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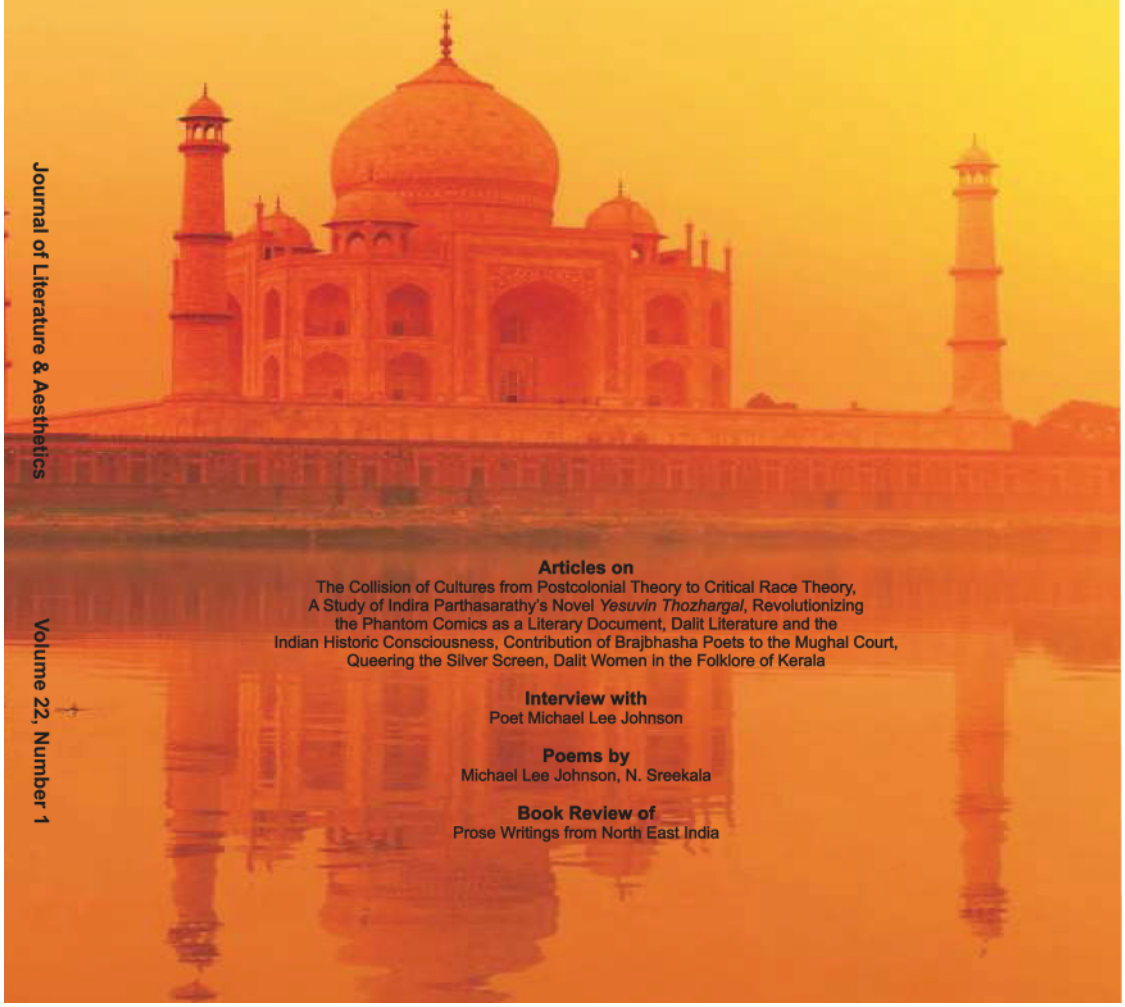

**Articles on**

The Collision of Cultures from Postcolonial Theory to Critical Race Theory, A Study of Indira Parthasarathy's Novel *Yesuvin Thozhargal*, Revolutionizing the Phantom Comics as a Literary Document, Dalit Literature and the Indian Historic Consciousness, Contribution of Brajbhasha Poets to the Mughal Court, Queering the Silver Screen, Dalit Women in the Folklore of Kerala

**Interview with**

Poet Michael Lee Johnson

**Poems by**

Michael Lee Johnson, N. Sreekala

**Book Review of**

Prose Writings from North East India

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# The Collision of Cultures from Postcolonial Theory to Critical Race Theory

**Rajnath**

**Abstract**

The essay focuses on the cultural conflict in the two movements in theory which emerged in America in the second half of the twentieth century and continued in the early years of the twenty-first. Postcolonial theory was founded by Edward Said in 1978 with the publication of *Orientalism* and critical race theory by Richard Delgado and Jeen Stefancic in 2001 when they jointly published their manifesto. The nature of conflict in the two theories is the same but they take place in two different regions, the former in the decolonized space in the Orient and the latter in America centred mainly in the two Ivy League universities, Harvard and Columbia. Where they two theories resemble and differ is the theme of the essay.

**Keywords:** race, racism, white-over-black, subaltern, identity, vision

Postcolonial criticism has received a great deal of critical attention in India as well as the West, whereas critical race theory, which is of later origin, has had limitated circulation in American academic circles. But I notice a striking similarity between the two theories. Both movements are informed by the collision of cultures, Western culture of whites and Oriental culture of nonwhites.

Postcolonial theory was pioneered by Edward Said, a Palestinian who was later naturalized as an American citizen and taught at Columbia University, whereas the manifesto of critical race theory was written jointly by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, Professors of Law at Pittsburg University.

The main charge of the postcolonial critics against the West is that they have been looking down upon the nonwhite Orient as the inferior other. Their focus is on the decolonized world of the East which was once under the rule of Western imperial powers. In his

*Orientalism,* which became the Bible of postcolonialism, Edward Said succinctly brings out the West's derogatory attitude towards the East:

> The Orient is irrational, depraved, (fallen), childlike, different, thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, normal. (1995, 40)
>
> The Orient was linked . . . to elements in the Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. (1995, 207)
>
> The essence of Orientatalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority. (1995, 42)

At the other end of the spectrum, the focus of critical race theory in on the ethnic minority in the metropolitican West, in the U.S. in particular. Like untouchables in Indian society, blacks in America are on the bottom rung of the social ladder bearing the brunt of humiliation.

It is a strange coincidence that both in the West and the East the Orient has suffered. The Orient that suffered in the East was the Orient ruled and exploited by Western rulers and the Orient that suffered in the West was the Orient humiliated by the white majority. One thing which is common to both the theories is the derogatory attitude of the West which consists of whites towards nonwhites of the Orient.

Indian culture looks upon the whole world as one family, *Vasudev Kutumbakam* but the trinity of postcolonial theory, with two from the India subcontinent and one from the Middle East, did not pay any attention to the marginalized minority communities including those from the countries of their origin. I can hazard the guess that the postcolonial theorists settled in the U.S. with respectable position as professors at the Ivy League looked down upon blacks, if not Asian minorities, just as whites did. I wonder how these theorists will react to the appointment of a black woman Professor as President of the prestigious Harvard University reported in *The Times of Indian* for December 17 , 2022:

> Harvard University named Claudinc Gay, the school's Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science as its 30th President, the first black person and only the second woman to hold the job.

This tilts the balance in favour of blacks in America. This is a very healthy gesture made by the faculty and administration of Harvard University. This reminds us of the appointment of Amartya Sen, the Indian" Economics Nobel Laureate as Master of the Prestigious Trinity College, Cambridge.

Blacks in America are the most disadvantaged people in the world. They were brought to America and Europe as salves from the African colonies of the British Empire and treated, bought and sold as animals. Neither the leftists nor the postcolonialists have bothered about them and the kind of hate speech and epithets to which they are subjected.

Spivak who wrote her much touted essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" did not pay heed to blacks and other ethnic minorities who could not speak and had to be spoken for. This is

where I see the superiority of Gandhi over Western thinkers. Whatever may here been his personal attitude forwards blacks in South Africa, where he had been brought as a lawyer to fight for justice to members of its Hindu community, two very distinguished and highly respected black leaders were not only his admirers, but followers, Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Martin Luther king, Jr. of America.

Both postcolonial and critical race theorists focus on the collision of cultures, though they identity it in two different regions. In the former the attention in centered on the cultural conflict in the Orient, while in the latter the attention is directed at the cultural conflict in the West. Both movements draw on Western thinkers like Foucault. Lacan and Derrida, though the latter is much better grounded in this tradition. Postcolonial theory had its origin in history and then moved into other disciplines like politics, philosophy and literature, whereas critical race theory originated in law and then entered discipline like education, psychology, and sociology. An attempt has been made in this essay to extend the latter to literature where it will join hands with postcolonial theory.

The ultimate aim of postcolonial theory as well as critical race theory is not hegemony but equality, peace and harmony. Critical race theorists have said time and again that they desire equality with whites in all domains life and activities, particularly law and education. Edward Said has asserted throughout his critical journey as a postcolonialist that he wants the division between East and West stamped out so that there is no race for hegemony. His message for the mankind in the concluding paragraph of *Culture and Imperialism* in loud and clear:

> It is more rewarding—more difficult—to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than about us. But this also means not trying to rule others, not constantly reiterating how our culture or country is number one. (or *not* number one for that matter). For the intellectuals there is quite enough of value to do without *that.*(1994, 408)

Here there is a message for all, for whites as well as blacks, for Westerners as well as Orientals. This is a message of reconciliation and harmony and rules out any conflict between nations or cultures. There is no happiness without peace, says Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavadgita* and for peace we need to avoid all those situations which cause conflict and one of them is an unhealthy competition.

Reverting to critical race theory, the worst target of white men's hatred are blacks, though others are not completely left out. Why are they hated? It is primarily for the colour of their skin, and only secondarily, for their inferior cultural formation. For these deficiencies, as viewed by whites, they are subjected to racial epithets and hate speech. According to Delgado and Stefancic, two basic tenets of critical race theory are:

> First, racism is ordinary, not aberrational—"normal seienee," the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of colour in the country. Secondly, most people would agree that our system of white-over-colour ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material, for the dominant group. (2016, 7)

Let us not forget that white-over-colour was the predominant cultural problem in the erstwhile colonies of the British empire including India. White is by convention associated with the positive qualities such as innocence, purity, beauty, while black stands for the negative like violence, fraud, crime, ugliness, sin, etc. Crimes and sin are generally committed at night, while during the day those activities which contribute to health, prosperity and growth take place. The contrast between white and black explains, but does not justify, why blacks are despised in America, which is a county dominated and controlled by whites. Blacks have been striving to change this narrative, but so far they have achieved little success.

Besides blacks there are other minority groups in America like Latinos, the Asians, and one gets the impression that they do not intend to join hands with blacks in their fight for justice and equality. Even the blacks in America, who are well-placed holding respectable position as Professors, lawyers or scientists distance themselves from run-of-the-mill blacks who are left alone to fight for their rights. The civil rights activists also circumvent the rights of blacks.

In their book, *Understanding Words that* Wound Delgado and Stefancic have explored various dimensions of hate speech and hate epithets used for blacks and other minority communities. The epithet "nigger" for Africans has been examined in detail by Randall Kennedy in his book *Nigger*: *The Career of a Troublesome Word.* He calls it "the filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language." Delgado and stefancic have examined the history and development of four racial epithets hurled at blacks and other ethnic minorities: Chink for a Chinese, kike for a jew, spic for a Mexican, wop for an Italian. These are slurs intended to damage others' reputation and hurt their feelings.

I have always maintained that language is the first and foremost indication of one's culture, not so much the command as the control of language, which means not using words that would hurt someone's feelings. This is where lies the significance of a book like *Understanding Words that Wound*. A person who indulges in hate speech and employs hate epithets does not realize the extent to which they cause mental agony to the victim. Words act like arrows shot from a bow wounding the targeted person. This explains why in the *Bhagavadgita* Lord Krishna has stressed the need for *Vachiktap*, i.e. verbal penance to control one's language. An wounded person, like a wounded tiger, may pounce back on the hate-speaker and physically harm him.

Hate speech is not confined to white-over-black situation in American but can take place in any country, with any people in any situation. It is always premised on the superiority-interiority complex. No less a person than Gandhi was subjected to hate speech by the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, who called him "an Indian Fakir." It was Gandhi's magnanimity that instead of feeling hurt, he turned the tables on Churchill by taking his slur as a compliment, as he always wished to be identified with the poorest of the poor.

The hate speech directed at blacks in America may be the most humiliating and the dirtiest form of hatred but even a country like India is not free from hate speech. The

residents of Bihar considered a backward state are subjected to hate speech in the advanced state of Maharastra whose capital, Bombay is called the commercial capital of India for its prosperity and employment avenues. They are forced to speak the language of the state which is Marathi, and if they fail to, they are asked to, and sometime forced to, go back to where they came from.

Those familiar with Western criticism know that the New Criticism, which exercised a decisive influence on theory as well as class-room teaching, talks of "language as gesture" which is the title of a collection of essays by an eminent New Critic, R.P. Blackmur. This means that poetry can convey concrete reality through the manipulation of language. In critical race theory "gesture is language" which means that gesture can communicate the meaning which is normally conveyed through language. To take an example, a white man sees a white person, man or woman, he smiles but he does not when he sees a black person. This means that he likes a white person but dislikes a black one. There is nothing that anybody can do about hatred conveyed through gesture, but if it is conveyed through words or action then certainly it can be reported and a formal complaint can be lodged.

In India hate speech is frequently heard of in the political context, as politicians like to express their differences in a language which will hit the opponent below the belt. Of course, there are poticians who are soft-spoken and make sure that their language does not hurt anybody but their member is few and far between.

Critical race theory had its origin in law, both the classroom teaching and legal profession. It is felt by blacks that when a case of hate speech goes to court, the judges who are white do not do full justice. This is a personal problem of white-over-colour which fully justifies whites defending whites at the cost of being unfair to blacks. And the problem with the legal system in that, in the manner of deconstructive philosophy and criticism, any thing can be proved right or wrong depending on the rhetorical capacity of the lawyer to convince the judge. It was for the misuse of rhetoric that Plato banned the entry of sophists and poets in the ideal state ruled by philosophers. But Plato, deconstructionists as well as critical race theorists are not fully justified, as the great majority of criminals do get punished and spend years in prison, poets are admired, logic prevails, and people have not lost faith and belief in the legal system.

It is shocking that an advanced country like America has so much of cultural conflict resulting in violence. While in America, in New York, or Buffalo, or any other city, I had to be extra careful while walking on the road at night. I used to frequently look back to make sure that I was not being chased. What is the solution to this problem, which is a stigma on American culture? The solution lies in both whites and blacks minimizing their differences and dislike, understanding each other's strength, not using words that wound, changing their conduct towards each other and, most importantly, realizing that we are all human beings not withstanding the colour of the skin and deserve human treatment.

There is little doubt that hate speech in its worst from exist in America where people are hated for the colour of the skin, but it exists in other countries and other races as well. That it exists in India is evident from the following newsitem published in *The times of India* for November 18, 2022.

Hate Speech

H.C. Turns down Azam's plea seeking stay

Azam Khan, a Senior Samaj Party leader was charged with hate speech against the Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, other senior Jantra Party leaders and the then District Magistrate of Rampur. For his hate speech Khan was awarded three years' imprisonment. He appealed for a stay on imprisonment in the High Court, which was turned down.

I fail to understand why people, especially those holding responsible position indulge in hate speech. Apart from the punishment which is awarded for hate speech, it tarnishes the person's image and proves beyond doubt that he lacks culture which is best displayed in language.

Throughout my long journey as a critic I have emphasized the binary of sweeping generalization versus critical discrimination and maintained that sweeping generalization militates against cultural as well as critical formation. Not all blacks or members of other minority communities are bad and whites who indulge in reverse hate speech cannot be reckoned good human beings. Blacks who indulge in discrimination or recrimination against whites or indulge in physical violence against them without immediate provocation are equally to blame. We must not forget that blacks were for a long time forced to live as slaves, and meted out brutal treatment. This may have engendered in them a feeling of revenge. On the other hand, whites were for a long time owners of slaves and therefore they find it difficult to treat them on a par with whites. The past is a big stumbling block in the normalization of the black-white relationship. To reduce or remove acrimony both blacks and whites must try to forget the past and behave with each other as best they can. During my long stay in England and America I made several white friends, but I also made friends with a couple of blacks whom I liked. One white and one black friend came to see me off at the Buffalo airport when I was leaving that city on my way back to India. When I was at Leeds in England I was introduced to a black young man by a pretty young body who was working in the University library. This was her husband who struck me as a decent young man. The wife told me later that the moment her parents learnt that she had married a black, they told her that they would have no relationship with her and her husband. This is a problem for which there is no solution. Parents did not harm her or her husband but simply snapped their ties with them. Nobody can be forced to like or dislike a person. This kind of situation obtains in India when an upper caste girl marries an untouchable. Parents of the girl sometimes get her or her husband or both killed for the sake of their honour, which is called honour killing for which they are punished by the court of law. But if they just leave her and her husband they will be will within their legal rights.

Blacks need to prove that they are not what they are taken to be and whites will have to maintain good formal relationship will blacks. Once the relationship between the two improves, social contact between them will follow. We cannot achieve the desired effect unless the change takes place in the mind and heart of the people. Blacks in America are the entire humanity's concern and they cannot be left to fend for themselves. In my discussion of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a postcolonial theorist of India origin I have charged her with ignoring blacks in America:

> Spivak's concept of the subaltern in neither specific enough nor general enough. One wonders why *Blacks* in the U.S. and ethnic minorities in the metropolitan West cannot be brought in the category of the subaltern. (89)

To change the situation of blacks and their relationship with other communities, blacks will have to make their own contribution before expecting change in others. They must shed violence, avoid reverse discrimination, and recrimination in order to become acceptable to whites. Others who are outside the white—black dichotomy should attempt to reduce, not expand the chasm between the two. Blacks need to win the heart of the people through language and conduct.

Why was the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized not so bitter in a country like India, a colony of the British empire? In the first place, the problem in India was not so much white-over-black as white-over-brown and as such Indians were in between whites and blacks. Secondly, Indians were never used as slaves and hence never subjected to the kind of brutal treatment which blacks experienced. Thirdly, in the past India was not only culturally rich but head and shoulders above Western countries which had been duly acknowledged globally. If the past of blacks generated an interiority complex, the past of India made Indians proud. This does not mean that blacks can be ill-treated and humiliated just because they were given this treatment in the past. The past of India was admired, but the present has been decried. Our educational system, our forms of worship have been reckoned primitive, though our Vedas and Upanisads were praised. The Jalianwala massacre in which hundreds of thousands of Indians were butchered is still remembered as a horror for Indians and a stigma on British rule and culture. The British came on the mission of "the white man's burden" to lead India out of darkness to light, but they also exploited India and tortured Indians. Britishers left India with a legacy which included English language, English education and social reforms, but in their endeavour they were greatly assisted by an India, namely Raja Rammohun Roy.

Whites who ruled over blacks in their African colonies, exploited them in multiple ways but they also made their contributions with the result that blacks have made a mark in certain domains like literary creation getting a black writer, Wole Soyinka the most prestigious Nobel prize. It is because of English education that Barack Obama became President of America and Claudin Gay has been appointed President of the Prestigious Harvard University. Blacks and browns should acknowledge, while criticizing their erstwhile colonizers, the benefits

that have ensued from the colonial rule. Whether Indians or Africans, if we see only the dark side of the colonial rule, our differences and dislikes will increase, but if we see both dark and bright sides, then we shall come to a better understanding of each other.

With its origin in law, critical race theory frequently turns to legal system to underline injustice to blacks. Delgado and Stafancic cite the case of a black, Matthew Hale, who studied Law at Southern Illinois University. After his graduation he applied for a membership of Illinois Bar Association so that he could practice.

> Like most state licensing procedures Illinois required that Hale demonstrate his character and fitness to practice law. When the state bar refused to certify him fit to practice law, even though he had passed the state's bar examination, Hale petitioned for review by the Illinois Supreme Court which rejected it. He then applied for certiorari (discretionary review) by the U.S. Supreme Court, which also declined to clear his case. (2018, 151-52)

Delgado and Stefancic point out certain week points in Hale's moral fitness; for example, not accepting racial equality, justifying violence, if necessary, using racial epithets against the jews and the non-black coloured people in America, which make him morally unfit for practising law, though he had the requisite qualification. I once again invoke my favourite critical term, sweeping generalization, which Delgado and Stefancic are careful enough to avoid and use critical discrimination to put their finger on the flipside of Hale's character. Howsoever good or qualified a person many be, if there is a weak point in him, it must be brought to light.

