity.

The concept of “perfect matches”—moments when “colour, sound, and thought align”—represents a key phenomenological insight. These are not metaphysical events but lived experiences of cognitive coherence within my neurodivergent sensorium. The AI's compositional response created actual sonic “matches”—moments when multiple layers converge in complex consonance before dissolving back into textural multiplicity. These moments embody what I theorise as the aesthetic goal of soft cognition: not permanent clarity but temporary coherence, not resolution but resonance.

The collaborative methodology itself demonstrates neurodivergent agency within technological assemblages. Rather than using AI as a tool to overcome cognitive “limitations,” I employed it as an extension of my sensory-cognitive ecology. The AI became what Andy Clark might call a “cognitive prosthetic”—not compensating for deficit but amplifying capacity. My synaesthetic instructions (“how klinkt iets wat ‘lichtblauw en breekbaar’ is?”) became algorithmic parameters that the AI could process and translate into musical texture.

This challenges both traditional notions of individual authorship and ableist assumptions about AI as cognitive replacement. The composition emerged from what I term “distributed neurodivergent agency”—my cognitive patterns extended through technological mediation, creating possibilities neither purely human nor purely artificial. The result is genuinely posthuman art: not art about posthumanism but art that enacts posthuman relationality. Thus, “Fuzzy Boundaries” demonstrates how neurodivergent aesthetics can materialise theoretical concepts often relegated to abstract discourse. The composition’s “soft machines” are not metaphorical but literal—algorithmic systems responding to neurodivergent sensory logic. Its “fuzzy logic” is not analogy but lived epistemology translated into musical parameters. Its “boundaries” are not conceptual but phenomenological—the actual edges of my sensory experience made audible through technological collaboration.

The piece’s final gesture—dissolving into “textural silence”—enacts what I consider the ethical dimension of soft aesthetics. Rather than closing with resolution, it opens onto complexity. The silence is not empty but textured, not absence but presence of possibility. This reflects the broader epistemological contribution of neurodivergent aesthetics: not answers but better questions, not solutions but richer problems.

Through “Fuzzy Boundaries,” I demonstrate how neurodivergent embodiment can collaborate with posthuman media to generate new forms of aesthetic and epistemic possibility. The composition becomes a proof-of-concept for soft aesthetics of cognition—showing how sensory sensitivity, nonlinear processing, and generative repetition can create art that thinks differently because it senses differently. In doing so, it contributes to what I envision as a more neurodivergent-inclusive media ecology: one that values multiplicity over clarity, relationality over hierarchy, and soft boundaries over hard edges.

Towards a Soft Aesthetics of Cognition

The convergence of posthuman theory, neurodivergent embodiment, and soft computing principles outlined in this study points towards a fundamental reconceptualisation of cognition itself. Rather than understanding thinking as a discrete, internal process that subsequently finds external expression, the soft aesthetics of cognition reveals thinking as always already sensorial, affective, and relational—a distributed assemblage that unfolds across bodies, technologies, and environments. The theoretical framework established earlier—drawing on Spinoza’s monism (2/I,2), Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatics, and soft computing’s fuzzy logic—finds its validation not in abstract philosophical argument but in the lived reality of neurodivergent experience. My synaesthetic epistemology, where “Monday is a red falling minor third,” demonstrates that cognition and sensation are not separate faculties but aspects of a single process. The case study of “Fuzzy Boundaries” then materialises this insight, showing how neurodivergent cognition can collaborate with AI systems to generate genuinely posthuman aesthetic possibilities.

This progression—from theory through lived experience to artistic practice—suggests that neurodivergent embodiment

offers more than just alternative perspectives on cognition. It provides evidence for cognition as fundamentally different from dominant models: not computational but compositional, not hierarchical but rhizomatic, not bounded but relational.

Thinking as Sensorial-Affective Practice

The soft aesthetics of cognition reframes thinking as what I term “sensorial-affective practice”—a mode of engagement that dissolves traditional boundaries between perception, emotion, and reasoning. This dissolution is not conceptual but material. When I experience the “shimmer” of a word changing color based on emotional context, or when my “fixations” generate new patterns of connection rather than repetitive closure, cognition reveals itself as textural, temporal, and fundamentally embodied.

This challenges core assumptions of Western philosophy and cognitive science. Since Descartes, thinking has been positioned as separate from and superior to sensing—mind over body, reason over emotion, abstraction over materiality. Even posthuman theories sometimes maintain these hierarchies despite their explicit critique of dualism. The soft aesthetics framework, however, grounds itself in the phenomenological reality that thinking is sensing, that reasoning is affective, that abstraction emerges from rather than transcends materiality. This shift from hierarchical to relational cognition resonates with my earlier work on what I termed “cyborg mermaid” subjectivity (Mussies and Maliepaard). Where the traditional cyborg “is not made of mud” (Haraway 151) and seeks to transcend bodily limitations through technological enhancement, the cyborg mermaid embraces what appears as limitation—sensory sensitivity, nonlinear processing, atypical social connection—as generative difference. The mermaid figure, traditionally positioned as “flawed, disabled and less-

than-human,” becomes through technological collaboration not normalised but empowered to inhabit her difference more fully.

Neurodivergent cognition makes this visible because it resists the normative suppression of sensory-affective complexity. Where neurotypical information processing often filters, categorises, and linearises sensory input to achieve cognitive efficiency, neurodivergent processing tends to preserve what I call “textural richness”—the layered, associative, multiply-connected nature of embodied experience. This is not deficiency but design: a cognitive architecture that maintains rather than reduces complexity. The implications extend beyond individual experience to challenge institutional and technological systems built on assumptions of linear, hierarchical information processing. Educational systems that privilege singular focus over associative thinking, workplace environments that pathologise sensory sensitivity, media technologies designed around neurotypical attention patterns—all reveal themselves as not universal but particular, not optimal but limited.

Neurodivergent Contributions to Posthuman Theory

Neurodivergent embodiment offers posthuman theory several crucial contributions that expand its critical and creative potential. First, it provides material grounding for posthumanism’s critique of the bounded individual subject. Where posthuman theory sometimes risks remaining abstract in its dissolution of human/machine boundaries, neurodivergent experience offers concrete instances of distributed, relational subjectivity. My synaesthetic cognition, for example, demonstrates how selfhood extends beyond skin boundaries to include environmental textures, technological interfaces, and inter-subjective resonances.

This material grounding connects to my previous theorization of technological embodiment through the cyborg mermaid figure—beings who "become cyborgs to overcompensate, thus out-competing 'natural humans'" while maintaining their essential difference (Mussies and Maliepaard 4). Rather than seeking normalization through technology, neurodivergent subjects can collaborate with technological systems to amplify rather than suppress their cognitive and sensory specificities. Second, neurodivergent temporalities challenge posthumanism's sometimes linear progressivism. My cognitive patterns of repetition, return, and fixation enact what I term "spiral temporality"—a temporal mode that deepens rather than advances, that finds novelty through iteration rather than innovation. This offers posthuman theory alternative models of change and development that resist both humanist teleology and accelerationist futurity. Third, neurodivergent sensoria contribute to posthumanism's project of expanding agency beyond human subjects. When my voice literally triggers AI processing in "Fuzzy Boundaries," or when my synaesthetic instructions become algorithmic parameters, agency becomes truly distributed across human/machine assemblages. This is not metaphorical but material: my neurodivergent cognitive patterns becoming integral to technological processing, creating possibilities neither could achieve independently.

Perhaps most significantly, neurodivergent embodiment provides posthuman theory with Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007. what I call "minoritarian universalism"—a way of thinking difference that avoids both essentialist particularism and abstract universalism. My autism is not a bounded identity but a mode of relation; my synaesthesia is not personal quirk but insight into the relational nature of perception itself. Neurodivergence thus offers posthumanism concrete universals: specific differences that illuminate general principles of embodied cognition.

This builds on my earlier work theorizing how “misfits” can become “powerful cyborgs” through technological collaboration—not by overcoming their differences but by finding technological arrangements that support rather than suppress their alternative ways of being (Mussies and Maliepaard). The cyborg mermaid model suggests that neurodivergent embodiment offers posthumanism not just alternative perspectives but fundamental insights into the relational, distributed nature of all cognition.

Contributions to Artistic Media Development

The soft aesthetics of cognition suggests several directions for more inclusive and innovative artistic media development. Rather than designing media technologies around assumptions of singular attention, linear processing, and hierarchical information architecture, soft aesthetics points towards what I term “multiplicitous media”—technological systems that support rather than suppress cognitive and sensory diversity.

Current AI development, despite its sophistication, largely models intelligence on neurotypical patterns: efficiency over nuance, convergence over exploration, optimization over experimentation. The collaborative methodology demonstrated in “Fuzzy Boundaries” suggests alternative approaches: AI systems that respond to associative rather than logical instruction, that generate through iteration rather than innovation, that create meaning through layering rather than reduction. This has practical implications for interface design, algorithm development, and interactive media. Interfaces that support non-linear navigation, algorithms that preserve rather than filter sensory complexity, interactive systems that respond to affective and bodily rather than purely cognitive input—all become possible when neurodivergent cognition is understood as a design resource rather than accommodation requirement.