Misinterpreting law to deny justice to the marginalized is not confined to America where white-black binary is so significantly present but extends to other countries as well. When India was under the British rule, non-white Indians especially those who protested against the foreign rule were denied justice by white judges through a misinterpretation of law with the result that many of our leaders including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru spent years in prison. Gandhi's throwing out of the first class compartment in white-ruled South Africa despite his having a legitimate ticket is a paradigmatic example of what minorities including blacks have been going through in America. Moreover, sedition law was introduced in India to curb political activities for India's independence and send to prison all those who violated it.

Lest we should think that critical race theory is relevant only in the context where conflicts take place between the rich whites and the poor blacks as in America, the following newsitem proves that the race problem is ubiquitous.

> Harry and Meghna [of the British Royal Family] is to get Robert Kennedy Human Rights award for calling, out a "structural racism" in Royal Family. *The Times of India,* 24 November, 2022.

If we widen the meaning of "racism" we shall find that racial slurs and discrimination are present in all societies with the variations in degree. The basis of racism is not the colour of the skin or the economic condition but the superiority-interiority complex which can affect anyone anywhere. As Charles R. Lawrence affirms,

> Much of one's inability to know racial discrimination . . . results from a failure to recognise that racism is both a crime and a disease. This failure is compounded by a reluctance to admit that the illness of racism affects almost everyone. (237)

The essay from which this citation comes is significantly titled "The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism." Words are carefully chosen by Lawrence. He calls racism both a crime and a disease. Crime is consciously attempted but racism also comes as a disease without any awareness on the part of the person getting affected. Racism is like Freud's Id which is innate and unconscious but as a crime it is akin to Freud's ego which is conscious. Even a newly born baby may betray signs of racism, when it consider its mother superior to its father just as it displays what Freud has called infantile sexuality. These are the manifestations of the unconscious.

Sometimes I feel that there is something called "Racial Unconscious" which is different from Jung's Collective Unconscious. In the Collective Unconscious are stored both positive and negative beliefs which have passed from generation to generation. In the Racial Unconscious, beliefs are arranged in the superior-over-inferior binary. In every domain of life and activities, a person who is superior for one reason or the other looks down upon the one who is reckoned inferior. This is where hierarchy becomes important. For all Derrida's efforts at dehierarchising through his deconstructive philosophy, hierarchy continues to be important in our thinking and conduct and will remain so. Total equality is a will-of -the-wisp. A person who does not want to be looked down upon himself looks down upon others. Victims of racism victimize others and the wheel comes full circle. One limitation of critical race theory is that it is taken in the narrow context of white-over-black and only in the American context at that.

If we compare critical race theory with postcolonial theory or Delgado-Stefancic duo with Edward Said, the difference between the two theories will become clear. The critical race theorists stay confined to the white-over-black dichotomy not realizing that this is part of the general problem which relates to the superior-over-inferior dichotomy. Critical race theorists take racism literally, but Said expends it into a metaphor which is applicable to all domains of life where the superior-interior factor is involved. Everybody knows that blacks cannot change colour of their skin but they can prove that for other reasons they are as good as, even superior to, whites. Moreover, the colour is not the sole basis of racism. When an Indian Parliamentarian remarks that economy class in the aeroplane is fit only for cattle only because he travels in the luxury class, there is no colour consideration involved. The Indian media charged him with racism.

In critical race theory as well postcolonial theory, unitary identity is denied, as every person, they believe, is a mixture of multiple identities. In their joint manifesto of critical race-theory, Delgado and Stefancic write:

> No person has a single, easily stated unitary identity. A white faminist may be Jewish, or working class or a single mother. An African American activist may be male, or female, gay or straight. (2016, 10)

Compare this with Said's powerful statement in the closing paragraph of his best-selling *Culture and Imperialism :*

> No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim or American are no more than starting points which, if followed into actual experience only a moment, are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively white or black or Western or Oriental. (1994, 348-49)

The parallel between the two statements is not difficult to see. If whites and blacks in America realize what is implied in this statement, they will not be as hostile to each other as they are. In place of conflict, they will think in terms of reconciliation. Said says, very aptly and significantly, that "inperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale." Said's assertion that whites and blacks are not exclusive identities hints that some kind of reconciliation between the two is possible. Slave trade has ended and slavery in American has been abolished but still whites look down upon blacks as good for nothing except menial jobs. Blacks in American were a creation of whites but instead of realizing their mistake and atoning for it, whites continue to hurt and humiliate them.

In a significantly titled essay "Whiteness as Property", Cheryl I. Harris states that once a black woman passes for a white one, her world changes lock stock and barrel as in the case of her grandanother, who changed her colour by wearing a mask. She was in possession of all those things which she desired as a black woman but could not possess, such as respectability, lucrative job, no slurs etc. In the words of Harris:

> It was given for my grandmother that being white automatically ensured higher economic returns in the short term and greater economic, political, and social security in the long run. . . . Being white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination. (277)

Blacks ought to realize that they are not the only ones who face insult. Whites are also looked down upon for reasons other than the colour of their skin. The French look down upon the British for the superiority of their culture which attracted several British writers including James Joyee and Samuel Beckett. And the British look down upon the French for their superior strength in politics. I was told by an American friend that a German Jew did not want to move to Israel, despite threat to her life, only because it was in Asia which was inferior to Europe. Herein lies the significance of Said's message in the closing passage of *Culture and Imperialism* cited above.

It is unfortunate that the colour of the skin which is given, not earned makes so much differences, plus or minus depending on the colour. I know that a person cannot be forced to befriend, love, or marry someone he does not like, but one can be politically correct not to slur or harm a person who is not harming. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock, as he admits, was humiliated by Christians only because he was a Jew. This was certainly wrong, but the form in which he wished to take revenge on Antonio, a Christian was equally wrong. Hatred begets hatred just as love is responded with love. Christians' hatred for Shylock made him still more hateful.

When the colour of the skin is not in question as between Jews and Christians in Shakespeare's play, there may be conflict on the ground of religion. Protestants and Catholics disliking and fighting each other in Northern Ireland is another such example. Sias and Sunnis hating and fighting each other, though belonging to the same faith is yet another example.

Reverting to postcolonial theory and the parallel between it and critical race theory, one can say that both movements are premised on the relationship between the superior and the interior, in the former the superior colonizer and the inferior colonized and in the latter the superior white and the inferior black.

Postcolonial theory has been extensively used in literary studies, but critical race theory has yet to enter this domain. In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said has examined several literary texts including Austen's *Manfield Park,* Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and kipling's *Kim* in the light of postcolonial theory. Gayatri Chakroverty Spivak in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* has a full-length Chapter on literature. Critical race theory remains confined to law and social sciences, and its relevance in the domain of literature has yet to be explored. Since the central concern of critical race theory is attitude and behavior besides language, it is especially relevant in the study of drama and fiction. We have examined above Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the light of Critical race-theory placing the character of Shylock at the centre of discussion. In Arundhati Roy's Booker prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*, the character of the untouchable, Valutha and the upper caste characters' attitude and behaviour towards him is particularly significant. Ammu, an upper caste divorcee has a distant attitude towards Valutha, but she finds his body sexually attractive and has a hot and violent sex with him. Gesture as language can be explored in discussions of drama and fiction.

With the erstwhile colonies as free countries now, the colonizer-colonized cultural conflict is tapering off, though in some quarters the inferiority complex caused by the colonial rule persists. The while-black cultural conflict, which is certainly not as fierce now as it was in the past, will be reduced with the passage of time. Both conflicts in the wider sense of a conflict between the superior and the inferior will stay varying in degree from person to person.

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# The Ideology of Inclusion: Revolutionizing the Phantom Comics as a Literary Document

**S. Visaka Devi**

**Abstract**

Considering the ambiguity in the terms comics and graphic texts, the articlehighlights the fact that graphic presentations are unduly rated higher than comics though comics are much more eagerly awaited by readers. The Phantom comics are rejected from being included in curricula merely because of the bias of the Americans and the English, towards it as texts that reflect poor culture. In fact, the Phantom comics have a larger outreach and nourish both child and adult psyche alike with humanitarianism, environmental concerns, non-discriminatory trends towards the Bandar tribesmen by the philanthropic superhero. The Phantom is no less than Robin Hood and therefore deserves to be accepted as part of high literature.

**Keywords:** Inclusion, syllabi, popularity, Phantom culture.

Graphic novels have since the late 1970's been sensational reading for both the young and the adult alike and have recently become texts that deserve literary prominence. Perhaps ever since legends and tales that belonged to a nation came into print, graphic novels became a catchy, classic substitute for the oral narratives. This in turn soon was taken over by other heroes and superheroes who were exclusive characters in graphic presentations who added much to the imagination and magical serendipity of children, the young and the adult alike. In fact, Tom DeFalco points out that "comics were originally not intended for kids"- a statement that adds to the ambiguity of the term. (Qtd. in Weiner 12) Literally they were pitted against texts that were acknowledged as a major part of literature and were treated with certain disapproval either because they catered merely to young children alone in which the graphic presentations played a good role in impressing the young psyche and therefore not acceptable in high literature.

However, Comics and Graphic novels are debated terms and easily appeal to the masses than find space in literature syllabi. Therefore, they quite naturally fall under the larger term Popular literature. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica,

> Popular literature includes those writings intended for the masses and those that find favour with large audiences. It can be distinguished from artistic literature in that it is designed primarily to entertain. Popular literature, unlike high literature, generally does not seek a high degree of formal beauty or subtlety and is not intended to endure.

However, though Graphic texts seem to have negotiated their way into the literary matrix there is an uncertainty that still revolves around it. The reason being that a comic strip often figures in a magazine or newspaper in a serialized manner while the case is not so with a graphic text. A Graphic text is meant to give a whole theme and story with its supporting graphic presentations, in short, as observed by R.A. DeCandido, in his 1990 Library Journal Article "Picture This: Graphic Novels in Libraries, "a self-contained story that uses a combination of text and art to articulate the plot." (Qtd. inWeiner 32) This factor when analysed becomes ambiguous for a comic strip that appears as a serial in some magazine can always be compiled into a graphic novel later. But not vice versa as a graphic text is considered self-sufficient. Owing to the self-sufficiency of a graphic novel it was always treated way ahead of comic books. However, common references to these texts vary from comics, graphic novels, sequential art, photo novels, graphics and paperback comic novels. While the graphic novel itself has other additional names as graphic album, graphic instalment, graphic narrative and sequential art in specific.

The first Graphic novel was published in the US, in 1978 by Eisner titled *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. In the mid 1980's the focus was shifted to three other texts such as Frank Miller's The Dark Knight Returns (1986) Alan Moore's The Watchmen (1986) and Art Spiegelman's Pullitzer Prize winning Maus.(1980) By then graphic novels were becoming trendier than before with all their innovative presentation formats and other added features and qualities. This also in turn became a reason why Comics were undermined when compared to Graphic novels, forgetting the fact that comics had set the momentum for an enhanced form called the graphic version that was lengthier and a complete narrative unlike the serialized comics (which also did provide completion after a span of serialization) In fact, it cannot be denied that comics were much more intriguing for all age groups who would eagerly await the publication of the next issue.

The idea that comic strips or comic classics are categorized as popular literature or popular culture becomes debatable for the obvious reason that most children in India and across the world grow up reading comics. Reading comics is not so much based on affordability as much as it is on availability. (Klaehn 86) This helps them to build up several aspects, vital for developing a fine personality, the roots of which are sowed at a very tender age irrespective of the fact whether the child belongs to the elite or to the popular culture. Therefore, the idea of denigrating comics to popular literature that spurns off the texts from elitist standards to the common, leads one to wonder if it is a mere elitist construct that promulgates a stance as

that. Thereby, this can only be viewed as an elitist de-standardization of the innate power of comics as being 'popular' which automatically edges comics and comics-reading to a secondary status thus elevating graphic texts with their specificities as more powerful and significant.

What deserves attention here is that both comics and graphic texts bear the same intentions and values and the content is meant appeal to certain age groups. Among the various types of comics read, the first and second are the superhero comics and the funnies; while the third is the traditional one oriented toward children and teenagers; and the fourth is the graphic novels and adult oriented comics. These categories are mostly editorial, but they also describe different values. However, even after inclusive theories as comparative literature or studies has acknowledged Popular culture as a vital part of literature, still the reason why comics continue to be treated as the literary 'Other' is indeed a colossal failure. It clearly indicates a certain literary 'westoxication' that urges distinctions of 'class' and 'classlessness' in literature. Such reluctance emanates from the bias that extends from the elitist polemics against popular literature and culture that began with the comic innovations of the eighteenth century English artist William Hogarth. This, indeed was a conflicting concept of the times yet considerably aesthetic in terms of its value though ignored.

A powerful instance that decimates the elitist outlook is that of *The Phantom or The Ghost who Walks* by Lee Falk. Phantom comics, readily create a classless world for the young readers. The texts sensitize the young, by creating for them, multifaceted themes that portray the possibility of an ideological social set-up. In an attempt to provide this the writer incorporates in the text the ideal of classlessness, inclusion of races, environmental concerns, as the invisible commander of the law to the police- the Ghost who Walks, acts as a social referee. The Phantom thereby regulates and controls heinous crimes in the world around him as evident in all the roles he plays as in the ones titled *U-Boat Mystery, The Ghost Wall, The Secret City* to mention a few.

In this context it is important to take into consideration the question raised by Meskin in the article "Comics as Literature" that deliberates on the conflicting status of comics. According to him Satrapi's Persepolis and Moore's Watchmen are of greater significance as he claims that there is a thematic development and characterization which are what one should look for in a comic. (221) If such is the case, then Phantom is indeed another figure who deserves recognition for the same reasons mentioned above. For, such comics as the 'Phantom' have a far larger outreach than many others that have coerced to overshadow popular fiction. Mandrake the Magician, Judge Parker by Francesco Marciuliano, Prince Valiant by Mark Schultz and Thomas Yeates are a few worth mentioning.

Another factor is that, that Lee Falk was inspired by characters as El Cid and King Arthur and some of the fictional characters as well as by a few others as Zorro, Tarzan and Mowgli. Besides, Phantom as a multifaceted character, is more than an "American phenomenon" as per Encyclopaedia Britannica, who has stood the test of time successfully grounding his image across Scandinavia and Australia like nations (which sold its 1700th edition as reported in 2013), and who can be seen as one of the iconic characters among other graphic characters.

Phantom continues to be read as he has not faltered in upholding his righteousness, in weighing the pros and cons of an untoward incident before he plunges into action, in his shrewd decisions, in his rational deliberations, in his effortless schemes to trap miscreants, and his chivalry, on the one hand; While , on the other, his generosity to the poor, his benign association with the Bangalla's world famous Jungle Patrol (renamed as Denakali in the Indian Edition), his loyalty towards the native- Guran and his impeccable demeanour as a true friend of the helpless are no less than what readers who hero-worship him would look for. The most inspirational aspect about him are his roles that evolve through generations of readers across the world resembling those of the royal lineage, into the 24th Phantom in the futuristic Phantom 2040. Such an appeal and rootedness to a genre and power to sustain as an extraordinary and unique hero over times since he "first appeared in King Features Syndicate on February 17, 1936" is rare in popular fiction (Britannica).

The focus of the study is however to see how and why the graphic hero ought to be given a status among all other literary writers. The most convincing argument is the qualities in Phantom that would regularize him as a complementary counter-part of Howard Pyle's Robin Hood like heroes who robbed the rich to provide the poor. If Robin Hood the legend could indulge in robbery and yet be included in Literature, then, the questions raised here are to probe into, what criteria rejects Phantom-like-graphic heroes from being included in general literature. What is the cause that rejects this masked-man, in his striped trousers from being included into the main corpus of literature, much against Robin Hood who is portrayed as both 'villain and hero' yet is still accepted in the English socio-cultural context.

Furthermore, the discussion attempts to see aspects that have been over sighted for too long in such texts that require an invigorated outlook that would draw a superhero as Phantom to the fore. Perhaps what permits the existence of Robin Hood as a high literary figure is his role in plundering not merely the rich to financially facilitate the poor; rather it is his 'political stance' in plundering the rich- who rose to the status of being rich, by amassing wealth by merely manipulating their political prowess. The unfairness meted out to the poor, namely the dire condition of the peasants thereby drove Robin Hood to stand up for the poor. A political context as that leading an iconic image as Robin Hood to survive in Literature is obviously missing in the context of Phantom which is perhaps best described by Aquitias as "cultural legitimation"(1). Rather, Phantom exists as a mere figment of the imagination and Flak makes no such attempts to culturally legitimize nor fix him in an adulatory idolized cultural context through which the 'Ghost who walks' could expose the economic, political situations and the marred cultural landscapes of the times as does Robin Hood. This factor alone straddles Phantom 'to a less than important' identity of a commoner in spite of the fact that he is righteous enough to be 'The Man who Cannot Die' and who never forgets to leave the mark of a skull on the face of the miscreants- a self-made identity meant to terrify the unjust and the corrupt. Above all, if Pyle's Robin hood is legendary and still included in the high literature, Phantom who is imaginary as well as a fantastic hero, could anyway be included under the same category. But, A [literary text] is identified as a literary work by recognizing the author's intention that the text is produced and meant to be read within a

framework of conventions defining the practice (constituting the institution) of literature.' 30 (iv) [where ]'The definition of literature [is set] as highly valued writing. (Qtd. in Meskin 226) . But, in the case of the Phantom figure, Falk perhaps never foresaw the lacunae in the literary and social ambience of his superhero and merely created a figure who was more concerned with the social and environmental status of Mawitaan, Bangalla, and in ensuring that his townsmen live in peace, than indulge in politicizing the Phantom context. In fact, it is even more interesting to note that Falk first created his Phantom fascinated by the thugs of India. Later he redrew the Phantom as a powerful social moralist who the Singh Brotherhood a group of International criminal network detested. The Phantom was their foremost adversary who would do anything to eliminate him.

In the midst of characters like Sheena Queen of the Jungle who was described as the "Aryan mistress" by Geoffrey Wagner in his acerbic study of American Popular Culture Parade of Pleasure who made "the local natives . . . bow in terror before her" (Qtd. in Patrick 54) 'Phantom the Ghost who walks' sets an ambience of camaraderie with Guran his native childhood friend and well-wisher as in Falk's *Secret Temple on Eden* as well as the current chief of the Pygmy Bandar tribe, of the Sheriff of the town and his team who awaits, their commander's words to take instructions from him. Instances as in *The Phantom Graffiti* where Guran tends to his wound incurred from a gunshot and the Bengalla Bandar warrior pygmy tribes greeting him with such love and adulation as "Welcome home O-Ghost who walks" are the least one can quickly recall. Besides, popularity and fame that the Phantom dislikes is sensed by Guran much before The Phantom requests his investigating into it and Guran says, "I've sent scouts to discover who."

However, despite such innumerable instances that finds place in *The Phantom The Secret City*, *The Phantom The Hit Men, The Phantom Ghost Pirates* and more such stories what actually fails in fixing Phantom's powerful omnipresence on par with the righteous as Robin Hood, who is welcome among the elitist readers, only seems to be some form of strategic elitist supremacy. For, there evidently seems to be a conditioned failure in acknowledging Phantom as yet another, of the same calibre as Robin Hood. For though, Phantom clearly asserts classlessness in his own way, he does not conform to any of the western ideology or politics as does Robin Hood whose attempts are to flush the riches of those who have amassed wealth by unfair means, especially by men that rule his nation. Or in short Robin hood was reactionary to the then existing order which was King Henry the Second's, that according to Ibeji "was founded on the arbitrary will of evil men who could twist the law to their own ends, . . . [therefore] it was the role of the outlaw to seek redress and justice by other means" While, Phantom is a character who is absolutely delinked from any such antagonism to any regime, who is innately philanthropic by nature and has no record of having murdered anyone but merely has taken the vile to justice. This then is more suitable for the young psyche and what is more akin to what literature is basically meant for is unambiguously answered by the classless stance that Phantom assumes than Robin Hood who does resort to killing too when necessary and contextually justified.

Obviously, Phantom acts for the entire humanity and thereby it is needless for any political background for a hero as that, as an apt literary figure on par with his prefiguring British counterpart- Robin Hood. This in turn sets the context for the rejection of the Phantom comics from a literary scenario which in turn affects the acceptance of his very 'heroship'. According to Ryan Edwardson ". . .National comic books are . . . vessels for transmitting national myths, symbols, ideology and value. They popularize key elements of the national identity and ingrain them into their readers- especially, given the primary readership, younger generations experiencing elements of that identity for the first time. (Qtd. in Denison and Ward 4) So, what then can be more effective than characters as the Phantom, for the young psyche? This then is truly something that those elitists who disapprove the entry of Phantom like characters into the high literary arena should seriously rethink. Rita Sarkar makes an observation on the elitist critics of comics as follows

> Comics in the early decades of American popular culture came out in the form of comic strips or what were known as funnies in mass-circulation newspapers. Soon because of the content they had and also because of their easy and uncensored access to many homes across social classes comics became an object of concern and objection. The primary charge levied against them by those who considered themselves concerned citizens was the use of excessive, unbridled sensationalism in the majority of comics. It was felt that something that enjoyed such a wide circulation needed more screening, restrictions or responsibility before reaching its readers on whom it could have an undesirable but lasting impact. These detractors of comics therefore did not see it just as innocent entertainment but as potentially harmful and damaging. It was with this that America, trying to build up its status as an emerging civilised world power, felt threatened by a devaluation of its sense of culture and esteem in the Sunday comic strips/funnies. The argument that funnies are not meant to be judged by critical categories was not quite taken into consideration when growing number of anti-comic campaigns disparaged it on grounds of immorality and profanity. (121)

Despite such criticisms Graphic novels have cut across borders and have brought about multiple cultures to the fore especially American, British, Japanese African, Latino and Indian Graphic novels. They seem to have enhanced cosmopolitan cultures and tastes and have worked faster than novels or any other genre in literature thus widening the scope for a more diverse literary culture. The texts become sources for political and racial discourse. While a close analysis shows a logical evolution of comics to graphic novels**,** along with themes, portrayal of protagonists also evolved simultaneously. **T**he evolutions of the superheroes as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman that figure in Graphic novels seem to have been inspired or evolved out of comic heroes as Lee Falk's *Phantom, the Ghost who walks* and *Mandrake the Magician*. Interestingly, most of the themes that figure in Folklore, Novels, Movies, TV serials, Mystery, Crime and Science fiction also figure in Graphic novels such that today it becomes more necessary to consider them on par with any high literary text as they also enhance criticisms and interpretations.

Yet another strong factor that divides and lurks like a bitter truth, is about why the whiteman's imposing polemics takes shape only in the forests of Africa and India and why not elsewhere. This leads to yet another phase of the argument that, that is in order to reform and bring about greater verity to the oriental multitudes that is baselessly presumed to lack in law, order and justice in their native contexts. This intrigues further into the question of what is not so acceptable in Phantom as part of literature. The answer then is that it aggravates the question of acceptability of a white man who seems to act as an inevitable or imposing judiciary to the 'other(ed)' world, where there is an obvious, unquestionable assertion of the white man's supremacy which alone, as it has always been assumed, can execute law and order in an otherwise unruly and unlawful India and Africa. However, the question remains, how far such implementation of a white man's law and justice, especially, in the postcolonial context, is acceptable, fair, non-racial, non-ethnic in outlook and which indeed are obscure. Though it still remains suggestive of how characters from both ethnic groups, such as, Guran- Phantom's native friend and the Sheriff's acceptance of the fair protection wielded by the invisible 'Ghost Who Walks'. Friese, in her "White Skin, Black Mask" shares her Phantom experience as follows:

> We were dimly aware, I suppose that under the dark suit and mask there lurked a white man. And there was that mysterious Anglo credit- "Lee Falk" – atop each comic. But the author's signature was inconspicuous. We did not know him. What we did know was the Phantom's circumstance: darkest Africa, with its big game, its witch doctors and naked black tribes.

Yet what is so appealing about the Phantom is his sociability, generosity and benignity that is unsurpassable irrespective of which class or community he deals with and to which class or race he himself belongs to.

Having identified the causes that nullify the Phantom from being accepted by the world of high literature, it also reiterates the need to identify what actually then justifies its inclusion. Justification would thereby depend on what aspects of Falk's Phantom are worthy of consideration. In this context, it becomes crucial to identify features that are usually agreeable to the reading audience. This task becomes easier when the discussion takes up a few features directly from literature. For instance, this is answered when we try to understand what or how each text of the past came to be renowned for; Texts of the 18th and 19th centuries usually reverberated failed ideologies, and broadly speaking , they were often analysed or researched from Sociological and Psychological perspectives, for the issues were depictions of social deficits and anomalies that were related to racism, anti-semitism, feminism, poverty, lapses in religious and other institutions, assaults through or by the powerful on human race or on the environment , distortions of history, culture and the revolts against the economically powerless as well as the non-acknowledgment of cultural pluralities.

Without further deliberations, it has been clear that texts embedded with certain social issues have been categorically analysed or read for certain purposes. Thereby, this argument provides scope for analysing Phantom too on similar grounds. For though Phantom comics were meant to entertain the Children's world with the serendipitous powers of an invisible

hero, what actually intensified readership was the classlessness with which Phantom diffused his will to serve the tribesmen of Africa and act as a secret agent to the Mawitaan town's Sheriff which imparted a selfless, humanitarian impulse to the world of child psyche.

Furthermore, graphic texts of the Phantom type are intense records of popular history and the spirit of the times. They are crucial to the understanding of cultural hegemony and are described by critics as a "versatile book each author speaks as a cultural critic and gives the reader an engaging examination of this popular media in a variety of nuanced ways, thus pulling comics and graphic novels from the proverbial cultural 'gutter' (p. 1). (Qtd. in Pennell)

Indian Graphic presentations seem to have been largely pushed under the carpet though one cannot forget the Satyajit Ray's *Feluda s*eries written in the Tintin style that entered the world of comics and the unforgettable *Thupariyum Sambu* down South by the humourous Tamil writer Devan whose first version of the text appeared in Graphic form. The more recent ones' capture current vacillating issues and they are Delhi *Calm* by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, *Corridor* by Sarnath Joshi and Kashmir *Pending* by Naseer Ahmed and Saurabh Singh. As interesting as its graphic presentations the history of Graphic novels is also intriguing, drawing us further and further into its unfathomable depths.

The reference Comic and Graphic novels are indeed reflections of American and British prejudices though they easily fit into the European and Japanese cultures very well. This easily allows us to sum up the point that its high time, Comic or Graphic Novels- whatever the (conflicting and differentiating) terms of reference may be which were considered part of Popular literature at one point of time should be incorporated into the high literature for reasons that they have proven effective as any other literary work of art. While how far the terms are synonymous continues to remain contested. To conclude, adding Comic and Graphic novels to high literature is beneficial to the young, as they would facilitate both verbal and visual literacy and how they usurp knowledge and culture in the process of meaning making. "This perspective seems similar to that of Gee (2002), who argues that we master different literacies in different areas, comics being one of these areas." (Qtd. in Wallner 100)

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# Signifying The Lost Opportunity: Literary Study of N. Prabhakaran's "The Globe"

**M. Ramakrishnan**

## Introduction

"The Globe" is a Malayalam short story written by a prolific writer, N. Prabhakaran, and it is included in the writer's volume entitled *Thirenjetutha Kathakal* [Selected Stories] published in 2007 by DC Books (Kottayam, Kerala). Apart being a story writer, he is also a noted poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, translator, editor and columnist, etc. Born in 1952 in Parassinikkadavu in Kannur district of Kerala, he started his career as a lecturer at the Department of Malayalam of Lekshmipuram College of Arts and Science, Neyyoor, Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, and retired as the Head of the Department of Malayalam, Brennen College, Thalassery. His very first creative writing, "Ottayante Pappan" appeared in 1971 and it won the first prize under short story category, and since then he has won more than 18 awards to his credit. His stories are simple and elegant and here is an example for addressing contemporary issues. "The Globe" is one of the finest stories of the writer that delineates the complexity of social issue by employing literary symbolism that can be explored from semiotic approach. In this qualitative research using a descriptive method, the given text is analyzed based on the intrinsic and extrinsic elements that constitute the narrative syntagm of the story by narrating the realization of the lost object of the protagonist. In the process of description, the narrative elements, forms of inferentiality, available codes, signifying aspects of the narrative, etc., are discussed. This description also pays attention to the language and the narrative technique employed to drive home the message.

## Around the Story

Simple but carefully chosen words have been used in the story to construct the setting that is more symbolic, meaningful and significant in a way that readers could be carried along the story lines with deep emotions. Though it is an imaginary story with characters having their own configurations and attributes, the readers are brought closer to the characters by bridging the gap between the narrative world and the social world of reality. The characters

are set with minimal features that resemble that of folktales, that is, simple and straight forward to enable the readers to construct them in their imagination and understand them without difficulty. The story fulfills the semiotic representation with the help of series of events intertwined and arranged in a temporal and causal way. In the story, the narrative is constructed using a single variety of semiotic media that solely depends on words, that is, the absence of spoken language, images, gestures and acting – thus, it is a linguistic narrative text that reflects the writer's confidence on the nature and function of language which diminishes gradually the gap between fictitious world and the real world. Thus the narration brings the text more closely to the readers by establishing a kind of familiarity with the characters, settings and the issue that has been dealt poetically.

As usual the fictionalization dissolves the reality towards the construction of narrative reality whose purpose is to mediate between the social and narrative realities through the theory of reality. So the narrative reality that is ready for consumption is actualized merely through the familiarity with the linguistic resources as well as through the concreteness of experience which is the essential criteria for any narrative. Indeed, "The Globe" is written in three and half pages gives scope for multi-level analysis with the help of linguistic and semiotic tools in syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels. However, the text provides different elements altogether to understand the limitation of the syntactical structure because of the narrative presentation with the limited set of subject and verb. Here the size of the text is limited to a number of actions and participants, but it does not compromise on the interest it has to generate on the readers. With the passive and attributive sentences, the text constructs the narrative that goes beyond analogies to present sophisticated metaphorical and symbolic representation of literary elements. In the text, both narration and description are viewed as paradoxical, that is, while narration depicts the texts as events, the description portraits the non-sequential pattern of traits and events associated with the protagonist (Kariyan). So to understand the text pragmatically, this study focuses on the whole process of communication in which the text participates. The scheme or communicative structure found in the text reflects the components such as sender, addressee, context, message, setting, code. Similarly, the text establishes its intertextual relationship with other texts in a way to participate in the discourse on social development. That is, the text of "the Globe" rests upon the processes of identification, differentiation and exclusion, and the subtlety and symbolism used in the text make the text more significant in the larger discourse of human development. The author or writer, reader, text (a piece of language), narrative text (narrator, narratee), story (cognitive structure of happenings), fabula (agents, action-scheme), technique of telling (linear, flashback and foretelling) are some of the elements with the help of them, the Globe can be enjoyed with missing any aesthetics.

**The Story**

"The Globe" begins with the narration of the story by a narrator, who is a specific entity within the text. Since the writer does not own it as himself or disown it an imaginary, the narrator must be treated with at most care because of its significant role in the story or being

part of the whole narrative. However, with the assumption that the narrator is not the reflection of the writer, we consider him as merely the representation that is required as part of the story telling technique. The story begins with the self-narration by the narrator which establishes special and temporal settings with the conditions about the narrator. The meeting between the narrator and Kariyan on all the evening of salary day of each month presents the temporal continuity of the past, present and with the hope for the future. By saying that *ende lodge muri* ("in my lodge room") the spatial setting is well established on the one hand and the lodge room is used here to symbolize many things; an integral space where a meeting could be possible between entities belonging to the different social spaces; a space that is more expanded and cosmopolitan; a transitional (spatial) point that enables the narrator to have a non-orthodox and non-conservative mode of life. In an unaided English medium school the narrator is the Malayalam teacher and Kariyan works as a peon. The introduction of characters takes the story to the next level by its implication the different conditions – though some of them are common to both of the characters, still there is a hierarchical setting or arrangement as part of the work space culture that is constantly being violated on the evening of salary day of each month. The given description depicts the economic conditions of both the narrator and protagonist and it must be stated that the writer pays careful attention in giving details that to signify the social background of both the narrator and the protagonist including their names, nature of work, living locations, etc. The progressive, egalitarian and accommodative attitude established between both the narrator and the protagonist could be seen reflected when the story develops further. Each line in the story either conveys something important of the characters that is both the narrator and the protagonist, but also carries the story to the next level in a quick succession. When they drink on the salary day, the expenditure is shared as per the proportion of their salary and it is a condition that guarantees their regular meetings, and as a result of these meetings this beautiful story..

The "colony" where the protagonist lives is situated in a ten-minute walk away distance from the lodge where they meet on the salary day. On the day they drink, Kariyan will be staying in the lodge room till one or two o'clock in the night. The accessibility and proximity to the "colony" could have seen as significant for the protagonist to stay with the narrator till late evening. Now the narrator comes closer to the point where the actual story the writer wants to share, is going to begin. The late evening on the salary day will be filled with singing songs and reciting stories by both of them. However, interestingly, Kariyan sings always the same songs and recites the same stories. The writer slowly builds up emotion with the help of the narrator who personalizes it by saying that he [the narrator] has heard the same songs and the same stories on many occasions but he never felt bored with them. In fact, the narrator used to feel himself as a new listener in front of Kariyan each time he sings the same songs and recites the same stories. In fact, among the stories, there is a story that moved the narrator. It is the story that Kariyan used to recite with emotion. It is the story of a globe, and it is not merely a story of a globe that is non-existent. But it is a testimony to the million and millions of underprivileged people who lost their prosperity either by their fault or by the factors inherent to their social and cultural life, or by the unknown factors. Thus, the globe

symbolizes the lost world for the millions, and simultaneously it offers hopes that the globe is still there objectively one can get it.

The story tells about an incident that happened to Kariyan during his childhood. Here, the narrator gives the indication that requires the temporal movement towards the past. The move between past, present and future is possible within the narrative with the help of few signifiers. It was about 35 years ago when Kariyan was studying third or fourth standard. With the help of language medium, the story 'about 35 years ago' as a narrative tool that takes the narratees back to the specified years. The going back in time is important in order to visualize the condition in which the characters are set. And also it helps us to compare the current scenario in the social settings by travelling back to the current time. The school and the distance between Kariyan's home and the school help us to visualize the advancement on the developmental paradigm. Once it happened - in a nearby hill-town, there was a club meant for the rich people and was run by the estate owners, doctors and business people. As part of publicity programme, the club had organized a singing and recitation competition for primary school students of nearby areas. The writer's sensitiveness to the social development and the role of education is highly expressiveness in this passage, and it is carefully reflected in the form of subtle criticism towards the rich people by portraying the attitudes and activities of them that lack philanthropism. In both the events of the competition, the protagonist Kariyan won the first prizes. Kariyan received the prize from the district collector with a big applause from the audience. The prize included an envelope containing ten rupees, a small globe as memento and a certificate. Kariyan came to the function along with his father. Since it would be dark outside when the function ends, the organizer had already instructed the parents to accompany their children. Though these events are set as they had happened a long time back, to look carefully, they are the current events that have been projected as the events of the remote past. Further, the promotional activities of educational institutions need to be understood in the context of privatization and commercialization of education. After the prize distribution is over, his father quickly snatched the envelop from Kariyan's hand and kept the money in his pocket. Thus, Kariyan was now holding both the memento (the globe) and the certificate. He was not aware of the object that he was holding in his hands. His father looked at the globe surprisingly without telling anything or enquiring anything about it. Here the story reflects vividly and subtly the condition of the socially backward communities and their access to education.

The innocent father was keen on the envelop which contains the ten rupees, and ignored about the other two items that had more symbolic values to Kariyan. When the development does not happen uniformly and the less access to modern education is a reality, the situations portrayed with the help of Kariyan's father is very well contemporary than the event of the past. The father is occupying a representational role in depicting the social relevance of the text by interlinking or identifying the intersection of the narrative reality and the social reality. He has not been introduced simply as an uneducated and unschooled father of Kariyan, but as a representation of the millions of underprivileged families who entrust their responsibility of their children's education and development solely on schools and their teachers. Thus, it is

a not a surprise that Kariyan's father did not ask anything about the memento or the certificate. That is, in the cognitive world of Kariyan's father, there is no space for the globe. After leaving the venue, his father straight away went to a shop that was at the down of the hills. The shop was selling illicit arrack, known as *kaatti* in those days. In the shop, there was already a school teacher for drinking and the teacher took the globe from Kariyan and explained everyone about the object. He was telling about the globe in the way as he was teaching in a class. He told them that it was the globe where we were all living on it. Though it was very small, we could locate our India. After telling, the teacher took his glass of drink that was in front of him and finished it in a single sip. By touching the globe with his little finger, the teacher told everyone that if we had a magnifier then we could locate the place of this shop. Ours was a very small place in the globe, but the globe happened to be very big. He felt some uneasiness while telling this and it indicated that he was pity of his present condition. In other words, the teacher could have realized about the importance globe in its symbolic sense. The liquor shop has now-a-days become a cultural motif in the life of Malayalis. In the local context of Kerala, the liquor shop is both a public space as well as a 'public sphere' in the Hebarmasian sense. Like tea shop, the liquor shop is the place where there is an assemblage of different communities. The writer had displayed his courage in introducing a teacher character in the liquor shop and it show the writer's concern for the present society that is known for too much consumption of liquor. By the time, it began to be dark outside. Kariyan's father finished his drink and came out of the shop. He bought a local sweet for Kariyan from the nearby hotel. He also bought tobacco and betel leaves. Then they turned to the road that was going down from the hill to their village.

From the bottom of the hill, they had to cross the field, then a canal and then a field to reach their home. It was becoming dark, and Kariyan's father was literally worried. Kariyan was on his father's shoulder keeping his both the sides. Kariyan was holding his father's head tightly with one hand and in another hand he was holding both the globe and the certificate. When they got into the field, there was a cold wind indicating there was a raining somewhere in the hills. Before the rain water could reach field, they wanted to cross the field. In a hurry to cross the field, his father kept a long step in the field. After crossing the field they came to the bank of the canal. Here, one must remember that the writer appropriated the landscapes and other elements of nature to build the hurdles more symbolically and also to build up emotion in the story. The chill wind, darkness, ghosts like bushes, muddy fields are the positive aspects or indicators of the fertile lands, but in this story, they had been used to play a spoilsport. The canal that had knee deep water in the middle of it while they were one the way to the function, now it was carrying more muddy rain water from the hills. Kariyan's father waited for a while with hesitation. Then he made up his mind and started getting into the canal. He kept his each step slowly and carefully. However, while in the middle of the canal, he suddenly felt that something came and bit his leg. Expressing pain, he tried to lift his one leg to scratch on it. While doing so, he was about to lose his balance on the other leg and in the act he was about to lean forward. Somehow he escaped from falling and thus, managed to stand balanced. Everything happened within a fraction of a second. Kariyan

who was sitting on his father's shoulder became scared. Before Kariyan realized what happened, he lost his grip on the globe and eventually it fell into the canal. When Kariyan looked down, he saw the globe was disappearing with a sparkling light behind a plant. That was completely disappeared from the sight in a minute. Like a shadow, for Kariyan everything appeared dark for a while. Whenever Kariyan told the same story, he told them in the same way but with small changes. Kariyan used to tell the teacher-narrator that his hands were unlucky, that was the reason that the globe escaped from his hands. Kariyan as a boy cried and cried on the same night of the day he lost the globe and he also used to cry whenever he remembered the incident. Kariyan told the narrator whenever he remembered the incident he felt like crying. Keeping his head down, he cried like a child. Kariyan's story always ended with tears. After a silence, now the globe but not the story, floats on the current of our memory – even after the story is ended by the writer.