Furthermore, the soft aesthetics framework suggests new forms of collaborative artistic practice. Rather than individual artists using technology as a tool, or technology replacing human creativity, soft aesthetics enables what I call “cognitive hybridization”—human and artificial intelligence co-evolving to generate aesthetic possibilities neither could achieve independently. This is not human-AI collaboration but human-AI assemblage: distributed agency creating distributed art. This cognitive hybridization represents an evolution from my earlier work on how technology can help “misfits fit in” (Mussies and Maliepaard). Rather than using technology for social accommodation, the soft aesthetics approach uses technology for creative amplification—not fitting in but standing out, not normalizing but pluralizing, not correcting but collaborating. The goal shifts from making neurodivergent subjects more acceptable to making media ecologies more responsive to cognitive multiplicity. Yet, it simultaneously prompts a deeper interrogation of ownership and the very essence of creative production when human and artificial intelligences co-constitute the artwork, a theme I have previously addressed in discussions around intellectual property in AI-generated fanart (Mussies, “AI, Fanart and Intellectual Property”; “Artificial Intelligence”).

Towards Cognitive Multiplicity

The synthesis developed through this study points towards a broader vision of what I term “cognitive multiplicity”—media ecologies that support rather than suppress diverse ways of thinking, sensing, and being. This is not multiculturalism for minds but fundamental recognition that cognition itself is multiple, relational, and creative.

Such ecologies would value what neurodivergent cognition offers: sensitivity over efficiency, association over logic, iteration over innovation, complexity over clarity. They would understand that thinking is not problem-solving but world-

making, not information processing but aesthetic practice, not individual faculty but relational assemblage. The soft aesthetics of cognition thus represents both critical intervention and creative proposition. As critical intervention, it challenges ableist assumptions embedded in cognitive science, media technology, and artistic practice. As a creative proposition, it offers new possibilities for human-machine collaboration, aesthetic experience, and embodied knowledge. Most fundamentally, it insists that another way of thinking is not only possible but already present—in the lived experience of neurodivergent individuals, in the collaborative potential of human-AI assemblages, in the aesthetic possibilities of soft media technologies. The task is not to invent cognitive alternatives but to recognise, support, and amplify the cognitive multiplicity that already exists.

This recognition requires what I call “soft attunement”—a practice of attention that preserves rather than reduces complexity, that seeks resonance rather than resolution, that values questions over answers. Such attunement becomes increasingly crucial as media technologies become more pervasive and influential in shaping human experience. The choice is not between human and artificial intelligence but between hard and soft models of cognition—between systems that reduce complexity and those that embrace it, between technologies that normalise and those that pluralise, between media that flatten and those that texture experience. The soft aesthetics of cognition argues for the latter: technologies and practices that honor the full spectrum of human cognitive and sensory possibility, that understand diversity not as problem but as resource, that recognise in neurodivergent embodiment not deviation but destination—a glimpse of more multiple, more relational, more creative forms of thinking and being.

Conclusion: Embracing Cognitive Multiplicity

This research demonstrates that neurodivergent embodiment offers posthuman theory, artistic practice, and media development more than alternative perspectives—it provides evidence for reconceptualising cognition itself as fundamentally multiple, relational, and creative. The soft aesthetics of the cognition framework developed here suggests concrete directions for inclusive media design: interfaces that support associative navigation, algorithms that preserve sensory complexity, and interactive systems responsive to affective rather than purely cognitive input.

Fuzzy Sets Future research might investigate the ethical implications of AI systems designed to respond to neurodivergent cognitive patterns, explore soft aesthetics across different artistic media, and develop pedagogical approaches that support rather than suppress cognitive multiplicity. Most urgently, this work calls for media ecologies that recognise neurodivergent ways of knowing not as accommodation requirements but as design resources for more flexible, responsive, and creative technological systems. The choice facing contemporary media development is not between human and artificial intelligence but between rigid and responsive models of cognition—between systems that reduce complexity and those that embrace it, between technologies that normalise and those that pluralise human possibility.

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Comic Frames and Conditional Immunity in Indian Stand-Up Comedy

Tasnim Nazifa Choudhury*

Abstract

Research into stand-up comedy often veers into an implicit assumption that the joke text forms the central part of the experience; that the form is simply an instance where an appropriate stimulus (joke) leads to a reaction (laughter). While the joke text is the most visible and quotable aspect of the genre, it exists in relation to several factors that function in the background to create an illusion of the seamless, authentically informal comic artist's spontaneous rant about various niche grievances. These factors include the audience, the social placement of the venue, as well as the spatial and sensual factors that hold up the performance, and the material technologies (light-works, sound-system, stage, etc.), the labour from the management and staff of the venue, and of course the comics themselves. Mary Douglas looks at what different spaces do to a body, how certain "space/cultures call upon our bodies to be articulated extremely precisely, while others allow it to relax into relative inarticulate formlessness" (Douglas 361). A dedicated space for stand-up creates a particular frame around the performance and a set of expectations that come with it, which can be antithetical or incompatible with the norm of the world outside this frame. This paper intends to investigate the daily creation of the temporal and highly conditional immunity that is conferred upon comedy clubs and comedians in India. In other words, the paper seeks to understand how the space of stand-up comedy that is often associated with concepts of heterotopia, or parrhesia on the left/liberal side and anti-national and treason on the far right, through the management of the spatiality and the expectations of the audience creates a frame where the unmentionable aspects of

* PhD Research Scholar, Humanities and Social Sciences Department, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

society are openly talked about. More importantly, the paper seeks to locate the boundary of that comic frame in the Indian context and how the frame is playfully adjusted, stretched, often shrunk, and sometimes shattered. This analysis is based on observation of both live stand-up shows as well as recorded shows available on various online platforms.

Keywords: Comic, Frame, Space, Subversion, Reception

Stand-up comedy, according to Ian Brodie, is “a spoken verbal verbal performance by a sole individual”, “in front of or in collaboration with an audience”, “largely autobiographical or observational” and is “seemingly extemporaneous” (Brodie 14-15). Stand-up comedy, as a subcategory of comedy or as a kind of artistic treatment of any subject matter, is often associated with the idea of the subversive. This subversion is not purely political, though that is a huge part of the image of stand-up in popular conception, and can be related to the concept of incongruity, or in other words, subversion of expectations, that forms a major part of humour theories. In fact, Eagleton sees incongruity as present in all theories that try to explain the working of a joke (Eagleton 73). Unlike the other two major theories, i.e., superiority theory and relief theory, which try to explain why we laugh, incongruity theory tries to answer how we are made to laugh. Terry Eagleton focuses on incongruity, arguing “several of these (humour theories) are really versions of the incongruity theory” as he puts it (Eagleton 67); humour can spring from “a sudden shift of perspective, an unexpected slippage of meaning, an arresting dissonance or discrepancy, a momentary defamiliarising of the familiar” (Eagleton 67), etc. This is not to say that incongruity in its general sense is necessarily comic. Comedic incongruity involves disruption of socially organised and accepted trains of thought or violation of established conventions or laws. In the case of stand-up, additionally, the public dialogue about matters that are spoken only in informal settings within one’s intimate circles, or in

hushed tones, comprises an instance of incongruity, or subversion of the accepted norms of what is mentionable and what is to be kept under wraps. Thus stand-up comedy is a countercurrent to what is to be expected not merely in terms of subverted logical conclusions or politically divergent opinions, but also in terms of normative expectations of what comprises acceptability in social situations. It is noteworthy that while stand-up over the past few decades has amassed a reputation for political commentary, not all stand-up shows are politically charged in terms of targeted critiques of the status quo. A lot of stand-up remains far from any form of politicisation, focusing on observing cultural quirks that do not offend any religious or political hardliners, while a lot of stand-up also focuses on confronting the audience with the base and the profane. Thus due to the nature of the genre which takes on what may seem unsavoury to be mentioned in public, the art form requires to protect itself from backlash during the live iteration as well as the release of the performance recording. This inoculation from attacks from the audience, both live and digital, while talking about sensitive or unsavoury issues, is what I refer to as “conditional immunity”. This immunity is qualified with the term “conditional” as this inoculation is a fragile construction and may be seized and taken down because of a myriad of reasons. This paper seeks to understand the factors that lead to this conditional immunity, which is a tentative temporal acceptance, and in some cases even expectation, of conflicting behaviour and speeches by stand-up comedians. In other words, the paper will look into how the space of stand-up is organised so as to create a frame wherein divergence from norm does not receive the same treatment as it does outside the venue. Additionally, it will highlight the factors that inhibit or enhance comedic gratification in a given comic show, which plays a great role in the reception of the comic routine.

This study employs a qualitative, observational methodology to analyse these trends in Indian stand-up comedy.

The primary material for this analysis consists of both live performances attended by the researcher and recorded performances accessed through digital platforms, including YouTube and OTT services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Live shows enabled the observation of performer-audience interaction, spatial dynamics, timing, and improvisation, while recorded performances provided access to a wider range of comedians, venues, and temporal contexts. The analysis is based on close viewing and thematic interpretation of performances, with attention to recurring motifs, narrative strategies, linguistic choices, socio-political references, and performance styles. The study prioritises depth of interpretation and contextual understanding, foregrounding the researcher's situated perspective as an informed audience member. The passages that follow thus seek to locate the performance in a social paradigm, wherein the performer and the audience come to be related by way of a system of meaning-making that is different from that which is operational outside of a comedy venue.

The genre of stand-up is a conversational one, to put it simply, as despite the performer's voice being dominant, the upper hand lies with the audience. The withdrawal of the latter for any reason, be it external to the performance or otherwise, brings the performance to an awkward standstill, remedied only by winning them back or by removing the offender, i.e., the performer from the stage. It has also been described as a genre of intimacy (Brodie 5). This intricate, fragile, intimate relation needs exploration in order to understand stand-up in context, beyond the joke-texts or comic speeches which form only a part of the genre. The essay draws on audience studies to come to an understanding of the genre not simply as a text to be studied in isolation, but as a process involving both the performance and its immediate and cumulative reception from the audience. The audience here is understood not as passive spectators but as active interpreters who must be won over by the performer,

again and again over the course of the performance. Additionally, this “winning over” of the audience, as the paper goes on to show, is a process that is at work long before the performance proper begins. The idea of the frame has been borrowed from Erving Goffman to cordon off the performance event since live stand-up has an effect of being indistinguishable from “real” life because of a combination of its conversational tone, autobiographical nature and un-theatrical setting.

Before venturing into the formation and function of this frame and the conditional immunity it creates, there is a need to look at how the stand-up scene differs from other informal, intimate settings where a similar looseness of regulations may be prevalent. Beyond the commercial nature of the genre, which differentiates stand-up from other joke-scenarios, it also requires a kind of control or authority over the space and the audience. The audience and their reaction or response is not easy to theorise. As theatre critic Dennis Kennedy puts it, despite the “materiality of spectators, comprehending them is a problem in metaphysics” (Kennedy 3). The fact of their corporeal, material presence in the performance and the spectral, ephemeral, deeply personal nature of their reactions and impact on the performance is a curious and slippery phenomenon that equally interests and confounds theorists. Any discussion of the audience runs into certain difficulties owing to their non-homogeneity in terms of their expectations or social groups, etc., or the fact that their reactions to a performance are inevitably “private and internal” (Kennedy 3). And yet they cannot be ignored when talking about any performance since they are indispensable to any performance.

It has been highlighted that there are no words in most European languages to assimilate the two senses which are involved in experiencing a performance: sight and aurality (Kennedy 5). The primacy of the former produces the “spectators” (those who look/see) and the latter produces the

“audience” (those who hear). Kennedy also notes the elevation of “hearing the word” over the spectacle both in Biblical terms as well as in the Aristotelian understanding of the spectacle or “opsis” as the least important of the six artistic elements after plot, character, thought, diction and music. However, as Kennedy shows, several artists and philosophers from Aristophanes to Bertolt Brecht saw spectacle as instrumental to the narrative. Although there are situations where we are mainly listeners, as in the case of listening to a radio show, or mainly viewers, as in the case of watching a silent film or a mime show, the usual mode of experiencing a performance involves the use of both the senses.

So then what distinguishes a spectator, and constitutes their membership in an audience? Certain thinkers theorise the audience as those who, while acting as a witness to a performance, seek to decode the message of a performance ‘correctly’ (Elsaesser 12). While others see “subjectivity” in a performance or a piece of media as something inscribed into the performance or medium itself. For instance Laura Mulvey argues that there has been an exclusion of female spectators in Hollywood films because the media tradition in Hollywood constructed narratives with male subjectivity as the spectatorial position (Mulvey 11). Such views often take the discourse into the realm of an “ideal spectator”, and end up giving primacy to the film/performance over individual agency of the spectator. This leads to the supposition that the audienceship is an exercise in comprehension of the message inscribed in the performance or any particular piece of media. Historically, however, this “reading” of the message is not the main concern of audiences, and people have been observed to have attended theatrical events to “ogle an actress or another spectator, arrange an assignation, be with friends, create a ruckus, be noted at the event, watch a new scenic device, or for the sake of companionship, or simply because they were given a free ticket” (Kennedy 12). There are spectators who are dragged to a sporting event they have little

interest in, and in turn drag another to a film that the other finds dull or overstimulating and thus something to be cognitively detached from, and yet they all form part of the audience. Thus, as Kennedy puts it, “spectation is about more than reception”, and “cooperative attendance” is identified by Kennedy as the constituent factor in audienceship (Kennedy 13). Heim also sees the audience in the simplest of terms to be “a group of individuals gathered together to watch a performance” (Heim 5).

During live stand-up shows, there are countless instances of the audience members becoming verbally unruly, or not being “warmed up” which impact on the efficacy of the stand-up routines. This is most palpable in the case of new or amateur performers. Though the duration of the sets pertaining to newcomers in the field are minuscule, the new comic artist standing apart in the spotlight, being the focal point of the audience who are doused in half-darkness, feels the pressure of establishing and subsequently maintaining comic authority. Often, the little stage-time given to an amateur comic passes very slowly, as they struggle to keep the audience amused throughout their set. This struggle for maintaining comic authority is not exclusive to the amateur artists. Established artists too must maintain it through various devices. The following passages draw the various accounts of stand-up comedy by critics and practitioners, as well as personal fieldwork experience undertaken for the purpose of this project. When one thinks of a stand-up show, one may fall into the misconception of putting the onus of success or failure, that is, laughter or monstrous silence, on the comedian(s) performing on a particular night in a particular venue. But as Dan O’Shannon points out in his incisive work on the “comedic event”, there are certain what he refers to as, “baseline reception factors” that remain in the background of the shows but influence to a great extent the direction that the show takes (O’Shannon 28). It is obvious that no one who comes to a show, comic or otherwise, is a blank slate. The preferences and experiences one has prior

to coming to a comic show colour the way they view the events that are to be unfolded before them. This is the “pre-joke reception factors” or “baseline reception factors”. These factors are one’s age, gender, language, educational and employment background, their preference in comedy, etc. This forms the reality of the audience outside of, or external to, the show. Further reception factors accumulate when one takes their seat in the venue. Are they sitting alone or in a group? Are they with friends or with family?

Here, an understanding of what O’Shannon calls the “vehicle” of comedy is important, which is defined as “a man-made creative construct in which a joke(s) may appear” (O’Shannon 43). This is different from the “device” of comedy which refers to the physical contraption in which the comedy may appear. To exemplify this distinction, the device in a stand-up show would be the venue itself, the physical stage and all that makes up the physical dimension of the show, while the idea of the show itself is the vehicle through which the jokes will be delivered. A literary instantiation of this would be that a Kindle reader is the device and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is the vehicle. As O’Shannon puts it, the device is the physical container in which or through which the vehicle, that is the creative container, comes into being for it to be experienced. The idea of the vehicle, and its related concepts are important to gain an incisive understanding of stand-up comedy since the presence or absence of a vehicle affects the reception of a series of jokes. For instance, O’Shannon talks about how a person, say an average office-goer, who is lauded in their workplace for their sense of humour, hilarious rants and witty banter, will struggle immensely when convinced to go on a stage and deliver the jokes that have been undoubtedly successful in the workplace. What changes in these two situations, joking in the workplace and performing onstage in a comedy club, is the change of

medium of delivery from non-vehicular to vehicular. Vehicular performance comes with a set of expectations that do not form a part of non-vehicular joking sessions. The latter is a setting meant for work; in the din of the quotidian frustrations of the workplace, humour delivered by a co-worker may be a brief welcome reprieve from the routine of the job. The former however is a specialised space dedicated to comedy (though the venue on rare occasions features spoken word poetry sessions as well). A person who has come to attend one of these shows will have bought a ticket, travelled to the venue dealing with traffic by road or the crowded metro, struggled to find a parking space, and (as often happens in stand-up shows) waited quite a while in the dark for the show to start. The stand-up show, which is a vehicular comedy, comes with a set of expectations that must be surmounted to a certain degree in order for a performer to do well. Anything that affects any of the coordinates of this performance ecosystem will create ripples in the experience of the whole performance. In this context, the concept of inhibitors/enhancers is significant to understand how the impact of reception factors are managed (O'Shannon 15). The comedian has to have a tight grip of the intellectual and emotional make-up of the audience in order to draw them into his narrative and create laughter. The transition from one comedic event to another in a given comic speech has to be done carefully without "losing" the audience or "cooling down" the room. Inhibitors are not always in the hands of the performer. As discussed above, in the section on baseline factors of reception, the audience comes with their own set of experiences, expectations, preferences and social dispositions which the comedian can only hope to not clash with his set or with the required behaviour in the comedy room. The elimination of inhibitors is a major task that goes on in the background mostly before the performances start. Such tasks of elimination of inhibitory elements are left to the managers and organisers of an event, who more often than not

are themselves comedians. The construction of the room itself is done in such a way that the room becomes a self-contained aural unit whose sounds stay within the room and which does not let external sound penetrate into the space. Such a construction is unique to comedy clubs and auditoriums, but the cafes, bars and nightclubs that often host comedians every week have an abundant supply of these inhibitors. In my experience of bar and night-club gigs, despite the huge turnout (these spaces are located in very affluent neighbourhoods and the crowd pays significant cover-charges or ticket prices) the aural distractions are too overwhelming for comedy. Since these spaces are not dedicated to comedy specifically (comedy nights take place usually once a week, like poetry nights), and more to live music which happens throughout the week, the acoustics are designed for the latter, and not for a conversational genre which requires one to speak at a normal register. The host of the show as well as the multiple announcements also attempt to establish a zone free of distractions by asking the audience to put their phones on silent, and to not do any videography. Interestingly the host often points out people in the audience who sit with their arms crossed and ridicule them, insisting on a more relaxed posture that will help them laugh and applaud openly. It has been a common complaint among the comedians that when a large group is in the audience, there are often distracting conversations or loud comments which count as heckling that emanates from the groups.