The balance could be seen in the construction of the father character and his projection as a careful man fulfilling his fatherhood. But as an uneducated man, he is not away from the realization that education is important. The amount of the pain and the efforts he made symbolized the burden of the people of the first generation who had to struggle to overcome the hurdle created by the hierarchical society. The writer displays his social responsibility by blaming neither the society nor the family for the missing opportunities, but bringing to limelight in a symbolically the invisible factors that can also haunt the underprivileged people from their opportunities. Further, the writer must be appreciated for giving stress on the talents that are naturally with the downtrodden communities but they are deceived of opportunities by the existing systems known for its social biasedness. The literary construction of Kariyan as a child subtly depicts the need of social reform that could provide opportunities and accessibility to education that can guarantee the formation or the establishment of an egalitarian society on the principle of equality, and thus making Kariyan not blamable by projecting himself as possessing knowledge. But the writer also subtly points out that there are some invisible factors that play a negative role in the progress of a society that must be understood through sociological and psychological studies. Thus, Kariyan is not merely crying for the lost globe which he was holding it, but for the opportunity lost in the childhood that made him as a menial worker in the school in the present time. This globe symbolism can be understood if we read the Sangam poem, "To us all towns are our own, everyone our kin, / Life's good comes not from others' gifts, nor ill, / Pains and pain's relief are from within, / Death's no new thing, nor do our bosoms thrill / When joyous life seems like a luscious draught. / When grieved, we patient suffer; for, we deem / This much-praised life of ours a fragile raft / Borne down the waters of some mountain stream / That o'er huge boulders roaring seeks the plain / Tho' storms with lightning's flash from darkened skies. / Descend, the raft goes on as fates ordain. / Thus have we seen in visions of the wise! / We marvel not at the greatness of the great; / Still less despise we men of low estate." (Kaniyan Poongundran, *Purananuru* – 192). The post Sangam text *Thirukkural* in its chapter on the importance of learning offers a framework to understand the meaning of the globe: "The learned make each land their own, in every city find a home; / Who, till they die; learn nought, along what weary

ways they roam!" (Meaning: How is it that any one can remain without learning, even to his death, when (to the learned man) every country is his own (country), and every town his own (town)?) (Kural 397); "The man who store of learning gains, / In one, through seven worlds, bliss attains." (Meaning: The learning, which a man has acquired in one birth, will yield him pleasure during seven births.) (*Kural* 398); and "Learning is excellence of wealth that none destroy; / To man nought else affords reality of joy." (Meaning; Learning is the true imperishable riches; all other things are not riches.) (*Kural* 400). In these poems, learning is given prominence and it is a way for breaking all he boundaries to make the globe as a single entity. The process of globalization has literally expanded our perspective beyond all our boundaries, and thus, having education means the world or globe is conquered.

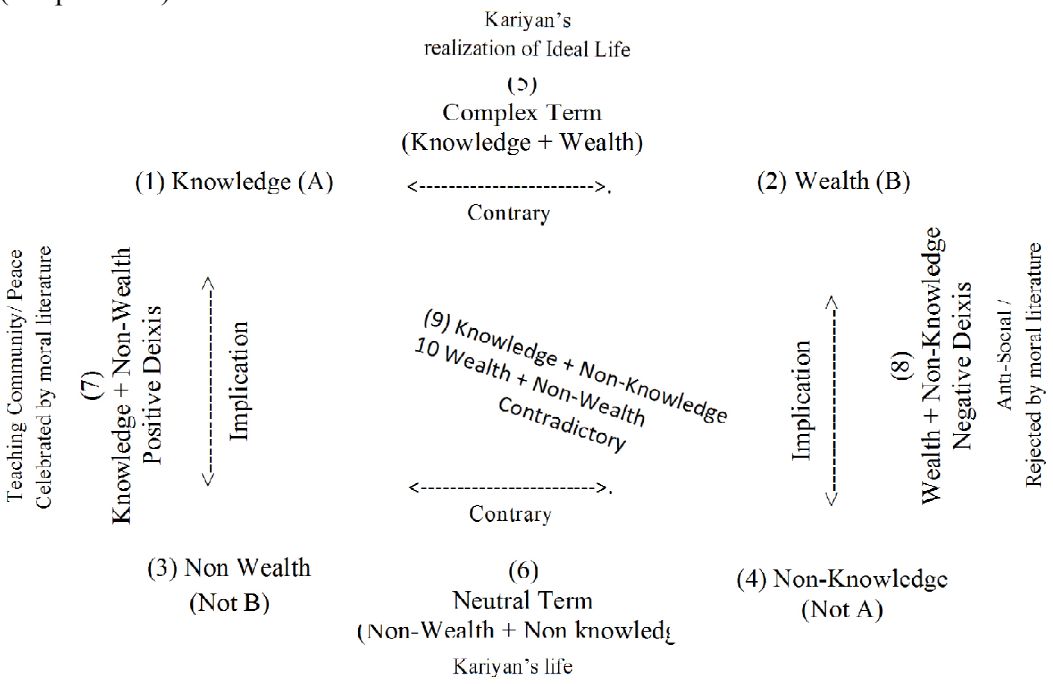
**Literary Analysis / Discussion**

"The Globe" has to be contextualized in order to understand the meaning constructed through different codes present in the text. The genre that has been chosen by the writer has wide acceptability, and it can also lead to the misreading of the text towards the construction of lost globe as lost landscape in the process of globalization and modernization. Thus with the help of literary codes available, this piece of analysis intends to prove that the lost globe signifies, through its absence, the importance of education as source of knowledge and a way for achieving progress in this social ladder. The title of the story creates a curiosity by not giving any clue until the globe escapes from the boy and disappears from the scene. The globe that has been part of the school curriculum has been used to refer to the physical space as well as conceptual one that can be conquered with the help of education. Thus, the process of reference must be paid attention to understand the nature and forms of referentialities that work on the structure of the narrative for the meaning production. The extra-referentiality of the text helps us to refer outside of the text to a material reality, sometimes an imagined one also. Here is the globe that is presented symbolically as well as metaphorically. The globe is already an imaginary construct deeply associated with the people who are having access to the modern education. The physical globe is the result of the visualization of the conceptual experience of those who are part of the 'modern knowledge system.' The globe as a visualized entity occupies our conceptual system in order to guide us in our movement within the geography. The teacher trying to locate the country on the globe that Kariyan is holding it could be seen as the symbolic one and also having external reference outside the text. Further discussion on the globe that happens at the local liquor shop proves the extra-referential field of narrative. The writer carefully introduces the extra-referential field for the presentation of some of the features of the globe and it is metaphorical that one could see any landscape on the globe provided that they have access to education. However, the self-referential logic can be seen emerged from the narrative through the semantic terms that produce binary oppositions by the way of inevitable implications. At this moment, the text must be condensed in order to find out a semantic term that can help us to create its contrary and contradictory terms along with their implications. The semiotic square developed by Greimas and Rastier, thus, help us to create more analytical classes on different positive deixis and negative deixis in addition to the complex and neutral terms. A single semantic category that comes out as a result of

abstraction of the text, the story of "the globe' in our case, with the help of semiotic square, produces more categories of terms on the level of contrary relations, contradictory relations and relation of implications. The possible abstraction of "the Globe" could be the term knowledge that is gained through the mode of learning, that is, the education is synonymously represented as knowledge. Now, to move further to get into the structure of the semiotic square, another category of the term on the contrary level can be created, that is, wealth which is in direct opposition to the knowledge. Now the term non-wealth (not-wealth) and the term non-knowledge (not-knowledge) could be created as a result of implications of the initially created terms (knowledge and wealth). With the help of these four terms, more relationships could be inferred following the semiotic square. Here, a visual representation of the logical structure of an opposition could be arrived by increasing the number of analytical classes, that is, from one to two; two to four; and four to eight (it can also be increased to ten, if it is required.). The signification of the story could be revealed if we place all the analytical terms on the semiotic square itself in the following way (fig.):

The semiotic square having terms and metaterms developed by negating and opposing the abstracted term can be discussed in terms of their positions (emanated relationships):

(Simple terms)




**STRUCTURE OF SEMIOTIC SQUARE**

1. Position 1 (term A – Knowledge/wise) (abstracted term)

2. Position 2 (term B – Wealth/rich) (contrary)
3. Position 3 (term Not-B – Non-Wealth / Poor) (negation)
4. Position 4 (term Not-A – Non-Knowledge / Ignorant) (negation)

   (Metaterms created from the simple terms)
5. Position 5 (term A (knowledge) + term B (wealth)) complex term (Ideal / literary fantasy)
6. Position 6 (term Not-B (non-wealth) + Not-A (non-knowledge)) neutral term (Average/ middle class)
7. Position 7 (term A (knowledge) + Not-B (non-wealth)) positive deixis (intellectual life / not desired by average)
8. Position 8 (term B (wealth)+ Not-A (non-knowledge/ignorant) negative deixis
9. Position 9 (term A (knowledge) + term not-A (non-knowledge/ignorant) (situational?)
10. Position 10 (term B (wealth) + term not-B (non-wealth/poor) (situational?)

A reading of the text can guide us to understand the signification of the concept highlighted in the text in addition to the semiotic square drawn here with the help of the terms and metaterms facilitates the analysis. Kariyan's realization of the opportunity lost at the childhood and the present day suffering could have been seen at the level that is at the neutral axis. Kariyan's realization is understandable that if the opportunity had not been lost, things could have been different. The anticipation in the traditional life of marginalized sections of the society, the ideal life of having both knowledge and wealth can be achieved through education. However, the narrator or teacher's position gives us better understanding about the real life. The description of the teacher sets in the positive deixis, that is, he is symbolized as having knowledge but lacks wealth. Though there are no sentences to reflect the realization of the lack of wealth, the other referential conditions available in the story imply that the teacher is with insufficient wealth. Similarly, the teacher who demonstrates the globe in the local liquor shop is also presented in such a way to imply a middle class life filled with unfulfilled dreams. So the ideal life projected through literature or philosophy can be an exception, not an illusion, but can be achievable by those who are at the socially elevated level than the average dream-ridden middle class. Similarly, the neither educated nor wealthy people could be seen as the normalcy of the downtrodden life, but the philosophy of emancipatory movements tends to focus on the reasons that need to be realized in order to set an agenda for overcoming the conditions. The semiotics square helps us to project the negative deixis that is the conjunction of wealth and non-knowledge. The negative deixis can help us to bring under this category a lot of elements that can be termed as anti-social. Conversely, the opposite of the negative deixis, that is positive deixis, is projected as ideal one because it is celebrated for being the source of knowledge. Importantly, not all the positions found in the semiotic square have not have the corresponding text in the story, but many of the must be understood as a

matter of implication or inferential. Finally, the metaterms A + Non-A; and B + Non-B (9,10) are having deep cultural meaning as they rest on the principle of non-contradiction, and for theoretical and deductive perspective, they can be understood within the cultural life of signifying elements. For instance, having knowledge and having non-knowledge or having wealth and having non-wealth invite cultural description of the functional value of the Non-Knowledge and Non-wealth – refer to the following examples, 'he is wealthy, but not wealthy'; 'he is knowledgeable' and not-knowledgeable' etc.

The inter-referential field is also useful in the interpretations of "the Globe". The production of meaning is mediated between two poles of intentionality and citationality and it is achieved, at some extent, at the decontextualized use of utterances. Kariyan as a child cried when he lost the globe and he used to cry whenever he thinks about the day he lost the globe. The teacher in the local liquor shop asserted that he could locate our country; similarly, Kariyan cried, etc., are some of the performative statements that have to be understood from the poles of interlocutory level. They are used here in "the Globe" to reconstruct a certain context and intention that facilitates the meaning formation. To decipher the intention of the writer, one must remember what Mikhail Baktin said about language in his *Dialogism* that "[L]anguage is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (p.294). So the analysis of literary text must be based on the interplay that 'occurs between the intentional and citational aspects of all discourse.' (Felluga 2002) Thus, the understanding the meaning of 'the Globe' that the writer had as his intention the analysis has referred to other literary outside its context, and here there are other instances in historical perspectives to restrict the globe to the metaphorical understanding of conquering the world through acquiring education or knowledge. To move further at the supra-referential field helps us to rely on our faith in language that is having the 'ability to determine some relatively stable meaning in the communicative process.' (Felluga 2002) The portrayal of Kariyan who works as a peon, gets a meager amount as salary, drinks with a language teacher, shares a small percentage of amount as a share for his drinks, help us to understand that the globe means to the educational opportunity for the betterment of life. Kariyan's cried on two instances: the once on the day he lost the globe forever and second is the continuous one that is whenever he thinks of the day he lost globe. As a child Kariyan cried for the globe that got out of his hand and disappeared. But as a man working as a menial staff in a school cries for the globe he couldn't conquer.

Despite narratives share structural features, each narrative is unique in its own way, and the difference is achieved by employing a limited number of organizational structures. These structures, though considered as affecting the reading of the text, for Roland Barthes, help us to explore multiple meaning and connotations. In the story, each sentences are constructed with syntagmatic and paradigmatic rules to make them independent and meaningful - making them feasible for multiple meanings, but they all work together to reach the end. For Barthes, every narrative is interwoven with multiple codes (Barthes 1974) and he lists out five codes that interplay to produce multiple meanings (Felluga 2002). We refer to these codes to

understand the text for a closer meaning in order to given social significance to the story. First of all, the hermeneutic code, 'an element in a story that is not explained and appears as an enigma for the reader'(Felluga 2002), in the Globe may be the undisclosed reason for Kariyan's discontinuity in education. Unlike other narratives where the enigma will be solved for the diegetic truths, it remains unresolved forcing the readers for their speculations. However, all the loose ends of the story are tied to untie the "snare" by revealing why and how did Kariyan lose the globe, his regrets is not just for the globe but for the lost opportunity for education which is not discussed by the writer. Other hermeneutic code like Kariyan is crying over a story of a globe is neatly and perfectly resolved at the end of the story to fulfill the reader's curiosity. However, the proairetic code, 'refers to other structuring principle that builds interest or suspense on the part of a reader or viewer' that is 'any action that implies a further narrative action' (Felluga 2002), is reflected as flash back to give reason for Kariyan's cry. Other than Kariyan's cry, the story does not keep anything that builds up any suspense for the readers. The third one is the semantic code that is used in a text to give a particular or additional meaning by way of connotation. In the story of globe, one can find in few places the semantic code is employed by the writer that give different connotation to the text: the meeting between the teacher and Kariyan on salary day, Kariyan's cry, the club activities, the teacher's elaboration about the globe in the local liquor shop, the teacher becomes emotional and upset after his explanation of the globe, description of the landscape and the nature while walking the field, and father bitten by soothing – all of them have and take special meaning in a way to complete the writer's task. The symbolic code is the fourth one which makes it difficult to differentiate from the semantic code and it is a deeper structural principle that works by a way of antitheses or by way of mediations between antithetical terms. (Felluga 2002) As Barthes writes, "Every joining of two antithetical terms, every mixture, every conciliation—in short, every passage through the wall of the Antithesis—thus constitutes a transgression" (1974:27. Cf. Felluga 2002). In the story of 'the Globe", the symbolic codes are used in a few places. The meeting of teacher and Kariyan over drinking; Kariyan and his father getting into the local liquor shop; and the teacher drinking in the local liquor shop are having their own contradictions and transgression. Finally, the cultural code, 'designates any element in a narrative that refers to a shared knowledge about the world works', including 'physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary, historical, etc.,' (Felluga 2002) have been effectively used at many places in this story. The importance of education for social development is reflected in Kariyan; knowledge about the liquor shop; the description of the landscapes can be from the text as examples. All these codes work together in the construction of meaning of the text and they also help us to understand that the story of the Globe is all about the lost opportunity in the childhood life of Kariyan that eventually affected his progress to force him to be a menial worker in a school.

## Conclusion

"The Globe" of N. Prabhakaran is a simple story that deals with the importance of education in the contemporary world and it is important, particularly for the people belong to the marginalized and downtrodden communities to address their social problems and over

some social evils. Though those who read the story tried to argue that the story is a about the loss of native land in the process of modernization and globalization era, this study clarifies that conquering the globe is always realized through education not by capturing landscapes. To prove this point, this study has utilized literary tools available in the field of Narratology, in a broader sense..

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# Dialectics of Power Transformation: A Foucauldian Reading of Vaisakhan's Railway Stories

**Karthika R. & Anjana J.**

**Abstract**

Rail locomotion permeates an illusory experience of transition subjugating the passenger identity under its machine power. From the time of its inception, railways in India was considered a critical harbinger to modernity. More than a mode of transport railways used to represent an extended metaphor of Imperial India. The complex infrastructural mechanisms of colonial science and heraldry, cartography, landscaping, trade, pleasure and travelling culminated in railways. This imperial face of Indian railways also encompasses equally woeful tales of exclusion of its associated labour forces. The conjuring journey of Indian railways would have been incomplete without unveiling the power politics to which its grossly underpaid workers succumbed. A close examination of the seemingly apolitical railway culture undermines the dominant ideology it upholds, transforming it to a carrier of hegemony. The role of railways as an Ideological State Apparatus and its contribution to nation building is manifested through the symbols, representations and cultural practices associated with it. The paper attempts a Foucauldian reading of power politics embodied in Indian rail stories with special reference toVaisakhan's railway stories'Noolpalam Kadakkunnavar','Lokantharam' and 'Jagratha Nithanthajagratha', taken from his anthology*Pachavilakku*.

**Keywords:** Narratives, Railway, Underprivileged, Foucauldian.

## Introduction

Being the largest employer in India, Indian railway serves as a cultural edifice to the entire nation inculcating a distinct fabric of life to its associated folk. Despite the murky imperial agenda of profit-making and colonial expansion, it may be argued that the British were really confident regarding the role of railways to propel social change in India. The emotional cognizance it embodies is deeply based on the social relations upon which it is rooted. More

than a precursor to modernity, its myriad cultural implications adorn Indian railway as a cultural signifier. The parameters governing the politics of mobility are manifold and mainly involves speed, space and time factors. But the unveiling of its social parameters expound the status of this transport mechanism as a super structure and the power relations embedded in it.The paper delves into a Foucauldian reading of the issues of power asymmetries, manipulation, exploitation and inequities on part of the under privileged sections in the railway domain using select railway stories of Vaisakhan.

**Anjana J.**

M K Gopinathan Nair aka Vaisakhan is an Indian short story writer, playwright and screenwriter who is currently the President of Kerala SahityaAkademi. Having been an employee of Indian railways for twenty years, many of his stories feature railways as the backdrop. His anthology of railway stories comprising nineteen short stories is published as *Pachavilakku*.These stories exemplify how a leading institution like railway works in society through principles, ethics, morals, attitudes and conceptions of the world and how it becomes a voice of the segregated sections of society.

**Locating Foucault's Modalities of Power in Indian Railway**

Railway is the home not only for regular staffs like drivers, cleaners, ticket examiners, station masters, railway guards,etc but also for individuals like beggars and scavengers who are usually kept at bay. Within the social spaces of trains, there is segregation on the basis of class and gender. Also one can see the gendering of space with separate compartments for ladies. (Nair, 49).The set of unconscious/conscious beliefs unstated but followed by each of these groups explicate the ideology propounded by railways and how it generates a social consciousness about the railway culture in its dependents.In common use, the term 'power' is a broad concept that encompasses notions including ability, agency, domination and potential. As Lynn Fendler in *Michel Foucault* claims:

> Foucault's analysis breaks the concept of power apart as he examined how power operates within a democratic system in which people are supposed to govern themselves. Democratic governments do not gain legitimacy through threats of terror and so a careful theorization of power is required to perceive how this new 'kinder and gentler' mode of power works. Foucault explicitly identified four modes of power viz, sovereign power, disciplinary power, pastoral power and bio-power as modes of power in democracies. (43)

The modalities of power operate within the purview of class, caste, gender and colonial parameters, thereby equating railways to a superstructure."The state," Foucault explains in *Security,Territory,Population*, "is super structural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family,kinship, knowledge, technology, and so forth." (123). An investigation into the hierarchical roles associated with railways unfolds a reservoir of grievances and power polemics enveloping its labour forces. Verena Erlenbusch in "From Sovereignty to War:Foucault's Analytic of Power" states:

According to the classical theory of sovereignty,power is essentially state power, which is exercised in top-down fashion according to a distinction between what is permitted and what is prohibited. But acc.to Foucault, this classical theory of sovereignty fail to point out how power actually functions in society. He argues that power extends beyond the state and is exercised in institutions like the family, in relationships between physicians and patients as well as teachers and students,or in the workplace.

Though bio-power denotes power over bodies, Foucault explains it as "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations."

(*The Will*140).He also claims that the modern power over human life constitutes two intertwined poles. Foucault calls these as anatomo-politics of the human body and bio-politics of population. Whereas anatomo-politics centre on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility', bio-politics targets the body of the species with all its aggregated biological process:births, deaths, levels of health, longevity, reproductive health, etc(*The Will* 139). The select narratives depict how the sovereign power exercised on the underpaid Class III and Class IVIndian railway employees in the 1970's and 80's by higher railway officials, first class passengers and money lenders transform to a mode of bio-power.

**Sovereign to Bio-power: Dialectics of Transformation**

Indian railway as an institution demonstrates themechanism of power transformation mainly through its underpaid employees who do all sorts of menial as well as supervisory jobs. Though they have the label of government employees,still they lead a life of destitution. Infact the very label of government employee urges them to exhibit a decent standard of living that ends up in incurring substantial interests and instalments each month.

'NoolpalamKadakkunnavar' is an example of the destitution faced by one such grossly underpaid railway clerk who desperately tries to resolve the monetary intricacies of his life. His devotion in systematically entering and transmitting the messages pertaining to rail passengers retains him till 9 pm in the station. But the larger figures of debts and interests accompanying his salary at the beginning of each month remain a never ending vicious circle around him.

Ramagownder's shop-109.75
Milkwoman-7.50
Fuelwood shop-15.00
Newspaper -5.25
Grocery shop-12.50
Textile instalment-20.00(Vaisakhan,"Noolpalam" 82-3)

The calculated monthly repayment of Rs.170 and his net salary of Rs.140 points to the subsequent craving for thirty rupees,reiterated as 'just thirty,..thirty..'(83). As in a sovereign power, the money lenders derive their power from a social contract in which individuals agree to submit to a sovereign who guarantees order and security. But the very same contract yields them suffering and destitution owing to the unending repayments that leaves aside nothing but negligible sums. The sovereignty exercised by the money lenders is seen as transforming to a mode of bio power subsequently.

The central character describes his wife as a 'great wonder' owing to her survival capability with mere seven grams of hemoglobin (Hb). Whereas the minimal Hb requirement for the sustenance of a woman in the United States is six gram, the protagonist wonders how his wife manages to live, have sex, deliver their babies and do the daily household chores with mere seven grams of Hb(86). Also the chronic cough, nutritional deficiency and bronchitis which adorn his children owing to unhealthy living conditions force him to 'beg' for transfer to his home town.

His helplessness and apathy to be under the mercy of his higher officials irrespective of the fact that he is a devoted employee aggravates his wretchedness.

> I beg to submit the following...the clichéd expression. Should it be I beg? It's a bit old. New meanings have come. I can write even a new dictionary. Beg-an absurd word used by a helpless underpaid employee to convey his urgencies to the senior officer. Phlegm-a kind of gum developed in the bronchial tubes of common men and their familieswho are forced to live in adverse circumstances owing to their jobs. Human-a mammal living miraculously in undevelopedindependent nations. Belong to Homo Sapien species and have the ability to weave webs of relations and get themselves killed entrapped in it. (87)

According to Foucault, "the classical privilege of sovereign power is the 'right to take life or let live', sovereignty manifests itself as a right to kill when the sovereign's existence is in danger." (*The History* 136). But in contrast to the repressive mode of sovereign power expressed as the right to end life, there are other forms of power that seek to manage,optimize and increase life. Foucault calls this form of power as bio-power, which he argues exist in two main forms-focusing on the body of the individual and secondly by deploying regulatory controls to manage the processes of life such as reproduction,mortality, morbidity, life expectancy, etc(*The Will*140). The physical turmoil and impoverishment of the character and his family can be viewed as synonymous with the bio-power exercised by the superior officers and money lenders on class III employees like him. The discretion of the officers whether to stand in favour of them and the reckless imposition of the money lenders are regulatory controls over these employees and their family members that encapsulate their physical, mental and sociological well-being. In this novel,the bodily weakness and exhaustion reaches a saturation point as the protagonist's wife give herself into a mental break down.

> His wife stood up immediately without listening to his words. Stood straightly on the cot without caring to adjust her fallen *saree*. Looked at her husband and kids with a

compassionate smile. Soon the smile vanished. Her face darkened. She rolled her eyes to intimidate him and the children. She stretched out and bent the fingers, stretched out the tongue and trembled.Seeing that her family is afraid, she burst out into an uncontrollable laughter. As it echoed the entire room, she jumpedonto the floor. Stopped laughter. Shook vigorously. Stayed quietly as if to listen something, then crawled under the cot and hid near the wall. (87-8)

Similarly in 'Lokantharam' the fortune that befalls on a coach attendant named Damodaran in the form of branded shoes, accidentally left out by some first class passengers and the subsequent tragedy he faces is picturised. The presence of the branded shoes makes him a laughing stock among his fellow workers and invites dubious looks from his senior officials.

'Hey,how did you arrange this? Prince's shoes!'
Many heads rose from the group playing Rummy.
'Passengers will bow before you today, sure.' (Vaisakhan, "Lokantharam" 30)

Unlike other days, he finds that particular day as extraordinary and devotes his entire attention to the shoes alone while working in the night shift. The invocation he has in his mind due to this rich possession and the way it changes his perception of the world unveils the sovereign power dynamics inherent in that representative object. The same object gains him acceptance by another group of first class passengers who disregards his job status and welcomes him to join their company. 'Damu, we don't discriminate people as sub-standard ones or unsuitable for company. We are a different lot.' (34)

Still, the frequent look on his shoes is a reassurance for the group to justify his inclusion in the company.Damodaran finds this gesture from the passengers an unbearable one. He begins to lose patience when their conversation was wholly focusing on his shoes. The old man in that company, Mr.B.K puts his glass down and speaks by touching Damu's shoes, 'Damu…You're an honest man. That's why I…I'(36).The branded shoes here serves as a trope for wealth, nobility and reverence.But the very same supremacy which this Class IV employee acquires is lost immediately as he gains overconfidence and shows excessive freedom to the lady in the group. As the repressive mode of sovereign power on part of the passengers begins to break out, the protagonist jumps out of the carriage accidentally falling out. Foucault argues that localized relations of power like workplace hegemonies can equally serve as an apparatus of bio-power, managing human body and the processes of life. (*The Will*139). Thus the sovereignty exercised on the menial staff by the representative first class affects his very own body resulting in his death and hence is an illustration of bio-power.

'Jagratha,Nithanthajagratha' is another story in the same anthology which sketches the diffused regulatory measures that are initially a part of sovereign power and that which subsequently relates to the anatomo-politics of the human body. The presence of a VIP in one of the night trains and the arising commotionamong the Class III and IV employees of a station named 'Thenari South' to ensure his smooth journey is sarcastically picturised. The repeated telephoning and interrogation on part of the Controller to assure the presence of

signal lamps for this midnight train excruciates the station master's agony.The story develops through the words of him who is forced to pester even the sleeping porter to light the blown out lamp in that rainy night. The adverse natural conditions and the sudden gust of wind worsens his misery under the sovereign supremacy exercised by his superior officer. Though he yields fully to this control, he is not exercising this sovereign power in the same coin at his subordinates. Having been the flocks of the same feather, the narrator shows more tolerance towards the delay from switchman and night patrol staffs. The same feeling of camaraderie causes him to act readily on knowing that one of the night patrol staffs, Kumaran is poisoned by snake. But his agility proves futile at the indifference of his senior officer whose concern is the VIP alone.

> 'Has the ambulance started? The night patrol man is becoming very bad.'
> 'Hello, enough.enough. You don't even have the patience to wait even for two minutes when an officer is talking.,Shame on you!'
> 'Sorry.The man's condition is getting worse. Each moment is valuable.Ambulance…'
> 'Hey Mister, Nothing can happen if you repeat'ambulance'. They've already informed that it's not starting.'
> 'Have they informed so? But you haven't told me that.'
> 'Haven't I? Sorry. I thought I had told. You see, VIP special is about to start.'
> 'So ambulance won't arrive?'
> 'Wait, I'll ring once more. Let the VIP coach go first.'
> 'Any goods vehicle to send Kumaran?'
> 'No. All goods are distant. Had been blocked for the VIP train.' (Vaisakhan,"Jagratha" 64)

The Controller threatens and silences the anxious queriesfrom the Station Master about ambulance. The classical privilege of sovereigntyis explicitly manifested through the repressive strategy adopted by the Controller in this context. His unconcerned attitude to these underpaid employees reveals the nullity ascribedto their bodies.By the time the Controller heeds to Stationmaster's worries and makes a serious call to the hospital, the man had succumbed to death.The visible form of sovereign power exercised by the higher officials over the underpaid menial staffs thus transforms to a form of bio-power in this story also. Whereas other underprivileged employees including the Station master luckily manages to survive without injuries in the hassle about VIP train, the patrol staff falls victim to it.

## Conclusion

The menace on the corporeal existence of the Class III and Class IV Indian railway employees of the seventies and eighties is a clear illustration of bio-power which originates from the modality of sovereign power. The picturisation of railways as the 'sinews and arteries of the nation' and the method by which railways nationalize India can be scrutinized only by examining the power mechanism latent in it. Rail narratives serve as an apparatus of this power play seen from the perspective of its employees and passengers, among which the

underpaid employees represent the fringe section who are sidelined in the torrential polemics of power.

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# Contribution of Brajbhasha Poets to the Mughal Court

**Sanskriti Razdan**

**Abstract**

This article examines the contribution of Brajbhasha poets to the development of Mughal culture, focusing on their work for the Mughal Court. Poetry written in the Brajbhasha language that conveyed the local populace's ethos, values, and customs was essential to bridging the gap between the ruling class and the ordinary people. They contributed to the evolution of Mughal writing by introducing novel subjects, modes of expression, and forms of expression, such as music and dance. One of their most important contributions was to the evolution of Mughal literature. Poetry composed in the Brajbhasha language, which the Mughals encouraged and supported, is now an integral part of India's canon of literature. The article argues that Brajbhasha poetry made significant contribution to the Mughal court.

**Keywords:** *Brajbhasha Poets, Culture, Literature, Language, Mughal Court.*

*Introduction*

Literature plays a crucial role in shaping society. It has continued the ancient practice of passing on a culture's defining mythology, folktales, and legends from generation to generation[1]. The cities of Mathura and Vrindavan in the Braj area are where the Brajbhasha dialect was originally spoken. The author of Tuhfat al-Hind (the gift of India), Shahnawaj Khan, also connected the Brajbhasha with Brajmandal and offered the following flattering assessment of the region's literary culture. The Braj region, which includes present-day Mathura, Agra, and the surrounding areas in Uttar Pradesh, was the primary Brajbhasha-speaking area[2]. During the Middle Ages, Brajbhasha was primarily seen as the language in which poets composed hymns and devotional songs in honour of Krishna and Radha. This language's grammatical rules are laid out since the language is popular among poets and the culturally

affluent because it contains poetry full of vivid colour and lovely expressions of the adoration of the lover and the beloved[3].

Muzaffar Alam, in his study of the rise of the Persian language in the Mughal state under Akbar and later, argued that vernacular could make its presence felt in the Mughal court and literary culture only in the eighteenth century in response to political pressure from the regions in the form of rebellious movements. This is because the Persian archive portrays Mughal society as a completely Persianized society with little room for a vernacular culture like Brajbhasha literary and Brajbhasha literature, notably its rich poetry, was consistently supported by the imperial Mughal court and the Mughal ruling elite, which included Mughal Princes, high mansabdars, and middle ranking mansabdars, calling into doubt this common belief[4]. In the Brajbhasha literary culture, several of these Mughal men took part not only as patrons of vernacular poets but also as poets.

***Historical and cultural influences on the Mughal Court of Brajbhasha poetry***

Outlining the literary climate, the Mughals might have found upon their arrival in India a good place to begin. Support of Hindi by Indo-Muslim elites predated Brajbhasha literature and the Mughal Empire, which emerged in sixteenth-century India[5]. Most significant early indicators of Hindi poetic originality may be traced to Indo-Muslim cultural settings and courts, a fact usually ignored by nationalist literary historians. There are scattered references to vernacular verse forms and songs as early as the Ghaznavid period (around 977-1186 A.D). Still, the activity in regional Muslim courts and Sufi khankhas inspired major textual achievements in pre-Mughal Hindi: a series of Premankhyans written in the Avadhi dialect between 1379 and 1545 A.D. The Avadhi poet Manjhan (who wrote Madhumalati) and Shah Muhammad Farmuli, whose Hindi poems are affectionately remembered by the literary biographers of early modern India, were frequent visitors to the court of Islam Shah Sur. Language and literary tastes in North India shifted significantly during Akbar's reign. One example is the respect the Mughals had for Persian poets. Another noteworthy shift occurred when the Brajbhasha dialect began suppressing the Avadhi dialect in vernacular literary circles[6]. There is only a little difference between the languages. Despite their varying morphological traits and preferred genres, both can be categorised as Hindi (which Indo-Muslims often termed Hindavi). As well as writing treatises on ancient Indian aesthetics known as ritigranth, Brajbhasha poets liked writing brief muktuk poems, typically on devotional or regal themes. Unlike Avadhi, which comes from further east, the Braj dialect is not too far removed from the Hindi spoken in Agra and would have likely been readily understood by the Mughals[7].

It is difficult to determine when the Mughals first became interested in Braj literary culture. Almost all early Hindi poets connected to the Mughal court have been lost to history, leaving behind only their names and maybe a few lines of poetry. Humayun has been linked to the support of Brajbhasha songs, which share some characteristics with poetry and can be difficult to tell apart. Several Braj authors are also linked to his court. The works of the poet Narhari are more chronicled than those of his contemporaries since he gained the support of Islam Shah Sur and eventually became a poet in Akbar's court.

Akbar had a deep appreciation for music, particularly dhrupad songs sung in Brajbhasha, the language of his court[8]. Tansen, a famous court musician, is hardly in need of introduction. Music is given significant attention in Abul Fazl's Ain-i Akbari, which includes a chapter devoted to Bishnupad (Songs to Vishnu). Abul Fazl does not mention the many Hindi poets who worked in Akbar's court, but their names and works have survived in poetry collections. Only a select few, like Karnesh and Manohar (among others), receive even passing mention in literary history, and even then, only with scant personal details. Todar Mal, Akbar's revenue administrator, and Faizi, Akbar's Persian poet laureate (and Abul Fazl's brother), are attributed to creating Braj poetry. Akbar written a few songs in Hindi himself. His Majesty's inspired nature is strongly drawn to composing poetry in Hindi and Persian, as described by Abul Fazl; he displays a subtle grasp of the finest points of literary conceits.

***Brajbhasha poets recognised at Mughal Court***

Keshavdas' Jahangirjascandrika (Moonlight of the Fame of Jahangir) from 1612 A.D shows a deeper connection to the Mughal court under Jahangir. This was a panegyric, as the name suggests, and it took place in the Agra royal court, though it is unclear whether he gave this to the emperor. Although Jahangir speaks highly of a group of Hindi poets in his autobiography, this may have indicated that the Braj language was more widely spoken during his reign. Many artists from the Braj region performed at Shah Jahan's court. Lal Khan, Khush-hal, and Vishram, all descendants of Tansen (whose Braj music was present in Akbar's court), attended the Mughal court. Poets from the Braj tradition who are linked to Shah Jahan include Harinath. It was also reported that the monarch met with Biharilal. Poets of equal renown who were associated with Shah Jahan's court include Sundar, Kavindracarya Sarasvati, and Chintamani Tripathi. It is still being determined how much support Aurangzeb gave the Braj poets during his reign, but it is believed that this support persisted despite the emperor's lack of involvement. It was stated that all of Aurangzeb's sons and grandkids shared his passion for Braj. This suggests a lengthy connection between the Mughal governing elite and the Braj literary tradition. Although Persian would have maintained its status as the imperial court's primary language, Brajbhasha was also spoken there. However, only some of Brajbhasha's accomplishments originated outside of royal courts or even in those of the Mughals.

Riti poetry thrived primarily in imperial and sub-imperial courts, and its readers were members of the governing class. Merchant elites like Bhavani Dutt Vaishya or Sabal Singh Sahu were trying to get a foothold in the concept of royal power by emulating courtly patronage to the rich genre of poetry. Merchants played a crucial role in the vernacularization of the Mughal literary sphere by mimicking court practices such as patronage to poets and troops of musicians. Still, they have been largely ignored in studies on cultural productions in the pre-modern period. Because of their connections to the imperial court or courts of the Indo-Persian elite, aspiring Mughal gentlemen could adopt cultural practices from the court. Even among the provincial elite, far from the Persian Cosmopolis of Agra or Delhi, there was a growing aspiration to be recognised as a Rasik of Riti poetry. By going through these

motions, we can value the autonomy of these bhasha poets, who were nomads to varied degrees and have been largely overlooked in research on Mughal history[9].

### *The Contribution of Brajbhasha Poets to Mughal Literature*

Brajbhasha poets had a significant and multifaceted influence on Mughal literature[10]. It was well-known that the Mughal Empire was a strong patron of literature and that during Akbar's reign, the court of the Mughal Emperor was a hub of literary innovation and cultural exchange. Poets who composed in the Brajbhasha vernacular language contributed significantly to the development of Mughal literature. Poets who wrote in the Brajbhasha language contributed significantly to Mughal literature by emphasising regional themes and topics in their work. Since the authors wrote about love, nature, and devotion to God, the common people of northern India could relate to their writings. Their writings contributed to forming a distinct Mughal cultural identity and connected highbrow Persian literature with the common populace. Brajbhasha poets pioneered the introduction of innovative new forms into Mughal literature, which was immensely beneficial. For instance, they disseminated dohas and chaupais, which were types of moral and spiritual literary styles written in concise rhyming couplets. These forms eventually became an integral part of India's literary heritage and were adopted by the literature of other regions.

Brajbhasha poets significantly contributed to the evolution of Hindustani, a language composed of Persian and regional dialects. They used Persian phrases and idioms, which not only improved the overall quality of their work but also helped spread the language to a larger audience; as a consequence of the blending of cultures, a new linguistic identity emerged, which included elements of both the native and foreign languages. This identity incorporated elements from both languages. Brajbhasha poets played a crucial role in the evolution of Mughal dance and music. The regular incorporation of music and dance performances in their performances contributed to the spread of their popularity beyond the Mughal court[11]. Brajbhasha poets contributed a substantial body of work to Mughal literature, encompassing many forms. In addition to playing a significant role in the evolution of music and dance, these individuals were instrumental in the evolution of new literary genres, introduced local issues and motifs to the fore, and enhanced the Hindustani language. Their works contributed significantly to the formulation of the unique cultural identity of the Mughal Empire.

### *Themes, styles, and genres of Brajbhasha poetry*

During the medieval period, Brajbhasha was primarily seen as the language in which poets composed hymns and devotional songs in honour of Krishna and Radha. Keshavadasa shattered this norm, revealing to the public that Brajbhasha could cover various topics and styles[12]. This is especially clear in Rasikpriya and Kavipriya, two of his most well-known compositions. During the Mughal era, Keshavdasa's rich tradition thrived. Brajbhasha literature expanded outside the Braj region and beyond its original focus on devotional topics. Located to the South of Agra, Gwalior is where much of the oldest Brajbhasha literature was written. Vishnudas, a poet, started writing Brajbhasha versions of stories from the Mahabharata and

Ramayan based on Sanskrit texts. Vishnudas's work is significant because he is credited with pioneering the vernacularizing tradition by giving fresh life to the ancient epic tales of Krishna and Ram. This is but one of the sources from which Brajbhasha derives. Some of its linguistic, lexical, content, stylistic, and illustrative elements originated in the Apabhramsha, the Sanskrit Puranas, the Persian and Sanskrit dictionaries, folk ballads, and other sources. There needed to be uniformity of style in Brajbhasha literature[13]. There was a wide range of textual output. The more prevalent form of bhakti verse was the pada, which consists of rhyming couplets in a simple metre and is intended to be sung. Both Surdas and Mira used this technique in their writing. Bihari was an expert in the doha form of couplets. Kabir also frequently uses the doha, and the caupi or quatrain which are most common in narrative epic poems. Modern hagiographies were also written about poet-saints at the head of a sampradaya or sect, such as Vallabha and Chaitanya. The Vallabha sect chronicles are often cited as one of the most influential of these pseudo-historical works since they represent an early stage in the development of Brajbhasha prose. The diversity of literary styles is wider than the topics and ideas that inspired them.