While superiority as an enhancer is based on a kind of recognition of difference (from the performer who is narrating some embarrassing memories or from those that connect the punchline with the set-up too late to laugh along with the group), identification can also be a huge enhancer. When comedians talk about issues that resonate most with a large part of the audience, they relate with the character and are roped in on the narrative

more effectively. Though the action described in the narrative may be exaggerated and ridiculous, the audience relates to the motivations, the embarrassment, the desires, etc., of the performer and goes along with the narrative despite its blown-up proportions. Beyond this, the performer tries to localise and vernacularise their sets to maximise immediate contextual cognition. A comedian whose cultural background is completely alien to the audience will not be able to readily create identification with the crowd; the comedian must have in their possession the particulars of the local and vernacular knowledge. This can be as major as cutting out entire joke scenarios from their routine like one comedian, Siddharth Sudhakar, a Delhi-based comedian reveals in an interview. He talks about how he prefers to perform in big cities, rather than any tier-two city, because of the nature of his content which talks about relationships in modernised spaces like Delhi or Mumbai or Bangalore where cheating on one's partner, though looked down upon, is not shockingly offensive to the audience. He chooses to cut off such jokes entirely from his comic repertoire when he goes to, say, Raipur or Indore for a performance. Such edits can be minor as Kishore Dayani, the owner of a small comedy club in Hauz Khas village states, like replacing one locality for another when one is performing in a different city. A joke where he talks about the noisy Karol Bagh of Delhi, becomes Sant Nagar when performing in Jaipur in order to have the audience catch on to the logic of the joke.

Mary Douglas looks at what different spaces do to a body, how certain "space/cultures call upon our bodies to be articulated extremely precisely, while others allow it to relax into relative inarticulate formlessness" (Douglas 361). A dedicated space for stand-up as described above creates a different set of expectations altogether, which can be antithetical or incompatible with the norm of the world outside this frame.

The term frame is used here, in a limited sense, in the vein of Goffman (Zerubavel 528). His interaction order entails a fragile consensus, an unwritten set of agreements among the social participants. This consensus, as Persson describes it, is a balancing act between two “forces”; ritualisation, the coded norms or accepted behaviour or set of expectations, and vulnerability of such actions, which are on the brink of breakdown needing further ritualised ways of mending the situation. It has to be clarified why Goffman’s dramaturgical theory of social interaction is important in the context of stand-up, which is an artistic performance, and not a social performance of ritualised behaviour. This is where Brodie’s work on stand-up that characterised the form as a genre of intimacy or professionalized intimate talk becomes important. As shown earlier, stand-up mimics an informal social setting, while inhibiting the setting to become truly informally social (where the audience shares an equal opportunity to speak up) rather than a bracketed performance through formalized strategies involving the lighting, and the “take-down” of hecklers. The stand-up artist must keep the balance from tipping over, through take-downs, filler jokes, jokes about when jokes do not work, etc., while the audience often indulges in unruly verbal comments that sometimes are meant to intentionally derail a comic speech, ruin a punchline, in order to get the room’s attention. In such situations, the comics resort to and are even encouraged to be as harshly witty as possible to shut down the offensive troll. Additionally, though, there is something to be said about certain elements or jokes in a comic set which can be unacceptably offensive especially when it comes to certain marginalised groups, it can be argued that even in the absence of such “punching down”, the stand-up stage hosts subject matters which perhaps can only be whispered amongst a group of friends or informal acquaintances or spoken of in one’s private quarters. This license to stand-up, it must be clarified, is more pronounced

in live shows, with a spatio-temporally co-present audience, rather than YouTube or short clips on social media sites.

Framing can be seen as “placing information in a unique context so that certain elements of the issue get a greater allocation of an individual’s cognitive resources” (Pan and Kosicki 57). The domain within which a stand-up routine takes place operates with shared beliefs about the society at large; in the case of Indian variety of the genre some instances of this will be along the lines of “engineers are single and socially awkward”, “South Delhi/South Mumbai people are ignorant about the social reality”, etc. In light of such shared beliefs or knowledge, a comedian builds their set based on (a) established ideas about joke writing/delivery, while minding the (b) constraints of the society at large, and the specific space of performance in particular, and (c) the anticipated response from the audience. Instead of seeing the comic text as a “psychological stimuli with objectively identifiable meaning”, an analysis of the frame is to look at the organization of the symbolic devices “that will interact with the individual agents’ memory for meaning construction” (Pan and Kosicki 58). The primary framing in a stand-up show, before the syntactical, thematic, lexical, and rhetorical frames and devices come to dominate the performance, starts to take effect long before the show itself takes place. To refer back to the section about the reception factors, from the moment a stand-up show is announced, by way of a poster circulated on social media by the respective club, or by way of a “story” on a platform like Instagram which is used by the comic artists to promote and publicise their shows. These platforms provide the primary framework, distinguishing the show from other formats, and creating a set of expectations. This can be instantiated by looking at how the artists, as well as the organisers choose to publicise their show:



Fig. 1. Poster by Happy High Club, Shahpur Jat, Delhi. Used for illustrative and academic purposes. All rights remain with the original creators (@happyhigh).

The image above from the same club shows self-deprecation, at a collective level encompassing the performers as well as the managers of the club, while simultaneously announcing the dates of the show.



Fig. 2. Event poster from Habitat, Khar West, Mumbai. Reproduced for commentary and scholarly reference. Rights belong to the original owner (@thehabitat).

The image above is more interesting in that it talks about the comedy club's attitude as a venue to art forms other than comedy. This picture has been taken from the Instagram page of the very popular comedy club in Mumbai, The Habitat. As a broad cultural performance venue, wherein the club hosts spoken word poetry events, and musical events, it is aware of its base following, which entails stand-up comedy. Hence, the notifications and publicisation of even the non-comedy events takes on a comedic element when it comes to the publicising of the event details on social media.

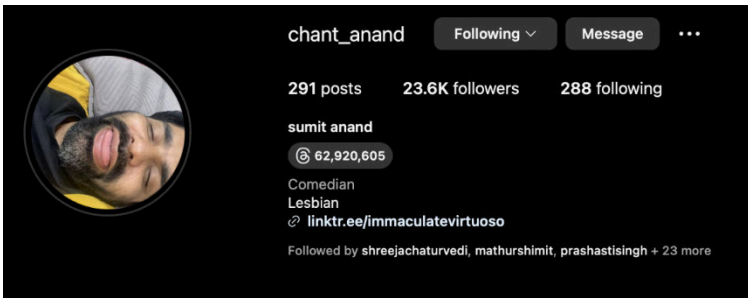


Fig. 3. Screenshot of Instagram profile (@chant_anand). Used under fair use for analysis. Copyright remains with the respective account holder.

In addition to the image of the club that forms a set of expectations, the artists too more often than not maintain a proximity to absurdity, infantility, and “offensive” content. Sumit Anand, a Delhi- based comedian, as pictured above, is representative of a similar vein of frame-setting, absurdly describing himself as a “lesbian”.

These images are intended to demonstrate why a reading of stand-up without taking into account these factors may lead to an incomplete understanding of the content itself. These factors contribute to the creation of what can be called the “comic frame”; the components of this frame go beyond the physical dimensions and incorporate such instances of digital media use as pointed out above. These instances are the equivalent of the

markers or cues that precede a joke or a riddle, or anything that stands outside the serious business of life; “A – walks into a bar and...”, “Knock, knock,”, “Have you heard the one about...” etc., are essentially signals of suspension of regular rules for at least the duration of the joke. This is not to deny the often problematic nature of stand-up in particular, and comedy in general; the aspect of whether comedy is meant to punch up or down is beyond the scope of this paper, but will be investigated at a later stage. What is made clear through an analysis of this background is that the joke-texts, that form the main content, the shareable chunk of the show, which gets retweeted or shared on other social media, are embedded firmly within a system of meaning-making, which if divorced from the joke-text runs the risk of the comic speech being interpreted as offensive without considering the whole context. When we add to this mix, the baseline reception factors we discussed earlier, which form the factors internal to the show but external to the comic set proper, a fuller picture emerges of the performance.