Anandghan brought the prospect of romantic love between two people to a genre of Brajbhasha poetry otherwise dominated by Krishna devotion and courtly themes. The present Hindi poetry of echoes the depth of the pain of love depicted in his poetry, attesting to his profound influence on future poetry. Even when they appeared to deal with Krishna-bhakti, his quatrains were seen as expressing an Islamic romanticism. In contrast, his padas, devotional songs, and other works were seen as expressions of real Vaishnava devotion. His quatrains sparked a heated debate because they blurred the lines between secular and devout themes.

Keshavdas's decision to rework this older literary form allowed him to experiment with a classic palette of courtly kavya styles. This piece was written when Bir Singh, who had deposed his older brother, ascended to the throne of Orcha. There is more at play here than a mere coincidence between literature and politics. The complexity of Kesavdas's historical epoch necessitated a new literary style in Brajbhasha[14].

***Brajbhasha poets enriched Mughal literature with their works***

The Brajbhasha tradition, a constellation of courtly poetry and intellectual practises that flourished in an environment of mixed Mughal and sub-imperial patronage, can trace its lineage back to Kesavdas, who Hindi writers revere as one of its founders. Kesavdas broke with convention by choosing the less prestigious Hindi dialect of Brajbhasha over Sanskrit, the traditional language of the Indian court. He broadened the scope of Brajbhasha, which had hitherto been limited to Krishna-themed lyrical poetry, to include works on various scholarly and even arcane topics and forms. Although they were written in Brajbhasha, Keshavadasa's works were considered paradoxical because the Sanskrit literary tradition influenced them. The literary language Brajbhasha was on the cusp of widespread acceptance at that time. The Bhakti movement is often cited as a factor in the shift in public opinion. The spread of Vaishnavism helped keep the general public's focus on languages like Brajbhasha.

One notable example is Abdul Rahim Khan Khanan, who supported and wrote highly regarded works in the Hindawi literary genre, using both the Awadhi and Brajbhasha languages in his poetry compositions. The muktak style, popularised by Gang, was central to his work. In his work Kavinirnay (1746), Bhikharidas asserts that Rahim is the preeminent poet of Brajbhasha. Doha and baravi were Rahim's preferred writing styles. Khan-i Khanan was a prodigy in the written word and an avid reader. He was a renowned scholar of not just Persian but also Arabic, Sanskrit, and Hindawi, and at Akbar's request, he even studied Portuguese. Supposedly, he had the largest library in the sub-region. The works he penned in the Hindawi language under the pen name 'Rahim' demonstrate his brilliance[15].

Birbal and Tansen were two notable courtiers of Akbar who wrote verse or prose in Brajbhasha. Akbar is claimed to have bestowed the title Kaviraj upon Birbal for his Brajbhasha compositions, which Birbal wrote under the takhallus (pen name) Brahma. Todar Mal and Faizi, Abul Fazl's brother, are also rumoured to have written in Brajbhasha. The fact that the Mughal aristocracy during Akbar's reign was interested in vernacular literature is supported by Shahnawaz Khan's statement of Zain Khan Koka's (1601 A.D) fondness for Hindawi ragas and kavitts (riti metres).

***Cultural Identity***

The Mughal emperors' encouragement of Brajbhasha poetry resulted in the development of a unique Mughal culture. Included in the cultural practices of the Mughal court was poetry written in the Brajbhasha language, which had the effect of lowering social barriers between the aristocracy and the common people. This was of the utmost importance in a society that placed a premium on social stratification and in which the cultural norms of the upper class were frequently viewed as foreign and unrelated to daily life. Support for Brajbhasha poets, whose works reflected the Mughal Empire's tolerance for diverse cultures, was one way the Mughal Empire's rulers encouraged cultural blending[16]. This cultural mixing was reflected in the language, concepts, and motifs of Brajbhasha poetry, ultimately resulting in a new literary tradition distinct from both Persian and Sanskrit. The Mughals' encouragement of Brajbhasha poetry contributed significantly to the development of a distinct cultural identity for the them. It established a cultural synthesis that matched the global nature of the imperial government and gave the locals a sense of cultural pride and identity. These factors contributed to the growth of mutual comprehension between the ruling class and the general population.

***Language***

Brajbhasha poetry contributed considerably to the evolution of Hindustani, a combination of Persian and regional dialects. Brajbhasha poets broadened their language's allure by incorporating Persian terminology and idioms into their works, increasing the language's popularity. The Mughal dynasty's encouragement of Brajbhasha poetry significantly impacted the evolution of the Hindustani language. During the Mughal Empire, Hindustani became the common vernacular of northern India. Persian and local dialects merged to form this language during this period. By incorporating Persian terminology and idioms into their works,

Brajbhasha poets substantially contributed to developing the Hindustani language. This adoption of Persian linguistic traits was not done to acquire a new vocabulary; rather, it was done to express subtle ideas that were difficult to articulate in the prevalent vernaculars of the time.

By integrating Persian vocabulary and idioms into their writing, Brajbhasha poets raised the level of Hindustani and made it more accessible to a wider audience. In a society where proficiency in Persian, the language of the governing class, was typically associated with social and economic mobility, this linguistic expansion was especially crucial. Within this society, the governing class spoke Persian. The poetry of Brajbhasha was instrumental in developing a common vernacular between the educated classes of Iran and the rest of the country's population. Incorporating Persian linguistic elements into Brajbhasha poetry also contributed to developing a cultural synthesis that reflected the cosmopolitan nature of the Mughal Empire. This contributed significantly to the emergence of Brajbhasha as a literary form. This linguistic and cultural melting pot was manifest in the poetry of Brajbhasha, which contained elements of both indigenous and foreign cultures[17]. Brajbhasha poetry inspired Mughal literature with new ideas and styles. Brajbhasha poets wrote on love, its core, and religious devotion, which Mughal royalty and commoners liked. They influenced Urdu and Rajasthani poetry. Brajbhasha poetry, which offered new themes, techniques, and genres, greatly improved Indian and Mughal literature. Mughal royalty and commoners loved Brajbhasha poets. Brajbhasha poets wrote about love, nature, and God[18].

Brajbhasha's poems explored love in all its forms, from earthly to spiritual. The Mughal royalty adored poets like Surdas, Tulsidas, and Rahim for their emotional intensity and it is especially for love and dedication. It influenced Urdu, Rajasthani, and Mughal court poetry. Kabir and Guru Nanak were influenced by Brajbhasha poets Tulsidas and Surdas, who wrote in Braj. Brajbhasha poetry unified North and South Indian literature. Brajbhasha poets used Sanskrit and other regional classics to separate North Indian literature from South Indian literature. These Brajbhasha poets impacted Urdu and Rajasthani poetry, which covers love, nature, and God. Brajbhasha poets are Surdas, Tulsidas, and Rahim. Today, Brajbhasha poets are revered in India's literary canon[19].

### *Music and Dance*

The Brajbhasha language poetry substantially impacted the musical and dance traditions of the Mughal Empire. The well-known religious melodies known as bhajans are frequently founded on Brajbhasha poetry. Occasionally, music and dance performances were performed alongside bhajans. Brajbhasha poets played an important role in the creation of music and dance in the Mughal manner, popularised by the Mughal monarchs, who were well-known art patrons. During the Mughal era, devotional melodies known as bhajans that were based on Brajbhasha poetry were a prominent musical genre in the North Indian region known as India. They provided financial support for these tunes, frequently performed alongside musical and dancing performances, ensuring their continued success[20].

Mughal dance, another popular Mughal art form, was developed by Brajbhasha poets. Courtly dance was fundamental to Brajbhasha poets' devotional melodies and lyrics due to its importance in their performances. Mughal emperors danced for the imperial court. Due to the widespread acceptance of Brajbhasha-based devotional songs called bhajans, a new musical style combining Persian and Indian music arose in Mughal culture. Hindustani music was the new style. Brajbhasha poetry influenced Mughal musical and dancing techniques and is important to India's cultural heritage[21].

Brajbhasha poetry shaped Mughal literature, music, and dance. The Mughal Empire is important to Indian history and culture because of their encouragement of Brajbhasha poetry. The Mughal Empire mixed cultures. Brajbhasha supported Mughal culture through poetry. Persian-speaking Mughals brought Islamic and Persian culture to India. The ruling elite promoted local poets and artists to connect with the people[22]. Brajbhasha poetry's love, nature, and God themes unified Mughal India's many peoples. Regardless of education or native language, the poems helped nations build a unified cultural identity. Persian, Central Asian, and Indian influences shaped Mughal art, architecture, and cuisine. Mughal rulers patronized poets and performers. Persian and Indian cultures blended during the Mughal Empire, creating a distinct identity that has been treasured since. The period's music, dancing, and poetry inspire modern artists. Brajbhasha poetry promoted Mughal culture. It shaped a Persian, Central Asian, and Indian cultural identity. Brajbhasha poetry fostered cross-cultural exchange and cherished practises[23].

### *Conclusion*

Poets of the Brajbhasha school contributed significantly to the Mughal court's literary canon and influenced the evolution of Mughal speech, song, and dancing. Due to their use of local languages and topics, Brajbhasha poets were instrumental in bridging the gap between the governing elite and the common people, ultimately contributing to forming a distinct Mughal cultural identity. As a direct consequence of the Mughal rulers' encouragement of Brajbhasha poetry, the aesthetics and values of Mughal society at the time were profoundly affected by the blending of multiple cultures. Since Brajbhasha poetry is still studied and revered in contemporary society, its impact on Indian culture can be observed even today. The contributions made by Brajbhasha poets to the Mughal court illustrate how literature and the arts can bridge cultural differences and foster mutual respect and understanding between people of different backgrounds.

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# The 'Other' in the West: A Study of Indira Parthasarathy's Novel *Yesuvin Thozhargal* [Comrades of Jesus]

**C.T. Indra**

**Abstract**

This paper examines a unique novel in Tamil *Yesuvin Thozhargal* by Indira Parthasarathy ,set in Poland during the Cold War period offering a critique of Soviet Socialism and Western capitalist duplicity. The novel should be read in the context of Cold War politics which pitched the East against the West within Europe. The novel set in Poland at the time of the Martial Law in the 1980s, throws light on various historical and cultural issues through an Indian's encounter with Polish rebels, dissidents, officials, artists, intellectuals and commoners, besides Indian diplomats, Polish children of Indian parents etc.The paper also brings in for a brief comparison a Tamil travelogue *Via Europe* by A K Chettiar, on the impact of Cold War politics on East and West Germany.

**Keywords:** Polish Nationalism, Solidarity Movement, Western Capitalism, Soviet Socialism, Cold War Politics, religion, emigre

The common Indian notion of the West is confined to capitalist countries among European. Indira Parthasarathy, in his 1987 Tamil novel **Comrades of Jesus,** titled in Tamil, *Yesuvin Thozhorgal*, shows the binary within the West between East Europeans and West Europeans, between Slavs and other Europeans, culturally speaking, and the socialist countries and capitalist countries, politically speaking. The novel set in Poland at the time of the Martial Law in the 1980s, throws light on various historical and cultural issues through an Indian's encounter with Polish rebels, dissidents, officials, artists, intellectuals and commoners, besides Indian diplomats, Polish children of Indian parents etc. The novel examines the differences and similarities between the Polish people and the Indians. Both are very religious and have been conquered races in the annals of history. For a century and more Poland was even out of the World Map. However, there has been a continuous sense of cultural tradition. One of the characters, Asha, remarks, during a heated discussion on the way Poland was treated by

the superpowers during II World War: "Although Poland disappeared from the atlas in between, it has lived in history uninterrupted because it has a tradition of allowing the dissenting voice" (88). The novel raises, in a stirring manner, issues of Indian and Polish identities. It critiques the drawbacks of Soviet Socialism which denied freedom to the Poles. The novel is thus concerned with larger structures of ideas, political, religious and cultural, which force an Indian reader to rethink on his/her usual notion of the West. It adds a new dimension to colonial and postcolonial studies and is a fresh contribution to modern Tamil Literature. We find it describing one white European oppressing the other. There is the deep memory in the minds of the Poles of Hitler decimating millions of Poles during II World War with the connivance of Russia. The novel is a highly discursive one, as many of Indira Parthasarathy's novels and plays are.

The novel should be read in the context of Cold War politics which pitched the East against the West within Europe. India was formally a non-aligned nation, deliberately keeping off from both the blocs, which was the cardinal point of Jawarharlal Nehru's foreign policy. But very often it left us in untenable neutrality. A witty conversation, right in the beginning of the novel, brings this out. The narrator who is a visiting professor from India, tells the lady from the Social Bureau that he is 'neither East nor West' politically speaking i.e., his country is a Non-Aligned one. The girl retorts in humour, "Where is this country? In the Arctic region"? The Professor is not the one to give up. Hence he replies: "Do I look like a penguin"? (8) This dialogue is a typical example of Parthasarathy's wit and humour even while examining a serious intellectual or philosophical issue. The novel gives us an opportunity to look at the impact of the Martial Law and the Solidarity Movement (eventually put down by the Communist Regime), on the material life of people in Poland. The Jewish character Pyotr recalls to the Tamil narrator of the novel the historical significance of the Solidarity Movement in the 1980s. It checkmated the autocratic government's intentions. Hence, he reminds us that no Hungary or Czechoslovakia happened in Poland (50). As against the consumer culture in the West, there is scarcity everywhere in Warsaw (9). Even toilet paper is scarce. The scarcity of toilet paper may look like an absurd detail. But we soon learn that in a totalitarian set up even toilet paper can be suspect because it is used to spread anti-government and subversive literature among dissidents. The specious argument of the government that too much paper should not be produced because it meant destruction of forests, is an index to the political atmosphere prevailing in Poland then (11). Toilet paper, US dollar and empty supermarkets become emblematic of the economic and political crisis in Poland during the days of the Solidarity Movement. Polish intellectuals believe that Poland can never have any political spring (110). There is an atmosphere of fear and subversion.

If Indians, in general, are said to lack a historical sense, the Poles have a very keen historical sense. It may be a fierce reaction to a veiled form of colonialism in the garb of socialism after the war. Anna tells the Professor: "Certainly. Being conceived in the German ideological/philosophical tradition, brought up by a Russian nurse, this demon-child will not be accepted by self- respecting Polish citizens. We can't that easily forget history. Those

who accept it— I'm talking about our people— are pure self-centred persons, there is no doubt about that" (21). The Communists bartered the country in sheer self-interest. In post-war Poland the Socialists betrayed the nation. And the Hitler-Stalin agreement still galls the Poles, not to speak of the 15,000 Polish soldiers decimated by the Russian Red Army. In 1945 the people of Warsaw rose against the Nazis and perished as 'mosquitoes' and Russia never came to their rescue. Thus, we see Poland's tragic link with Germany and Russia. Poland's geography is its curse. She cannot wish it away (51).

The novel raises the important issue of Polish nationalism and strikes a comparison with Indian nationalism. The Poles have a deep sense of piety towards their land and are basically Roman Catholic in religion. (It is true that the largest percentage of Jews in Europe lived in Poland and the concentration camps were set up in Poland). In the novel, Asha, the daughter of the expatriate Prof.TNT, argues that India is not a nation but a conglomeration of small nations (86). The Indian ambassador in Poland ponders on India's status as a nation. Even as in Britain, the Scottish, the Welsh and the Irish have come together to form a nation, the Britishers have constructed a nation in each of their colonies. Whereas in Poland the sense of nation is strong because of one race and one religion (136). The axis of nationalism, language and religion is a running motif in the novel. In the latter part of the novel there is once again a deeply engaged discussion on what is 'home' and what is national identity. Turski, the painter, passionately affirms that nationalism is a weakening sentiment. He asks those who have gathered, to consider what happened to the Irish who had such an intense sense of patriotism. Poland is in the same plight, he rues (202). The Tamil Professor recalls the shrewdness of the Britishers who, by establishing a government, created a nation. He makes a thought-provoking observation: instead of a nation creating a government, a government created a nation which suited colonization.

The Indian Professor in the novel, who teaches Tamil in Warsaw, finds a cultural unity, if not a political unity, running through Poland as well as India. He argues that Indian national identity is a product of European advent. It was fostered by English education which alienated the intelligentsia. Although both countries were slave nations, they never lost track of their cultural identity. This is worthwhile perception.

At the social and cultural levels the novel explores interpersonal relationships and the Polish national character. The institution of family is less important in modern Poland and divorce is widely prevalent. The longevity of Indian marriages shocks the Polish sensibility. The author also shows how Poles are given to drinking and it is worse when they are a subject nation. If whisky is the capitalist drink, vodka is the socialist drink (114). On the lighter side the Professor finds that both the races are a slack people, with no sense of time and therefore negligent of work. Turski says, "In Europe it is the Slavs who speak most loudly. Try travelling in buses in London or Amsterdam, there will be terrifying silence" (209). As Slavs they have an inferiority complex; they don't have much respect for Russians largely because they are also Slavs, although they fear them, whereas they acknowledge the Germans as their superiors.

The novel offers a trenchant critique of the hypocrisy of western democratic countries. They would put an embargo on import of wheat on poor Poland while they won't be as severe on Russia. There is an insightful discussion in this novel of Cold War politics – specially how the big powers in the World treat the small nations as if they were their pawns. His long stay in Poland enables the protagonist of the novel to see for himself clearly the lopsidedness of both India's foreign policy and the invidiousness of western capitalist countries. The latter preach democracy to non-capitalist nations, but in reality hedge them in by their military and economic prowess. This is an acute observation which was true even in the later part of the twentieth century in the context of what happened during the Iraq war.

The novel urges us to acknowledge that there is much similarity between India and Poland. Even so from various incidents that happen in the novel we can see show India is far more democratic than the socialist Poland.

During the Emergency, of course, there was a shocking suppression of freedom of press in India. But things changed for the better. In Poland, during the period depicted in the novel, the situation is grim. Even in matters relating to University Campus the power of the Government is felt – as for example, in the election of a Vice-Chancellor. The author is, of course, too much of a realist to idealize the Indian situation. We have our own campus politics and the Professor points out how for all the seeming democratic process which is followed in India, ultimately functionaries like Vice-chancellors are chosen only in terms of their proximity to the powers that be. But Bowanski retorts that India still allows its citizen to apply for a passport unless one is a criminal whereas in Poland dissident professors are denied the right to apply for one (134).

One interesting topic which crops up often in the discussions is the inseparability of religion and politics in Poland. The Catholic identity is the majority identity which sees itself as the 'other' in relation Russia and Germany. Anti-Semitism runs deep in Polish blood although millions of Polish Jews perished in the concentration camps. We find in the present-day, Polish Jews doing everything to get assimilated. There is a discussion of the equation of religion and politics in India. But the novel (published in 1987 and set in the 80s) cannot be expected to discuss the latter-day developments in our country in the matter of politicizing religion. However, the novel does make a reference to the pluralist and multicultural nature of Indian society which makes its position somewhat different from Poland's. One interesting point is made by a Pole in the novel. He refers to the custom in Polish churches of engraving the names of the soldiers who died in II World War. The protagonist asks himself why in our temples we don't commemorate the memory of those who laid downs their lives for the country (89). It is a humanist gesture and perhaps Hinduism and Indian religious thought in general, do not feel inclined to set the human above the divine. Whereas in Poland, religion is politically implicated. The Indian diplomat Naren is of the firm opinion that nationalism, passion over one's language and religious fervor, are all factors which set the clock backward. The implication may be that such nations cannot achieve modernity.