During my fieldwork I came across some notable instances of breakdown of the intended process of decoding owing to the combination of (a) the sensitive nature of the content/theme of a comic speech/set, and (b) the unembedded relating or narrating of the joke text devoid of the broader frame within which the offending joke was originally delivered. One such instance was a set by comedian Gursimran Khamba, in Habitat, Mumbai, in the winter of 2022. Khamba, who was the last act of the show that evening, came to a room as a climax to several hilarious acts. His set incorporated a rant, delivered between sniggers, about how the tragic death by suicide of a popular actor in 2020 must have driven down the price of that sea-view property. In ordinary circumstances, especially one about a public figure who had garnered an extraordinary, almost mythic fame posthumously, and whose death was followed by trolling, abusing and threatening of the “suspects”, such a joke is a recipe for disaster. To my surprise, the audience erupted with laughter

at every joke, albeit with some audible gasps of disbelief which were muffled by the uncontrollable laughter that followed. When later after the show I narrated the incident to two others who were not a part of the audience, regarding the content of Khamba's routine, I was met with stony faces of disapproval. It was clear that despite the massive success of the set at the venue, it could not be translated into other frames to the same effect. A comedy club, and a willing audience for the comedy shows create a certain frame which allows such transgressions to be not only tolerated, but perhaps even encouraged. This is achieved through a combination of the genre's nature as a "professionalised intimate talk" as if among friends, the semi-darkness in which one feels more at ease laughing freely at what ordinarily outside the context of the club would be intolerable or a hushed snigger, the alcohol based drinks which lend an even extra layer of informality and a certain level of suspension of ordinary morality. The stand-up audience, and this is true especially of the ticketed public shows, choose to come to such venues with the express intention of experiencing what stand-up as a genre has to offer, and are further eased into the much contested and debated domain of laughter through the comedy club's design of the space, and manner of publicisation of their shows. When this network of meaning-making is left incomplete or interrupted by someone who watches a clip on social media, it may lead to a very different understanding of the genre/artist in terms of their sensitivity towards volatile subjects. One such interruption in this highly-managed chain of meaning-making is the entry of the stand-up bits or shows online. As we discussed earlier, there are various modes of audienceship, and the reception of a set or a show changes with a change in this mode. To speak about the audience, one must account for theatrical pleasure, the pleasure of the narrative, and the scaled-down model of human life. The pleasure of theatre is in the community, the gathering; it is not a solitary pleasure; rather "it is reflected on and reverberates through others" (Ubersfeld 128).

It is inherently and historically a communal experience. When a stand-up set enters the digital landscape thus, the show presented in front of a “simple”, that is spatio-temporally co present audience, assumes a different character vis-à-vis the audience reception altogether despite the content remaining fundamentally unchanged, barring possible stripping away of gaps or interruptions in the narrative. This is why many artists face a lot of trolling, “cancellation”, and heat in general when they upload a set online. This is not simply with regards to anti-establishmentarianism in stand-up but can be noticed in even very non-incendiary non-divisive content. There is no shortage of one particular comment that is often left under many videos (on YouTube or Instagram alike): “Hasna tha kya?” (Were we expected to laugh?). This same content however, as opposed to what many comments suggest, “killed” in the live show. This is because there are ways to gauge the expectations and limitations of acceptance among the limited and clearly defined audience in the live-shows. The online landscape offers no such avenues, nor does it create the communal nature of the live shows where spectators reverberate off of each other in terms of responses. The online audience, in that sense, is less forgiving, made further uninhibited by the relative anonymity of the Web. It is in this context that the comic frame, the comic immunity created through spatial management adjusts, stretches, often shrinks, and sometimes shatters. It can be argued that such an understanding may not be reflective of the genre or any artist, since a certain level of offensiveness is the *modus operandi* of the genre itself, where shock and subversion of expectations is the order of the day. That being said, it has to be added that comic artists and their routines are not exempted from criticism for the simple reason that the genre is based on the objectionable and the offensive. Rather, the critique of such works be aware of the embedded nature of the joke-texts, which may not always be illustrative of the beliefs of the individual.

Douglas' idea of screening out is significant in this context. Though the non-verbal elements of communication form a large part of the interpretation of any enunciation, a certain screening out, especially of the involuntary reactions of the body to some sort of stimuli, is necessary for the meaning-making process to succeed. Based on the scenario at hand, the body's reactions can either be ignored, or seen to be constituent of an array of signs. Douglas gives the example of a funeral, or a first date, etc., as situations wherein the "threshold" of what constitutes as the array of signs is turned low (Douglas 388); hence every movement, every yawn, throat-clearing, are significant contributors to meaning-making. This is contrasted with sitting in a bar with a drink or enjoying a walk on the beach; the threshold here is high, and the small movements of the body can be safely ignored. The comedy club forms a space somewhere between these two extremes; in it, the audience is at once relaxed and on the qui vive, lest they stick out from the crowd too much. On the other hand, the comedians cannot be in the relaxed zone of "inarticulate formlessness"; their gestures, facial expressions, voice modulations, are all intentional, and vastly contribute to the meaning-making process. However the comic speech and the corroborating bodily reactions are meant to be taken seriously insofar as the jokes get comprehended, not to the extent that they are seen as reflective of the comedian's worldview.

To speak of the comic frame and how it functions to accommodate the base, the vulgar, the coarse, in short the abject side of society, is however not to assert that it provides a kind of immunity to the performers. In addition to displaying the uglier, less than desirable side of the human experience, the genre has often ridiculed the state, poked fun at its incompetence, hypocrisy and corruption. The frame in which stand-up operates has its limitations, and does not always stretch to lend protection to such performers who publicly go against the grain. This limitation affects the genre both on the side of the establishment, or the powers that be, and also on the liberal side of society

whose expectations of comedy are clearly drawn out; that of punching up and of showing truth to power. In the case of the former, there is no lack of examples regarding what politically vocal comics have undergone at the hands of the establishment in India. The most notable of these cases are Munawar Faruqui, Kunal Kamra, the AIB, etc. However, these cases are very different in nature and cannot be pigeonholed under the exact same category. While the FIRs against Kamra derailed and endangered his career and personal safety, the case of Faruqui is even more curious since he was arrested for jokes he did not even perform (Singh). In case of AIB (before the allegations of sexual harassment led to the dilution of the group, the FIRs and trolling they received were the aftermath of their sets/skits. Faruqui's subjectivity, not only as a Muslim, but as a survivor of the 2002 Godhra riots, made him a more vulnerable figure. This highlights the inconsistency in the treatment meted out to the artists based on their background. Similarly, comic sets or routines that end up, one way or another, in reinforcing the status quo or punching down on the marginalised face heat from the liberal end of the political spectrum. In one notable instance in a Blue Material show at the Delhi comedy club Happy High, one of the comedians made a quip about Mayavati which immediately after the show led to much outrage on (then) Twitter. It is important to note that the people that formed the audience on that particular evening were students from Jawaharlal Nehru University and Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, instead of the usual composition of mixed subjectivities. The students, almost all of whom were of leftist-liberal inclination, were disappointed in the dig at one of the only influential Dalit woman political leaders. These instances question the location of loyalty of the genre; does it lie on the side of power? Or on the side of the vulnerable? This is beyond the scope of this paper, but it demonstrates the limitations/failure of the comic frame. It can be said, however, that the fragility of the frame and the danger it brings to the comedian, whether of

incarceration or of social castigation and disenfranchisement, is both a function of the genre itself that deals with incendiary and offensive matters, as well as a somewhat desirable regulatory mechanism that holds the artist accountable for their speeches which cannot be given uncritical support.

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Translation

A Street Singer's Homage to a Father of the Nation

(Translated from Tamil to English)

Originally written in Tamil by Mu. Metha

Translated into English by K. Denish Raja Durai

Author Note:

Mu. Metha was a renowned Tamil poet and songwriter, born in Periyakulam, Theni, Tamil Nadu. He taught Tamil at Presidency College, Chennai, until his retirement. A key figure in modern Tamil poetry (Pudukavithai), Metha played a crucial role in popularizing the form in the 1970s and 1980s. He authored over 30 works, including novels, short stories, and essays, and was an integral part of the 'Vannampaadi' literary movement, which aimed to write poetry from a Marxist and global perspective. His celebrated work, *Agayathil Aaduthaveedu*, won him the Sahitya Akademi Award (a prestigious literary award in India) in 2006. He was widely recognized for his distinct literary style, blending social consciousness with modern aesthetics, making his poetry both intellectually rich and widely accessible.

Translator's Note:

Denish Raja Durai is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Sciences and Languages at VIT University. He holds a master's degree in Translation Studies and English Literature. His research interests include Translation Studies, Literary Historiography, and Comparative Literature.

I

As your photographs are carried in procession,
Why do you stand—
Head bowed,
In the middle of the street?
On this sacred day,
When your faded portrait is adorned with color,
I hear your cry—
A father mourning the loss of his child.
Oh, Father of the Nation!
I wail each time I see your peaceful statue.
With a heart weighed down by sorrow,
My poem remains unfinished.

II

The lines drawn on the map of this nation
Are ribs of the martyrs—
Their bodies carved into borders,
Their blood shaping the land.
We pay homage to them,
Not with cold stone monuments,
Nor with tributes that time can erase.

III

O, my son who once sought refuge—
After the sinking vessels sang in the sea of tears—
You gifted us ships filled with nectar,
But now,
Begging bowls rest in our hands.
Who are the magicians
Who turned gold to dust,
Hope into despair?
Who can unearth the shadow
That lies buried beneath another shadow?

IV

Is it because Bhagat Singhs
Are no longer seen
In the dim glow of nonviolence,
That rats now scramble and swindle
In the grand mansion of freedom?
Come, in the tradition of kings,
Who drape peacocks in golden shawls,
Relieve us from these rags—
The only clothes we've ever known.
We raised sheep,
And in time,
We too became sheep.
Our stomachs remain empty,
Yet our milk is taken.
We are left unfed,
But the shepherds somehow
Always receive their gifts.
With a heavy heart,
My poem remains unfinished.

V

Laws, once pillars of justice,
Now stand full of cracks,
Yellowed with age,
Shaken at their roots.
A hopeless life—
We dwell in darkness.
Sin after sin,
We commit in silence.
And yet,
There are enough sacred rivers
To wash them all away.
Bharat, my brother,
Stay pure,
As pure as you were meant to be.

VI

Crowns of flowers adorn the capital,
While in the slums,
Children's tender eyes
Glisten with unshed tears—
Salt-heavy drops falling to the earth.

VII

The spinning wheel you invented,
To weave khadi,
Now spins golden threads—
But for us,
Gold and silver exist only
In festival songs and distant dreams.
The people of this nation
Follow you faithfully—
But only in one thing:
They wear incomplete clothes.
At this pace,
One day, our birthday dress
May become our national dress.

VIII

Our leaders,
Standing before microphones,
Roar eloquently
About driving away poverty—
Yet it lingers.
Who said
Nothing has changed
In these twenty-five years?
O, my son who once sought refuge—
After the sinking vessels sang in the sea of tears—
You gifted us ships filled with nectar,
But now,

Begging bowls rest in our hands.
The waters released from dams
Do not reach the fields below—
Instead, they flow upwards,
Rushing in the wrong direction.
I know the journeys you took,
Through the slums,
Yet those who once loved you
Have turned you into a slum.
Garland the magicians
Who caused this change.

IX

As your photographs are carried in procession,
Why do you stand—
Head bowed,
In the middle of the street?
I hear your cry—
A father mourning the loss of his child.
Oh, Father of the Nation!
I wail each time I see your peaceful statue.
With a heart weighed down by sorrow,
My poem remains unfinished.



Poems by Sanjukta Dasgupta

Dystopia

Here lies the cactus land
Ashes carpet the dry earth
Sighs rise like siren songs
Here there are no tears
Here there are no fears
Here there is no water
Here rivers are suicidal
Subterranean stock still

Will the cacti flower someday
Like hope out of hopelessness

The steel grey sky above
Inscrutable as invisible God

July 27, 2025

Midnight

Decades ago
Someone said,
“At the stroke of the midnight hour
When the world sleeps
India will awake to
Life and Freedom”

Yet since that awakening at midnight
Midnights and middays quaked

Riven by blood-thirsty knives and bullets
God was appalled that His supreme creation
Could murder and destroy in His name
Midnights, middays, mornings, afternoons
Reverberated with cries of helpless anguish
Death stalked its prey at all hours
Obsessive compulsive disorder
Vermillion skies terrified life and freedom

Five months later after that stroke of the midnight hour
On a January morning three fast and furious bullets
Fired from a semi-automatic Beretta M1934 pistol
Violently silenced the apostle of non-violence
Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Since that day indelible darkness
Midnight is not clock-time
Midnight reigns beyond reason
Darkness at all hours not just nights
Darkness permeates mornings
Noon and afternoons
A nation afflicted with
Manic depression

Yet irrepressible hope
Awaits the first gentle radiant rays
Of an invincible non-violent dawn

June 1, 2025

Poems by Jasmine Kaur Chandla

The Fruit of Knowing

I ate the pomegranate seeds when they weren't looking,
stained my fingers with awareness
like Holi colours that won't wash off.
Now every mirror shows a woman
With too many questions in her eyes.
I envy the sparrow who builds the same nest each season,
never wondering if there might be better ways to weave.
I watch the neighbour auntie in her doorway,
content with her mangalsutra and evening prayers,
never seeing the golden cage around her kitchen.
Some mornings, I try it on that other life like borrowed
jewellery,
heavy but familiar. I fold myself into the shapes my
grandmother knew,
press my hands into dough, not books,
speak softly when spoken to, and avoid difficult truths.
For a moment, it fits like childhood shoes.
But the fruit I've eaten grows orchards in my mind,
trees heavy with questions that keep me awake:
Why must my worth be measured in served plates?
Why does my learning threaten like thunder?
Why must I choose between being seen and being loved?
The subway advertisement shows a woman with perfect teeth,
Promising happiness comes in bottles and boxes.
I want to believe her, how simple that would be,
But my tongue tastes the difference between sweet lies and
bitter knowing.
Sometimes I stand at the crossroads of
who I was told to be and who I am becoming,
wondering which path leads home.
Both journeys seem endless,
Both roads wind through wilderness.

The university degree hangs beside wedding photos,
Theory books hide behind cookbooks,
Ambition wrestles with duty in the quiet hours.
Perhaps there is no going back to before the fruit,
No unringing of that bell,
no unseeing of patterns.
Perhaps the bliss of ignorance was never meant for me,
whose heart was always too porous to the world's pain.
At night,
When doubts crowd like monsoon clouds,
I remember:
Even Eve never asked to return to the garden.

The Lichen and I

In the shadow of Deodar trees,
where the wind carries the scent of pine and rain,
I think of us. Two beings intertwined,
like the lichen on the stones of Shimla's hills.
You, the sturdy fungi, holding us together,
offering shelter beneath your stoic arms,
and I, the tender algae, drawing light from the sun,
turning that light into life for both of us.

But this is not the fairytale they tell in temples,
nor the love songs that resonate in the valleys.
No, beneath this quiet harmony, there's a truth
that the mountains would rather not speak of.

The fungi grip too tightly,
sipping the very essence of the algae's work,
a silent hunger hidden in the folds of love.
It is a balance, they say, symbiosis.
But is it balanced if one takes more than it gives?
Is it love if the sunlight I gather,
never reaches my own roots?

Poems by Patrick Aura

1836: The Silent Girls

Them noisy critters, them gulls
shall bring us rain
 in time
The hovel's disrepair
 lets it in

He paints His name
 and calls it a tavern,
 fronting laziless political power
 followers falling for His
 grandeur

It's all talk and no work
In factories from
 Lowell -- Kitimat
 Murdochville -- Glace Bay
We'd show you
 Five hundred gals all in silence

Ill-paid to shut the
world where everyone can
 Flourish
 Excess

After all,
We pay 'em for it

2023: The Silent Generation

“I feel very overwhelmed today”
seeking comfort in the shower’s tears

That’s not what they
 quite pay me for

It’s natural to have a voice
Even the job description claims
 In search of creativity

The hovel
got stronger after
 a storm
that lasted until 1974

Creatively
Reinforce SHIFTING superstructural
 morphologies
gracefully

As language
exit stage left

Frozen With Summer in Your Mouth

A tethered (b)a(r)ge on shifting water,
Remnant of a dynamic ice age set to return,
When sedentary extraction eradicates itself.

But for now, we revel in the warmth of summer,

As illusions of still eternity surround us,
Below the surface of meek lily pads.
Follow the stalks to snails on rocks,
Extending to an imagined life beyond
The lake-like blackness that engulfs us.

Yet, what frozen angel lies in its depths?
Waiting patiently for the cycle to turn,
And for winter's icy grip to take hold once more.

Dancing on Mushroom Islands

The tree shade makes the hike endurable,
On the fungi, it made twilight;
Universes emerge in the day and night,
As insects bounce a few rays off their wings,
Like disco balls on a blood-orange mushroom island.

The waxy dance floor brings us closer,
As they dance to a god too small for them to care,
As both their universes burn bright hot.

The rhythms of their bodies guide us,
As we spin and twirl in the enchanted glow,
Lost in the magic of this fungal paradise.

We lose ourselves in the moment,
Drunk on the beauty of the night,
Dancing on mushroom islands under the stars.



Book Review

Orbital Contemplations

Samantha Harvey. *Orbital*. Vintage, Penguin Random House, 2024, p.136, ISBN:9781529922936, Paperback, ₹ 499.00.

Nikita Tewari* and Hari Priya Pathak†

Orbital, the Booker Prize winning novel by Samantha Harvey, traces the vacant dome of space harbouring the scientific dreams of four astronauts and two cosmonauts aboard the International Space Station as they methodically organise their lives around the requirements of the expedition- mainly collection of meteorological data. Shaun, the American astronaut, fixedly navigates the boundaries of his understanding of a Universe sired by a benevolent God. His anchor is one of faith. Nell, who is English, is given to meditative contemplation as she scans the geography of the Earth, unable to grasp the optimism for faith that Shaun demonstrates. Chie is faced with memories of her Japanese upbringing, and has only just come upon the news of her mother's death. Pietro, an Italian, is mostly self-contained, having drifted into a state of natural composure by repeated missions to the I.S.S. The Russian cosmonauts, Anton and Roman, demonstrate remarkable dexterity and an emotionalism that animates their mechanical existence.

This work of deep philosophical contemplation and self-introspection is divided into sixteen chapters, depicting a day's experiences of the astronauts unfolding in sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets aboard their spacecraft rotating around the

* Research Scholar, Department of English, DSB Campus, Kumaun University Nainital

† Associate Professor, Department of English, DSB Campus, Kumaun University Nainital

earth, about seventeen and a half miles per hour. The solemn, almost meditative quality of its prose is deeply transformative—in that it elevates the scientism of the subject matter into the warmer poetic sensibility, so much so that the lyrical and rhythmical quality of the prose itself becomes particularly striking. At the author's hands, the work evolves into profound intelligibility, and grounds our abstruse imaginings of space into a concrete shape of remarkable possibilities. *Orbital*, as it traces the solidity of the Universe, accounting for the physical features with the precision of a topographical survey, unfolds as an experience to be felt differently by people. Additionally, it does not so much as condense itself into a well-specified and reasoned argument, but spreads over an entire landscape, being simultaneously scraped off and brought into existence. The poetic prose projects a delightful ambiguity of the linearity of the narrative, mimicking a serpentine movement, and transporting its readers to the chasmic depths of experience. The language and style achieve well in terms of the suggestiveness of everything it touches—tangible or abstract. The narrative, though deviating from a conventional plot structure, illuminates the very experience of reading with its emotiveness and profundity of perception.