One of the features in the novel which we may ponder, is the predicament of emigres. Usually, Indians prefer to go to capitalist, English-speaking western countries. Very few would want to go to East European countries. We have in the novel one Prof. TNT who is settled in Poland after being born in Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu. He is a master of Russian, Spanish, Arabic and Sanskrit and is very useful in a country which does not have much English. His daughter, begotten through his Polish wife, hates India because her mother was raped by unknown assailants while they lived in New Delhi for two years. Can we indict a whole country and society based on isolated incidents? This is the question which the Tamil Professor asks the Polish-Indian girl. More interestingly the girl goes to India, most reluctantly, to find her roots on her father's side and meets his affectionate, good-hearted sister. But the poverty and insensitivity, pervasive in India are appalling to her. Her father, living in Poland, remains somewhat of a recluse and a mysterious personality. After his daughter returns from India with chequered impressions, he dies, possibly of a sense of guilt that he neglected his sister.

In this novel, there are interesting discussions on language and mastery of languages. The Tamil Professor likes to show off his mastery of Polish. The Professor is well versed in Polish, Sanskrit, Arabic etc. There is a question often raised in the novel, 'why do we want to master another man's language?' The Polish daughter of Prof.TNT thinks that it is a form of inferiority complex to flaunt one's mastery of another's language, especially that of a conquering race. This is partly true of English in India and it also accounts for the neglect of one's own language. For Prof.TNT it is a matter of survival in an alien country. Nevertheless, the novel throws into relief the problematic issues of language and cultural identity.

If this novel had been written in English, the direction of discussion would have been somewhat different. It would have been confined within the post -colonial framework. It would have also become more popular. But it is in Tamil and is an articulation of the views of a Tamil writer who taught in Warsaw University for five years, occupying the first chair for Tamil. It is in a distinct tradition within the vernacular literature written by artists who were influenced by European literature. We locate this writer in this history and within it he makes a difference.

The focus of this paper has been largely on how we Indians, in general, have an insufficient knowledge of the East-West encounter within Europe from the point of view of Cold War politics and the Soviet hegemony over East Europe till the 1990s. Indira Parthasarathy's *Yesuvin Thozhargal* [Comrades of Jesus] is a novelistic exploration of problems of identity and selfhood in one such country. Looking for a counter or allied perspective I explored some more writings and was advised to read a Tamil travelogue by A.K.Chettiar, titled Via Europe. Although published in 1961, the author had suffered from wander lust, so to say, and had travelled extensively over the world even from 1920s. In this particular travelogue, I looked up the chapter on Germany. (No East European country is covered in this travelogue). It was written eight years after II World War ended, i.e., in 1953. The author is able to draw a comparison of his earlier visit to Germany and the present one. There is a reference to the

invasion of Poland by Germany and Russia in 1939. There are also references to the repeated redrawing of the boundaries of Poland and the utter callousness of the Russians in the Yalta Conference over this matter (109). The big powers are only interested in getting adequate compensation from Germany and establish their hegemony, each in their own way. Even when Russia argued for an allotment of more territory to Poland, it was all done out of self-interest (108). But in this travelogue, we also come to know that Poland got ¼ of the land space of Germany as it was before the war and it was the most fertile land and it also had coal. In the rest of the narration, we get an unedifying account how the superpowers vied with each other to have their share of the pound of flesh each in dealing with Germany. Even gestures of altruistic nature such as airlifting of food to West Berlin, conceal motives of power. A Hamburg trader asks the Indian traveller a bitter question: "Two years before West Berliners suffered out of cold and hunger, what were these Americans doing then? All this is propaganda, to deceive the world" (p.164). At the end of II World War the Western countries wanted to make the whole of Germany a democratic country so that they might prevent Russia's Communism from spreading over Europe. Germany would be a buffer. Russia wanted to make it a Communist country. But no one wanted to know what Germany thought about it. We see after the war, on one side the effects of war, poverty, and cynicism: on the other side, the overbearing attitudes of the allies in the matter of rebuilding the economy. The Indian traveller gives us a realistic picture of the contradictions existing in East and West Berlin. Public morality is very low, with the presence of American army in Frankfurt. There is discrimination, subtle and overt, in dealing with the Germans. Among the Germans anti-Semitism is still strong (145). They don't seem to think that what Hitler did was wrong. One Muller tells the Indian traveller that Russian soldiers were quite capable, but he hated the Russians. He longed for Hitler to be alive to destroy Russia. Fear stalks East Berlin. A.K.Chettiar gives a pathetic picture of East Germany (181). People are tired: there is no life in the city; people are also furtive, fearing arrest. There are signs of the damages of war everywhere. When he returns to West Berlin, Muller castigates the Russians and the Regime in East Berlin. There was rationing of essential commodities. Except for the street Stalineli where workers were housed in comfort, the rest of the places were abominable. People disappeared suddenly and were perhaps taken to Siberia, never to return home. There is a superiority complex among the West Berliners. For publishing a paper or magazine one has to get permission from the concerned Western authority in the given region of Berlin. The interest and security of capitalism should not be put to jeopardy by the editorial policy of any paper. This was the prime concern of the Western authorities. A.K.Chettiar, however, meets Indian academics like Prof. Mukherjee and his wife Prabhavati in East Berlin. He learns that education is free for the students. Because they are not Communists or of particular political persuasion, the Indian academics don't face any problem.

There are several little interesting insights all though A.K.Chettiar's travelogue. Some of the details demystify our notions of European character. There are also cheats in Germany; there is poverty and the same human urge to survive, to exploit and so on. The description

of ill-kept lodgings and eateries is shocking because we never associate the West with lack of cleanliness or deceitfulness.

The difference between the travelogue Via Europe and Indira Parthasarathy's novel *Yesuvin Thozhargal* [Comrades of Jesus] is that the former is largely a neutral commentary. But it has a wide historical sweep in as much as the author compares notes in his memory recalling his tour of Europe during the inter-war period. However, there is no special focus on the subject of Capitalism versus Communism. All observations on that subject are part of the general musings. *Yesuvin Thozhargal* [Comrades of Jesus] as its very title indicates, is deeply engrossed in that topic. Asha, daughter of Prof.TNT with a hyphenated identity – being an Indo-Polish or Polish-Indian- (her father an Indian, her mother a Polish), agonizes over the poverty and suffering of the Polish who are ironically very pious and deeply religious. Being inclined to leftist thinking, the novelist Indira Parthasarathy strikes a link between Jesus and Marx at this point. Both were comrades of the poor and the needy. Asha who opposed Socialism and was cynical of Communism, feels convinced after her visit to India that given Indian subjects' appalling poverty , socialism must inevitably be accepted. Coming from a Tamil writer of intellectual persuasion, the novel adds depth to modern Tamil Literature

Indira Parthasarathy is definitely acquainted with European intellectual and ideological tradition and critical theory in general, or we can say, it is instinctual with him. His novel shows how individuals have to negotiate their cultural and political identities at home and abroad, further, how no individual is allowed to be free of discursive space, for no one is outside ideology. However, discursive writing is not mere theorizing and this is testified by the text.

**Notes:-**

An English translation of Indira Parthasarathy's Tamil novel *Yesuvin Thozhargal* was done by K.V.Ramanathan with the title *Comrades of Jesus,* published by Rupa & Co., Delhi, 2005. However, the translations of passages in this paper are mine.

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# Living in the 'Wrong Body': Gender Dysphoria, Transition and Embodiment in A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*

**Lekshmi R. Nair and Rajesh V. Nair**

**Abstract**

In this article, we propose to explore how gender dysphoria is articulated/ problematized through transgender autobiographies, particularly of hijra community in India. Taking A. Revathi's *The Truth About: A Hijra Life Story Me* (2010) as a case study, we also stress on the role of life narrative approach in narrating trans identity as well as in gender sensitization. Body politics of hijra community through their performative acts of gender is analyzed through Revathi's text apart from debating issues such as trans activism and trans citizenship. The article also investigates the role of trans autobiographies in negotiating the disruption and destabilization of gendered boundaries. The construction of transgender identity through disidentification and re-embodiment is examined in the context of gender transition and embodiment.

**Keywords:** hijra, gender dysphoria, transgender, body, sexuality

Popular media representations of transgenders have ignited public interest and trans lives started garnering serious academic and social interest in the present century. Stephen Whittle comments on this new strand of academic engagement with transgender: "This fundamental shift was built upon within academia, and enabled trans men and women to reclaim the reality of their bodies, to create with them what they would, and to leave the linguistic determination of those bodies open to exploration and invention" (2006 xii).Predominantly autobiographical in content and style, transgender narratives politicize transgender engagement with society at individual and collective levels. The term 'transgender' is an extensive and a critical one that places in context and challenges assumptions regarding the ontology of sexuality and gender. The social structures of gender and patriarchal notions of sexuality determine individual identity and gender performativity, especially in a hierarchically ordered cultural scape. Transgender, variously termed as 'gender mixing, 'gender crossing, ''gender

blending' etc., is often used to refer to a person who has undergone surgery or hormone treatment to reconstruct or alter their bodies so as to cross over to another gender, a gender different from their assigned sex at birth. Individual identity and personhood, inextricably linked to a person's sex, becomes problematic for trans people when society at large undermines the practices, experiences and lived realities of a group of humans who articulate a fluctuating gender identity.

**Rajesh V. Nair**

Perhaps, there was a time when we used to look down upon the crucial role played by literature in foregrounding issues of human rights, but mainly due to the explosion of interest in different modes of life writing, this trend underwent a radical change. Literature's part in sensitizing readers against atrocities, particularly against marginalized groups including transgenders has triggered serious academic engagements. Now, transgender autobiographies, the focus of study here, drives home the speciality and rather utility of autobiography as a mode of articulating trans lives; however, one may notice the radical use of ""I" that becomes a place of creative and, by implication, *political intervention*" (Smith and Watson xix) (emphasis added). Nevertheless, Julia Swindells gives a positive dimension to this radical texture of autobiography through the following comment:

> Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, working-class people – have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself. (7)

Subscribing to this above observation while studying transgender life narratives, one may sense that "autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition" (Anderson 104), purely because of the blatant politicization of the subjects. Thus, generally speaking, trans life writing narrates, what we may designate as a *political self* with dual consciousness: "Self as culturally defined and Self as different from the cultural definition … always in transit, travelling into alien territory (Baruah 47).

Eleanor MacDonald deems transgender identity "as the felt incoherence of self and body" (6) and points out that while the experience of a noncoherent body and self is a permanent condition for some of the transsexuals, others try to achieve this coherence through medicalized process. Identity itself becomes problematic:

> as based in the profound sense of gender "dysphoria," of a disruption between one's sense of one's own gender and one's body. It is therefore simultaneously a problem of the relationship of self to self (mind/body) and self to others (the individual to culture, society, etc.) Transgender politics points to the refusal of this problem to be exclusively resolved either at the individual level or at the societal level. (6)

Transgender politics negotiates the disruption and destabilization of gendered boundaries. It is in this context that MacDonald identifies the postmodern conceptualization of liminality as central and critical to the fixing and understanding of transgender identities: "What is liminal is on the threshold, the edge, or the border, the "no-man's" land that exists in places between borders, where no rules hold, where contests over authority sometimes take place (9). Transgender identity is often experienced as an omission from or harm by the existing hegemonic binary categorizations of gender. Transgendered people frequently experience "living on these borders, and the costs of transgressing them" (9).

Translives subvert gender categorization, challenging customary notions of sexual classification. As an emotionally charged narrative, A. Revathi's *The Truth About: A Hijra Life Story Me* (2010) contributes to the ever-growing discourse on transgender studies and the multiplicities of transgender experiences. The social practices and traditions within the transgender communities, especially the hijra community are detailed within the ambit of personal experiences. As a transwoman, she exercises agency in her chosen gender and defies social categorization of gender. Born as Doraisamy in the Nammakkal taluk of Salem district in Tamil Nadu, she spent her childhood in the relative comfort of her home, basking in the attention and affection of both her parents. Revathi enjoyed the company of the neighbourhood girls and helped her mother with the household chores with the confidence of a woman. She could not stop being a girl and felt a strange sense of gratification at being called a woman. She won accolades for playing Chandramathi in *Harishchandra* in Class 7. In the *kurathi's* garb in the *Mariamman* festival, she could unapologetically express all the long-suppressed womanly feelings. However, the physical abuse and mental torture she had to suffer at the hands of the older boys in school coupled with her family's failure to empathize with her disheartened her. Her physical attraction for men and the feelings they incited in her lead to a haunting sense of "irrepressible femaleness" (14) and she began to perceive herself as "a woman trapped in a man's body" (15).

Cross-dressing is symbolic of gender rebellion in transgenders that starts at a very early age, very often in late childhood. Reminiscences about dressing up as females are common in transwoman narratives. Apart from clothes, they also express an explicit affinity to the games girls played. Revathi did not participate in any of the boys' games at school but rather played five-stones, hopscotch and hide-and-seek with the girls. Whenever in disguise, in women's clothes, Revathi felt as if she had given form to her real self and when she re-emerged as 'Doraisamy' in a man's attire, she felt that she was in disguise and that she had left her "real self behind" (16). Hines theorizes that childhood recollections of disassociating from perceived gender-appropriate toys or activities are common to transgender narratives and that these stories are indicators of a developing gender consciousness and a burgeoning resistance to ascribed gender identity. In the process, they also realize that such gender deviant behavior is socially unacceptable. Thus, gender rebellion permutates into a "childhood rejection of stereotypically gendered appearance or activities" (51). Accordingly, transgenders alienate themselves from their immediate family and circle of friends and begin experiencing and practicing their gendered reality away from the judgmental eyes of the world.

Sally Hines refers to Judith Butler's argument of the idea of 'sex' as constituting the biological male or female body, and 'gender' as referring to the social meanings attached to such bodies (22). This conception has disabled the more effective understanding of gender as distinct from sex: "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 6). In her essay 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution' Butler underscores the distinction between "sex as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity" (522). She perceives gender as intentional and performative arguing that "gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (520) and is manifested in the mundane acts of the body. The performative acts of the body like cross-dressing and playing gender roles constitute the creation of a conscious gendered identity that seeks to find embodiment, at a later stage, through gender transition. The proscriptions imposed by the social structure inhibit the practice of felt gender in a public space and trigger performative acts. Most of these acts are confined to the private space of home, hidden from the eyes of the family members. These gender performative acts manifest itself in Revathi's life in her cross-dressing, in her engagement with her social milieu; in the company she keeps, in the games she play, the women's work she does etc. The brutal beatings of her brothers and the mental torture that Revathi endures do not deter her from practicing her core gender. While engaging in these acts she experiences the synchronization between her inner self and her body performance. Her impersonation of Chandramathi and *Kurathi* are instances of playing gender in full public gaze. What is an artistic performance for the audience is for her performative acts in her preferred gender. She is exultant about her appearance as a transwoman in Tamil movies, but regrets not being cast as a woman. Butler observes:

> gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane ways in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (519)

The expression of the ontological 'core' gender becomes problematic for transpeople and it is through intentional stylized repetition of body acts that they seek to establish their core identity while they continue to live in a corporeal form that is non congruent with this identity.

"The corporeal body is central to transgender sensibilities, and the body is experienced, managed and modified through subjective and social understandings of gender" (Hines 84).The construction of transgender subjectivity embraces a quest for an embodied gender. Medical transformation of the body becomes a much - desired necessity when the experience of living in the wrong body is articulated within the discourse of gender dysphoria. While "some bodies are never at home, some bodies cannot simply cross from A to B, some bodies

recognize and live with the inherent instability of identity" (Halberstam 164), some bodies need to make the sexual transition from one to the other to gain a semblance of gendered identity and the congruence between the self and the body. Hines observes that "the narrative of the 'wrong body' within discourses of 'gender dysphoria' is repeated to gain surgical reconstruction, and the demand for surgery may be seen to be an outcome of the social and cultural investment in a gender binary system" (65). The body is experienced as an inner sense that influences and conditions responses to the social world. Reconstructive surgery becomes a means of integrating the inner self-identity and the social gendered identity. The necessity of congruency between innate gender identity and exterior bodily manifestation sublimates in the desire for medical intervention to alter the appearance of the body. Revathi describes her gender experience as that of a woman trapped in a male body. Her sense of self is incompatible with the material body she possesses. This incongruity between her real body and the psychic image of her gendered body culminates in a strong sense of gender dysphoria. Nataf argues: "the achieved anatomy is a way of relieving the confusion and anxiety, and the body is a point of reference, not a nature" (45).For Prosser, the 'wrong body' narrative reflects a genuine transsexual emotion, a desire for an embodied home. Gendered embodiment is crucial to transgendered subjectivity. "Transsexuality," Prosser argues, "reveals the extent to which embodiment forms an essential base to subjectivity" (7). He contends that transsexuals continue to "deploy the image of wrong embodiment" (69) because transsexuality gives rise to the feeling of being trapped in the wrong body. The image of being trapped in the wrong body articulates the need for aligning the gendered self with the material body image, thus becoming the primary goal of transsexual transition:

> It suggests how body image is radically split off from the material body in the first place, how body image can feel sufficiently substantial as to persuade the transsexual to alter his or her body to conform to it. The image of wrong embodiment describes most effectively the experience of pre-transition (dis)embodiment: the feeling of a sexed body dysphoria profoundly and subjectively experienced. (Prosser 69)

Revathi's life story offers a unique perspective of transgender experience and the myriad ways in which gender relations operate, leading to oppression, subjugation, exploitation and marginalisation. Claiming an identity, for her is breaking free from the confines of an ambiguous identity and assigned gender and sex roles, and laying stake to personhood in a body and gender of her choice, a sex that coheres with her core identity as a woman. "For some transgendered people," MacDonald observes: "the experience of a noncoherence of body and self is a permanent condition; for others, this coherence is achieved as a conscious, very often medicalized process" (6). She learns about the 'operation' that removed the male organ from the body or *nirvana* as it is termed in the hijra culture, and decides to join the house of hijras in Erode. Transgender lives are marked by migration and mobility. The quest for an embodied gender takes them across villages, towns and cities. Revathi's journey is no different; she joins her Guru in Delhi who advises her to conduct herself in a dignified respectable manner, for people believed hijras to be divine. Misbehaving with men and seeking them as

sexual partners were strictly prohibited. In Mumbai, she imbibes the deep-rooted traditions of the hijras who had "evolved a culture of their own to enable them to exercise order and restraint and also to exercise their rights" (62). Revathi hopes that after *nirvana* the female in her would be freed of her male body: "Back then I thought that in order to turn feminine, all I needed to do was get rid of this male object and I would become free to be a woman, like other women" (66). Her overwhelming desire to be a woman in body, mind and spirit makes her endure the painful procedure with poise. The physical transformation resultant of the surgery makes Revathi elated and proud: "I felt like a flower that had just blossomed. It seemed to me that my earlier male form had disappeared and in its place was a woman. I felt exultant" (88).

Jay Prosser points out that "mirror scenes punctuate transsexual autobiographies with remarkable consistency" and "constitute a convention of transsexual autobiography" (100). In the garb of the *kurathi*, Revathi feels as if she had shed her disguise and had given form to her true feelings. She is unwilling to shed her female clothes and stands gazing at her feminine form in the mirror. The image reflected in the mirror before the sex-reassignment surgery is a distortion and a misrepresentation of her inner reality. 'Doraisamy' was the disguise – a disguise that made her discard her core identity. She fails to identify with her physical form as 'Doraisamy' and pines for the imagined body that aligns perfectly with her suppressed sexuality. For a transsexual, Prosser adds, "(y)ielding this recognition that I am not my body, the mirror sets in motion the transsexual plot: …. it is shattered in its visual reflection, once the material body is seen not to be the felt body that the material body can be approached in bits and pieces –an assembly of parts to be amputated and relocated surgically in order that subject may be corporeally integrated"(100). After the surgery, Revathi identifies herself as a woman and her life lived as 'Doraisamy' seems fake and unreal to her.

Revathi's narrative is interspersed with accounts of companionship that exists between members of the transgender community. She muses over the friendship that she shared with the hijras in her native village. Soon after her surgery, a group of hijras rush to her help at the Chennai railway station and helps her board the train to Mumbai.

> For us *pottais*-whether or not we own things or know people-it is knowing a *pottai* that counts. Only a *pottai* knows another's feelings, pain, loss and anguish. . . . *Pottais* stand by each other and, believe me, a *pottai* looking for consolation is sure to find it, and often only in another *pottai*. We are, in a sense, like a flock of crows. We stick together (82).