Deprived of any earnest human interaction, the monotony of existence seems to sweep over the astronauts in the confined dimensions of the capsule, “They are so together and so alone” (1) with the contemplation as vivid, and gentle as a paradox could ever be; a sense of calm verging on the existential only because it must, in the “black of space” (1). It is a lengthy timeline—nine months, as if to endure again the natural period of gestation. They waver into an introspective meaning-making activity, experience in redoubled intensity the strain of relationships, or grief over death, out of the sheer incompetence of their faculties to bring it to resolution—Personal relationships thought about, but not meddled with, emotions pondered over, but not tackled. Now and then they hold their

cameras into action. It is almost from the vantage point of a seer that they capture the roundness of the earth, its idiosyncrasies and variations— a tender outlook of someone who regains the familiarity of his land after a prolonged absence. From a distance the earth is thought about more endearingly— a mother, a lover, or heaven— beyond its presumed location and now at the centre of their vision. “The earth, from here, is like heaven” (9).

Of remarkable distinction is the sheer literariness of the work which draws much attention to the craft as to the truths of science that, in a narrative of pure scientism, would have lacked the lucidity of the literary scholar. It is the winding strength of the narrative as against the taut manner of objective reckoning which forgoes the gentle versification by which language unfolds in the smooth texture of satin, and becomes a reiterative act of sublimation into rhythm. Additionally, the careful use of literary devices aids the narrative. For instance, paradox heightens meaning— it illuminates the resonance of a Universe with the individual capacity to be somewhere in between obliteration and regeneration. The rampant use of metaphors, oxymorons, alliterations not only make the prose highly poetic, flowing and rhythmical, but are in direct congruity with the astronauts’ experiences of the changing forms, colours and contours of the earth as they witness it from their capsule to be passing through conflicts of different nature and to be possessed by a force that marvels in two completely different aspects of being. The feral quality of space, thereafter, concretizes experience.

One of the very interesting and striking features of the book is the diagram of sixteen orbits of the Earth which the novelist provides in the beginning of the book which attracts and guides the reader to make sense of the movement of the capsule around the earth. Harvey’s style recalls the poetic spirit of the Romantics, displaying a fruitful balance of emotional, imaginative and meditative intensity with a deep regard for the

objective truths of nature. It's a seamless continuity of one feeling into another partaking in the general human condition, even in the face of a mission that might just as well be experienced and recounted in factual detail. Notably, the book invites interaction, reflection and meditation over our relationships- relationship with people, with our Earth, environmental degradation, artificial lines dividing us, and even feminist issues!

However, the narrative style, language and unconventional plot structure which lends beauty to the novel is also its limitation. Looking for the conventional thread of a narrative, we are consumed by its waywardness, where every attempt at symmetry only begets a constant piling of density upon density. Harvey seems to have overdone it, disrupting the natural into absurdity. Characters too, not well developed, partake in the surrealist character of the plot. However, taking in view the philosophical and meditative strain of the novel, characters are not required to be so. The novel has an open ending, rightly so, depicting the cycles which the astronauts must undergo repeatedly.

Orbital can be a wonderful read for those who appreciate and enjoy poetic, meditative and philosophical prose and don't hanker after facts, reflecting Keat's 'Negative Capability'. It is for those who marvel at the literary style which flows in perfect harmony with the meditative theme even if the novel is so scientific as to be about six astronauts in the space in a capsule!

Book Review

Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, *The Jallianwala Bagh Journals: Political Lives of Memory*, Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2024, 248 Pages ISBN 978-81-967852-1-5, ₹ 1250 (hardcover)

Kainat Siddiqui*

Over a century after the infamous massacre of Jallianwala Bagh (1919) at Amritsar in Punjab, the tragedy continues to incite strong emotions among Indians. In the aftermath of the First World War, Punjab had become a hotbed of anti-colonial protests partly because of the price-rise and food shortage. There were daily protests and violent clashes against the Rowlatt Act of 1919 and the arrest of senior Congress leaders including Mahatma Gandhi. In the immediate aftermath of the arrest of Congress leaders Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal, a peaceful sit-in was organised at a park surrounded by walls on three sides and single narrow entrance. The Brigadier General Michael O' Dyer ordered firing at the unarmed and peaceful protesters until the ammunition ran out. Several people jumped into the well to escape from the bullets. According to the British' official count, 379 people died although several other studies estimate it to be many times more. Historian Savita Narain puts the number of deaths to 1000 although uncertainty over the issue remains.

It is hence natural that even after a century, the history of Jallianwala Bagh ignites the pains and agony among Indians. In nationalist historiography and dominant narratives, the tragedy is often placed as a key turning point that galvanized the nation against the British rule. At the time of the centenary commemoration, and even afterwards, a host of works of art,

* Research associate at SABAR Institute, Kolkata

* Research associate at SABAR Institute, Kolkata

literature and films have come up revolving around the tragedy, including two recent films *Kesari Chapter 2* (2025) and *Sardar Udham* (2021). While undeniably significant in its impact, this focus has overshadowed other crucial aspects and perspectives, including the stories of those left behind, the women and children of the deceased.

A recent book published from the Jadavpur University Press, *The Jallianwala Bagh Journals: Political Lives of Memory* (2024) by Kolkata based feminist researcher, writer, translator, and curator Sarmistha Dutta Gupta foregrounds the horrifying experiences of the women who are often forgotten in popular historical writings. *The Jallianwala Bagh Journals* is written with a ‘pedagogic approach’ based on narratives from experienced family history, unwritten local oral narratives, and personal experiences (10).

Dutta Gupta had put up an exhibition at the Victoria Memorial at Kolkata in 2020 on the theme ‘ways of remembering Jallianwala Bagh and Rabindranath Tagore’s response to the massacre’ with the intention of bringing to life the experiences of the women who are often forgotten or marginalised in mainstream historical writings. The book is the culmination of her research on the subject, written like a diary.

The traditional historical accounts of the tragedy usually focus on the predominant role of the men obscuring the contribution of women. While history mentions the contribution countless prominent women figures like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Phool Kaur, Pushpa Gujral and Bhag Devi who actively participated in the freedom struggle (49), what amuses the author is that there are no archival accounts of Punjabi women who were directly involved as protest leaders. Neither of them was shot dead nor became Shaheed (martyr). The role, lives, sufferings, and the form of resistance of the women can

only be traced in the writings of short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) and poet Krishan Chunder (1914-1977). Contributions of women, even in the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, did not receive much recognition. Through Jallianwala Bagh Journals, the author actively seeks to amplify the role of women and marginalised voices so far overlooked while writing the history of the freedom struggle.

Their contributions speak volume about their strength despite bearing family losses. One such woman was Puran Devi who was just 19 years and was expecting her first child when her husband died in the massacre. As a single mother she struggled hard to raise her son only to lose him during the partition riots, co-incidentally when her daughter-in-law was expecting. She had to start all over again and now look after her widowed daughter-in-law and grandchild. Despite this, she dedicated herself to the social work in Hrishikesh, and worked for the empowerment of the women and helping them achieve financial independence.

Attar Kaur, who had guarded her husband's dead body at the Bagh, did receive some recognition though, and a road was named after her, and she was bestowed with the honorific of 'Jallianwala Bagh ki Jyoti' [The Light of Jallianwala] (53). Both these women had also refused the compensations from the British government as acts of their defiance against injustice, upholding grief and memory of the massacre.

Further many bereaved women like her donated their children's old clothes to the Jallianwala Bagh Memorial Fund. The women whose husbands were deported to Andaman had donated their gold bangles to these funds displaying immense personal strength in the aftermath of the Jallianwala massacre (45).

Besides contributions of women, Dutta Gupta also highlights how the protest was also an expression of plural values that India has always stood for. She uses the photograph of a list of names of those martyred in the massacre to point out how protesters included members of all communities, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. Dutta Gupta notes, 'Jallianwala Bagh is a symbol of unity among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs against an oppressive regime' (177).

The opening pages of the book contains the interview with the noted historian Professor Vishwa Nath Dutta in Amritsar. The 93-year-old historian shared his horrifying experience of the aftermath of the massacre. The author also came to know about the much lesser known 'Hussaini Brahmin' community, which had fought in the Battle of Karbala and later they settled in the Punjab-Sindh area' during the course of her research (23).

Unlike other books dealing with the history of Jallianwala Bagh (or otherwise), this book is not divided into neat chapters. It is a journal (as the title affirms) with day-to-day entries of the events. The author tries to interweave a connection between each date of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre with the contemporary protests across the country.

Although, India is a democratic and secular country now, but still, we witness such atrocities by the state agencies. This is an interesting aspect of the Journal where the author connects contemporary political churnings with the times of the Jallianwala Bagh. She posits that the farmers' protest (2019), the scrapping of the Article 370 (2019), the 2019-2020 protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) in New Delhi and Kolkata are very much similar to the atrocious Rowlatt Act or the 'Kaala Kanoon' (black laws). She also strikes a similarity between the Punjab which was cut down from rest of the country after Jallianwala Bagh incident and the way Kashmir was locked down after the abrogation of the Article 370. The migrant

workers with their bag-packs were forced to crawl in Badaun, (Uttar Pradesh) during the Covid 2020. This incident bears resemblance with the martial law implemented in Knoriyawala Gali (near Jallianwala Bagh) where Indians were forced to crawl on their bellies (92).

The tyrannical rule of the British had cut off electricity and water supply in Punjab. Similarly, after protests began against the three 'anti farmer bills' passed by the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party, the government took steps to cut water and electricity supply in the protest camps (31-32).

The book is not without limitations though. Dutta Gupta is not a trained historian, and consequently this is not a typical book of history, and does not engage much with the historical sources. To be fair to the author, the book does not make any such claims either. The work is based on oral history and local accounts of women who suffered through and in the aftermath of the massacre, and makes substantial contributions in challenging the established doxa on memory and narrative buildings.

Her style of writing has attracted the reviewer's attention towards the pains and sufferings resonating with those experienced by an individual, the family or the community just as they were during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

BIO NOTES

1. **Bhaswati Bhattacharjee**, a Senior Research Fellow, is working on her PhD thesis on female war-crime survivor's memoirs at the Department of English of Dr. Hari Singh Gour Central University, Madhya Pradesh, India. She is also a Research Intern at Genocide Watch, Washington D.C., United States, working under the supervision of Dr. Gregory H. Stanton. Her areas of research interest include war memoirs, biopolitics, intersectionality, and genocide studies.
2. **Denish Raja Durai** is an assistant professor of English at Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu. He is an avid translator and his research interest lies in Stylistics, Translation Studies, Comparative Literature, Eco-linguistics, Literary-Geography.
3. **Fardun Ali Middya** is pursuing his Master's in English at Behala College (Autonomous), University of Calcutta. His academic interests include religion and literature, folklore studies, performance studies, and Partition narratives. He has authored a monograph, several journal articles, and book chapters published in national and international venues. He has presented papers at both national and international conferences and has served as a peer reviewer at LLIDS.
4. **Hari Priya Pathak** teaches in the department of English, DSB Campus, Kumaun University, Nainital (India). Her fields of interest are Literary Criticism, Gender Studies (mainly in relation to Hindu religion, myths and women), Film studies, Cultural studies, translations and other interdisciplinary fields. Her more than twenty-five research papers and translations of some short stories from Hindi to English as well as some Kumaoni folksongs to English have been published in national and international journals. She has edited three prescribed text books and two English Grammar books published by Cambridge University Press for the undergraduates. Prof.Pathak has supervised six

research scholars and at present has six more under her supervision working on varied topics.

5. **Jaidev Bishnoi** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh. He earned his Ph.D. from the same department, where his doctoral research examined the conundrums of development in contemporary Indian fiction, with a particular focus on themes of displacement, disaster, and dispossession. His academic interests include literature and ecology, Indian literatures, and literary and cultural theory. Prior to joining Panjab University, he held teaching positions at GJUST Hisar, PEC Chandigarh, and GGDSD, Chandigarh.
6. **Jasmine Kaur Chandla** is a PhD scholar at the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University. She co-authored the poetry collection *Metamorphose: From Their Summer Love to Her Spring* (2017). Her creative and academic work moves across literature, music, and visual storytelling, engaging with memory, place, gender, and lived cultural experience.
7. **Jenisha T** is a doctoral researcher currently pursuing her research in the life narratives of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. Her research interests span across forced Migration Studies, Ethnic studies and cultural studies. She has published her research articles in the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* and the *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*.
8. **Kainat Siddiqui** is PhD in History, from Aligarh Muslim University. Her area of interests is regional medieval Indian history, maritime and economic history. She has published papers in national and international journals. Currently, she is working as research associate at SABAR Institute, Kolkata, India.
9. **Labiba Alam** holds a PhD in English Literature. Her doctoral research focused on the representation of myths in Indian Anglophone theatre, and their enactment on national

and international stages. Her current research interest includes the gendered domestic spaces and everyday life in South Asian fiction, with a focus on Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan literature.

10. **Manjeera G** is a research scholar from Department of English Literature, English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU, Hyderabad). She completed her M. Phil from Jamia Millia Islamia and her Masters from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. Her research centres on popular fiction and its various derivatives, especially focusing on contemporary young adult fiction and other popular forms of visual media, such as comic books, graphic novels and anime. She has presented papers in several national conferences and has published two book chapters. She briefly served as an editor for the art magazine *Abirpothi: Talking Art*. She is currently working on South Asian Science Fiction, focusing on dystopian narratives. She has also worked as Assistant Professor in Non-Collegiate Women's College, University of Delhi for a few years.
11. **Martine Mussies** is an artistic researcher, composer, and autistic academic based in Utrecht, the Netherlands. She is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Gender and Diversity at Maastricht University, where she is writing her dissertation *The Cyborg Mermaid*, examining the emancipatory potential of fan art through the lenses of neurodiversity and feminist theory. Martine is also part of SCANNER, a research consortium aimed at closing the knowledge gap on sex differences in autistic traits. She is the founder of CEAL, an interdisciplinary centre based in Utrecht that brings together academic research, artistic practice, and public engagement in Asian languages, cultures, and arts. She is the author of multiple books, including the Amazon bestseller *Inside the Autside*, and regularly works at the intersection of scholarship, art, and advocacy for neurodivergent visibility.

12. **Nikita Tewari** is a research scholar in the Department of English, Kumaun University, Nainital. Her academic interests span Indian philosophical traditions, Motherhood Studies, Psychoanalytic theory, Environmentalism, and Feminism. She has authored papers examining the impact of Indian philosophy on Western Literature, and has contributed to the expanding discourse on Ecofeminism. Her recent paper, “Towards a Maternal Ecology: Representation and Responsibilities”, was presented at a national seminar sponsored by ICSSR, New Delhi. As an advocate for maternal health, she strives to bridge the gap between literature and lived experiences.
13. **Patrick Aura** is a PhD candidate at the Université de Montréal. His research explores the intersection of 20th century Canadian and Indigenous literatures with environmental studies and history. He has also worked on science fiction, comics, and historiographic metafiction. His poetry addresses similar topics, often with a more tongue-in-cheek angle.
14. **Renuka K** is a research scholar at the Central University of Tamil Nadu. She is currently engaged with theories of space and the pedagogy of English Literature and Language in India. She graduated from the University of Madras and has three years of experience developing content for various international and national competitive exams, including the GRE, IELTS, TOEFL, and UGC-NET. She has recently contributed a book chapter to De Gruyter Brill’s Anglia Book Series (2025).
15. **Runjun Devi** is pursuing her doctoral studies in the department of Folklore Research, Gauhati university on the topic of Astro- mythology and Star-lore. She holds Post graduation degrees in Physics and Mass communication. Her interest lies in Folklore theories, Cultural anthropology, Popular culture and film studies, and science communication. She is a known name in Idiomatic

translation, Subtitle creation, and Prompt engineering for Large Language Model AI. She has served as a resource person and guest faculty in Gauhati University, Pragjyotish College, Goalpara College, IMCMS, and BA- A Cultural Organisation. She is an acclaimed writer and translator, with several publications in her repertoire.

16. **Salma Begum** is a doctoral researcher in the Department of English at Tezpur University, working at the intersection of Girmitya literature and Translation Studies. An avid translator, she works fluently across Assamese, Hindi, and English.
17. **Sanjib Sahoo** teaches literature in the Department of English, Tezpur University. His research interests and publications are in Indian Literature, Translation Studies and Popular Culture.
18. **Sanjukta Dasgupta** is a well-known scholar, critic, poet, short story writer and translator par excellence. She is the President, Executive Committee, Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library, Kolkata and a Visiting Professor at Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland (2018). She is also an Honorary Visiting Professor at the Department of English, Sister Nivedita University. She had served as a Professor (Retd.) and Former Head, Department of English and Former Dean, Faculty of Arts, Calcutta University, Kolkata.
19. **Smrity Jayara** is a doctoral research scholar in the Department of English, University of Delhi, working at the intersection of literary studies, disability studies, and technology. Her research broadly examines literary and cultural representations of disability, with particular attention to how technological interventions reshape embodied experience, accessibility, and social inclusion. She holds an M.Phil. in English from the University of Delhi and an M.A. in English from Panjab University, Chandigarh, where she graduated as a department topper. Her academic

training has been enriched through research internships and academic engagements at premier institutions, including the Indian Institutes of Technology at Madras and Delhi. She has presented research at national and international academic forums, including the University of Tor Vergata, Rome, and Paris, France. Her academic achievements include qualification of the UGC NET-JRF, recognition as an NPTEL Discipline Star by IIT Madras, and multiple course-topper distinctions. Her scholarly pursuits are guided by a commitment to inclusive, socially responsive humanities research that foregrounds accessibility, equity, and representation.

- 20. Tasnim Nazifa Choudhury** is a PhD candidate at the Humanities and Social Sciences Department at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi. Her research focuses on stand-up comedy in India. Rather than isolating the joke as the sole unit of analysis, her work approaches stand-up as a composite performance. Her academic interests lie in humour studies, cultural studies, and performance studies.

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