The narrative thus places companionship within the context of transgender transition and examines the role of friendship in sustaining the spirit of resilience, resistance and survival. Friends become family for these marginalized people and the camaraderie that exists between these groups play a pivotal role during the early stages of gender recognition and the subsequent gender transition. The emotional and monetary support of their gurus and friends help them tide over the turbulent early stages of transition. Such assistance comes at a time when they are misunderstood and alienated by their immediate family and as a result these friendships are assigned a status equivalent to or even exceeding that of kinship. Revathi recounts numerous

instances where she desperately wanted to be with her own kind rather than be with her own family. Her stay in her parents' home is always brief and bitter and she often finds herself returning to her guru's house in desperation. The process of transition attributes a new significance on the notion of 'friends as family' in relation to transgender experiences. Their sense of self-worth is validated, endowing them with a confidence to pursue life in a body of their preference, congruent with their inner self.

Transgender narratives point toward the gradual acceptance that family and friends offer them once they have undergone the transition. The resistance and anger transform into an accommodation of their changed gender identity and a willingness to offer care and assistance. Revathi's parents and sister and her close relatives and neighbours accept her as a woman and begin treating her as one. She shares a special bond with her sister who never questions Revathi's decision to become a woman. Her mother and sister successfully argue for her claim in the paternal property and as a result the parental home is registered in Revathi's name. Thus, the narrative investigates the course of gender transition inside the framework of familial relationships.

Revathi's desire for sexual happiness drives her into sex work at the age of twenty. Ironically sexual happiness turns into sexual experiences as work. While analyzing Hijra community's sexuality in general, it is useful to bring in the notion of sexual capital or erotic capital introduced by the noted sociologist Catherine Hakim. Essentially connected with sexuality, social mobility and social interaction, erotic capital refers to a set of elements which women use to their "relative advantage" (499), as compared to men – beauty (with cultural and temporal variations),sexual attractiveness, social skills such as grace, charm, liveliness, style and dressing and sexual competence (500-501). It is performative in nature and is "a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of (your) society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts (501). Speaking of erotic capital in connection with marginalised sexualities, Hakim observes: "The performance character of sexuality, and erotic capital more generally, is displayed most clearly by transvestite and transgender men, who dress and act as women, and, in some cultures, perform as female dancers and entertainers (504). For studying transgender autobiographies, it is important to understand how erotic capital functions. Hijras perform their gender through various acts on their bodies to erase vestiges of masculinity and augment their femininity-they tweeze or sometimes operate to remove their facial hair, use facial bleach to make their skin appear whiter, wear jewelry and grow long hair. Clothing is the most conspicuous marker of Hijra identity and they "adopt an exaggerated feminine hip-swaying walk, grow their hair long, and most important, *all* of them wear saris" (Reddy 131). However, they also inject hormones, construct vagina after their *nirvana* operation in the quest to approximate feminine gender.

Experiences of physical abuse and mental torture force her to leave sex work and join Sangama as office assistant for a meagre salary. Sangama exposes her to the human rights violations against sexual minorities, dalits and adivasis. Seminars, workshops and public

meetings gave her a platform to talk about the hijra culture, the property rights of hijras and the violence and discrimination they faced. Sangama enabled her realize her vocation as a social worker. Marriage to a co-worker at Sangama was another means of asserting her identity as a woman. But the relationship turned sour and ended a year later with the man walking out on her. Sangama, once again, became her solace and engaged her in field work. After the completion of *Unarvum Uruvamum* she returns to Nammakkal only to leave home again for the *hamam*, to resume sex work to fund her mother's treatment. Revathi felt terrible returning to sex work after working relentlessly for the rights of sexual minorities. Repelled by what she had become, she returns to Sangama to reclaim a life of dignity.

In chapter 10 titled 'Life as Performance' of her 2016 book *A Life in Trans Activism*, Revathi reiterates her commitment to social change through the medium of art. Driven by a burning desire for social change Revathi decides to take her life and work to people – through performance. Revathi talks at length about her foray into acting with Santhosh Sivan's national award -winning film, *Navarasa* (2005) and later with V. V. Kathir's movie *Thenavattu* (2007). She had reservations about the popular depictions of transgenders in the film industry as persona fit only for comic relief or as dangerous criminals. Hence, she was very particular about the characters she played as she wanted to act "as a bridge between the trans community and the non trans community" (119).

To Revathi, her calling as an activist seemed to be the natural culmination of her lived reality. The essence of her journey towards womanhood was an insatiable desire to free herself from the confines of the male body and to embrace her femininity. Writing, she concedes, is the most powerful tool to showcase the lives of tran speople and deal with the oppression that they were subjected to. It is a means to bridge the yawning chasm that exists between the transsexuals and the society; a medium to initiate a dialogue on their interconnections: "I had to write frankly and fearlessly about our lives that are lived perilously close to the edge" (2016 79). Revathi considers her role as a writer as another dimension of her work as a human rights activist, for writing, she believes, "holds the key to long-closed doors that have become rusty due to centuries of prejudice and ignorance (2016 79-80).

Revathi's first book in Tamil, *Unarvum Uruvamum* (*The Feelings and the Body*), later translated into English as *Our Lives, Our Works: Telling Aravani Life Stories* (2011), captured the life experiences of 25 hijras. Even though the book was well received Revathi soon realized that an exhaustive narrative that "captured the range of human rights violations experienced by the transgender community is possible only when the writer herself reflects on her own lived experiences rather than telling other people's stories based on formal interviews" ( 2016, 81).

A. Revathi's life-text raises certain debates regarding the citizenship rights of hijras in India. In her own words, "Transgender persons are not even regarded as people. We are seen as sexual deviants who are meant to satisfy only the perverse pleasures of male clients" (2016 59). However, the Supreme Court of India made amends through the verdict in on

15th April, 2014 by declaring that hijras belong to the category of 'third gender' with all the fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution. Here, the role of personal narrative approach in gender sensitization, curing our hetero-normative society from transphobia may be noted. Writing becomes an act of liberation for transgenders but at the same time, reading those texts which are essentially non-normative can also be a "(trans)formative act" (Prosser 125). He continues: "Transsexuality is thoroughly engineered by autobiographical narrative in this sense also: not only through the oral autobiography in the clinician's office, not only in the retroactive reconstruction of the life into a transsexual bios but through the reading of published narratives, the latter often engineering the former…. (125)."

Revathi's autobiography is an offshoot of lived reality but more than that the text addresses certain issues related to a community. In fact, the subject speaks on behalf of her group by switching over to 'we' instead of the first person 'I': "We want to live as women, and if we are granted the facilities that will enable us do so, we'll live as other women do. We were not born to beg or do sex work "(200).

The narrative structure of autobiography becomes conducive for the expression of transsexual subjectivity. Prosser's coinage of the term "body narrative" is intended, as he contends, to reflect "the ways in which body and narrative work together in the production of transsexual subjectivity" (105). Revathi asserts that writing the book had a deeply cathartic and healing effect on her, transforming her intense pain into art. Her deep yearning, to be identified and acknowledged as a woman, especially after the sex transition process manifests itself in a narrative punctuated with pain and suffering. Prosser asserts that the "narrative of a transsexual identification does not contradict but, rather, enables the realization of a sex-changed body" (105). According to him, the transsexual body, thoroughly enabled by narrative becomes the site where the conventions of transsexuality gets entangled with those of autobiography: "Like two mirrors autobiography and transsexuality are themselves caught up in an interreflective dynamic, resembling, reassembling, and articulating each other" (103).

Transgender narratives navigate a gender identity transgressing the cisnormative master narratives, and expanding beyond the constraints of the hegemonic gender binary. The process of narration becomes an act of constructing a unique subjectivity, engaging in a process of "disidentification" (Muñoz 1999), and seeking embodiment in their felt gender. Henry Rubin (2003 11) argues that "bodies are a crucial element in personal identity formation and perception" (11) and that bodies, including secondary sex characteristics are integral and central to the recognition of a core gendered self. *The Truth About Me* is an exploration of the distinct ways in which transgender identity is constructed and experienced as a lived reality, both individually and collectively. The role of self-help groups and support organizations in raising awareness about transgender identities and the extent to which critical interventions can help rebuild individual and collective identities for this community are well-explored as she describes her life inside the organization. "Transgender identity is about identity experienced as problematic; the experience of being transgender problematizes the relationship of the self

to the body, and the self to others. In doing so, it also problematizes issues of identity boundaries, stability and coherence" (MacDonald 5). Thus, Revathi's narration of her lived realities are central to discussions around fluctuating gender roles, oscillating sexuality, the materiality of the physical body and individual and collective identity.

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# Queering the Silver Screen: Lesbian Love in Todd Haynes' *Carol*

**Kishore Ram**

**Abstract**

Todd Haynes' *Carol* offers a portrait of lesbian desire revealed through desirous glances, alluring gestures, and engaging dialogue, creating a subtext of erotic innuendo and urge brilliantly performed by Cate Blanchett, as Carol, and Rooney Mara, as Therese. The article briefly traces the development of same-sex relationship and explores the movie as a queer cinema. The narrative pattern and cinematic techniques of the film, deeply queer in its filmic and narrative choices, is explored. Haynes queers the silver screen not just as a deconstructive operation but as an opportunity for restructuring systems of meanings.

**Keywords:** Queer cinema- heterosexuality- lesbianism- homosexuality -space- costumes- social-structure- lighting- close-up- point of view.

Lesbianism is an "alternative lifestyle, a way of loving, a sexual preference, a route to personal fulfilment or a form of self-actualization" (Kitzinger xvii). Celia Kitzinger in *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, notes lesbianism was earlier regarded as a pathological condition that required treatment, "the products of disturbed upbringings or the perverted results of genetic mishaps" (39). In the early years before the concept of lesbianism was coined and any serious study on sexuality done, women enjoyed immense freedom and had close friendship with other women. Sheila Jeffreys in *The Spinster and Her Enemies*(1997) notes that "in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many middle-class women had relationships with each other which included passionate declarations of love, nights spent in bed together, sharing kisses and intimacies, and lifelong devotion, without exciting the least adverse comment" (102).

The friendship between women came to be viewed as same-sex desire with the coming of the first wave of feminism. The struggle to come to equal terms with men resulted in the

move of existing without men. Independent women with work and power to be self- reliant started building up on their own. They developed friendship with similar women and this passed a powerful message to men that women were independent. However, the feminist movement also pointed out lesbianism not as an alternative to having sex with men, but an abnormality. There were attempts by women to copy the way of men. Smoking in public, drinking and taking up works labelled as men's were ways in which women tried to usurp the area of men. But the result was the label 'tomboy' and doubts about their sexual orientation.

Lesbianism was a new form of social control in a way contrived to chase women back to marriage and domestic life. Kate Burns feels "Lesbianism is the word, the label, the condition that holds women in line. When a woman hears this word tossed her way, she knows she is stepping out of line… Lesbian is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives… who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs. . . To have the label applied to people active in women's liberation is just the most recent instance of a long history; older women will recall that not so long ago, any woman was successful, independent, not orienting her whole life around a man, would hear this word (Meem 89).

The mid-70s saw a growing tolerance towards homosexuality. The distinction between homo and hetero lightened, and the homosexuals were given equal status, like the heterosexuals. Homophobia declined in developed nations. Lesbianism became acceptable and was no longer a medical condition thanks to the research led by Alfred Kinsey and his team. It led to the "depoathologization of lesbianism" (Kitzinger 46) and it was reconstructed as a pleasurable experience any woman could enjoy. Kinsey discovered that many women in America had lesbian sexual experience, some out of sheer fancy and others seriously. This led him to say there were neither homosexual nor lesbian people, there were only homosexual or lesbian acts and this anyone could engage in. (Kitzinger 46). Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg *(Homosexualities* 1978) feel that homosexuals and lesbians are titles that are dehumanizing categories and designed to destroy human identities. Glenn Wilson and D. K. B. Nias (*Love's Mysteries* 1977) feel that lesbianism is a harmless sexual activity if done between willing partners. Liberal humanism thus saw it as something that was harmless and could be assimilated into society. The liberal humanists changed the concept that lesbians should be made to undergo therapy to become socially useful beings. They saw sexual deviance to be normal and attempts to categorise them lead to problems.

*Carol,* directed by Todd Haynes, deals with true love. The love and attraction a person can feel towards another. Patricia White feels *Carol* "becomes a retrospective fantasy of a film of the 1950s: if it is not one made in the image of the present, it nonetheless follows a lesbian script" (18). *Carol* is the story of growing up and coming to realise what we need most in life. The two lead characters, Carol and Therese, come to understand that what they need most is each other. One sacrifices her boyfriend and the other her family to be together. Carol is a complicated person to fall in love with. Her complication is that she has a family, a daughter whom she loves and a husband who has time only for business. However, Therese

receives her as she is with all her complications and falls deeply in love with her. The first meeting of the characters is dramatic and director Haynes has given deep meaning to the meeting. Carol walks into the department store where Therese works as a salesgirl, in search of a doll for her daughter and is attracted by the salesgirl. They stand with eyes locked, looking deep, desirous, falling in love, crossing the threshold of social control to enter the premises of deviancy. When Carol leaves ordering the toy train suggested by Therese, she leaves behind her expensive gloves, something that provides a chance for a future lunch. The two significant properties that the director use in the opening scene are the gloves and the Santa Claus hat. Carol tells Therese, "I like your hat." The pointed hat and the comfortable gloves symbolise the comfort Carol and Therese could give to each other.

Director Haynes and screenwriter Phyllis Nagy present the love of Therese Belivet (Rooney Mara), and Carol Aird (Cate Blanchett), in a slow paced way, framing it shot by shot. The locking of the eye in the first scene, followed by the lunch and the parting scene in which Carol leaves her hand on Therese's shoulders a bit too long and communicates the deep passion she has for her. Set in post-war Manhattan, when lesbians were not tolerated in societies, this was a simple way to express lesbian desires. It is a coming of age story for Therese and, in a way, for Carol too who openly moves into a new realm of love, risking everything she possessed.

The period is the 50s, a period that considered same sex relationship as abnormal and illegal. Hence, the love in Carol is not that open and daring. Andrew O'Hehir notes that "Carol" is one of the greatest American screen romances of any era, period—and perhaps that serves as the ultimate vindication of Haynes' outspoken commitment to "queer cinema." The film opens cautiously with a man walking into a hotel bar and the camera records his perspective scanning over the people having lunch. As he orders a drink, he notices two women sitting together and they appear distinct as the only female duos in the room. The distinct costumes of the two female characters distinguish them from the rest.

The youth identifies Therese and forces himself into the company. Carol takes leave of the couple, leaving them to sort out how to spend the evening. The extreme close-up shot of Carol's hand lingering on Theresa's shoulder is the first sign of lesbian love. But the viewers are left clueless about their love until the flashback is incorporated from the perspective of Therese and we understand how the two met when Carol accidentally stumbles on Therese at a department store where she is a saleswoman. When Carol asks for a doll, Therese can convince her that a toy train is the right gift for her daughter. Even then, the viewers suspect nothing until Carol stops for a second to have a parting look and the two stand with their eyes locked. The attraction develops into a relationship when Therese returns Carol's gloves which she left at the department store. This leads to an invitation for lunch and forms the opening scene of the film.

Carol next invites Therese to her house in New Jersey for a visit. The prospect of an evening together is disrupted with the sudden entrance of Harge (Kyle Chandler), Carol's

husband. Male intervention in the female space occurs often in the film. The youth in the opening scene walk into the female space and usurp the space. The spy at the hotel who records the lesbian sex scene is another case of male intervention. Therese's boyfriend occasionally enters the space with the prospect of a life together. These male interventions are equivalent to male check on female sexuality. Luce Irigaray in 1975 said that "the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects" (Teresa de Lauretis 56). This stresses on only one form of sexual relationship: the male centred. Even same sex relationship between women were viewed from the male perspective and Luce Irigaray feels "So there will be no female homosexuality, just a homo-sexuality in which woman will be involved in the process of specularizing the phallus, begged to maintain the desire for the same that man has, and will ensure at the same time, elsewhere and in complementary and contradictory fashion, the perpetuation in the couple of the pole of "matter (Lauretis 56). Carol and Therese succeed to overcome these masculine interventions and create a space for lesbian love in the crowded Manhattan.

Carol and her husband are separated, and fighting over access to their young daughter. He represents the rich class businessman who has no time for his wife. But wants her to keep up his status in the society. He believes sexual instincts need to be kept in check by moral control and he strongly opposes his wife's same-sex relationships. He understands his daughter won't be safe with a mother who cannot keep her lesbian urges under check. Hence, he starts proceedings to get sole custody of the child. Harge represents the old order that never tolerates deviancy. In a way, he is a ditched husband, a father who attempts to keep his daughter safe, and a patriarch who tries to keep his family from cracking. He is against all forms of same sex relationship and opposes Carol's preference for women rather than men. He is a representative of the society that advocates only heterosexuality and regards it as the only form of acceptable social structure. Cheshire Calhoun says that heterosexuality is not just a sexual orientation alone, it is a "method of socially organizing a broad spectrum of reproductive activities…to insure reproduction by making the male-female unit fundamental of social structure." (Cuomo 200).

Carol is mature and understands her sexuality. Even under the strict monitoring of her husband, she pursues her sexual orientation with her close friend Abbey Gerhad. Whereas Therese is an immature girl who, according to her, is not even aware of "what to order for lunch". Carol and Therese are an unlikely pair from different economic and social zones and the age gap is also great. Therese allows Carol to take control of her and guide her but there are occasions like when she asks Carol 'Why don't we take the presidential suite?' shows she can take charge of a situation. Therese has an interesting character arc. She is immature, she learns to survive, and takes control and finally develops into a mature person. At the end of the film, she is a different person from whom Carol met at the store. The daring and bold Carol influenced Therese to change. She helped her to follow her professional passion and also realise her sexual orientation.

Carol has a perfect life, she is rich, has access to a glamorous life in Manhattan society and all comforts to lead a happy life, but within she harbours a love for women. Her first loves is her own friend Abby. One thing remarkable about Carol is that she never hides her feelings. She openly expresses herself even during a period when homosexuality was not welcomed. Jessica Toops notes that the 50s was a period in which "persecution of lesbians was common throughout this time. The loss of jobs, social status, economic status, and psychological stability were some of the major effects on lesbian women. Being suspected of being a homosexual during this era was just serious as being suspected of being a Communist, as it was believed that homosexuality was equally as dangerous as Communism"(98) Though Carol's attempt to reveal her sexual preference is rather bold, still there are scenes in which show she is not quite in control. There are scenes where she feels confused, like in the department store where she confesses that she is undecided about the toy. Another situation is selecting rooms at the motel. In both situations, Therese takes charge and directs her to change her decisions.

Carol puts up a stiff fight for her daughter but then she realises if she wants to keep her daughter, she has to give up her identity. She realises that even though the society comprising her husband, his parents, the judge and others around her blame her for what she is, she understands this deviance makes her up and there is no giving in to the pressure of the society and sacrificing herself. She gives up her claims to the custodianship of her daughter, to give up her house and move into an apartment and go to work from there.

Therese is a much-hurt woman, and it is clear but who hurt her or how is not clear. Her backstory is not pictured. She is found alone all the time and her family details not given. Her sudden attraction to Carol and the way she will go out with her for a long trip suggests going out with mother, shopping with mother, eating out with mother and being gifted with valuable gifts like a mother. Therese misses someone from the past and Carol is an apt substitute for the missing someone.

The two make love at the motel, but their lovemaking ends in disaster as it gets captured by a private investigator posted to do the task by Carol's husband. The period of the film set in the 1950s was a period that did not accept the lesbian relationship. The two characters feel shame at being discovered. However, shame has to be overcome to fulfil love, and both keep aside shame and come together again.

There is separation, and separation is painful. When Carol suddenly leaves Therese, she is sad. She feels lonely and seeks explanation, and Carol's close friend is there to substitute and take care of Therese. Her presence suggests that Therese has to be taken care of. She had to be fetched home from where she was left. The back story of Abbe and Carol's friendship and how they discovered love is narrated. How the car broke down and how they both curled up in bed and discovered their love for each other. Abbe taught Carol the value of true love and through her, she realized what physical love was. From her husband, she got only obligatory sex and not passionate love. She went in search of it and on her way, she had

to give up her family and daughter. She would take up the task and come out victorious in discovering her true self.

Carol returns to Therese's life as she had entered first, unexpectedly. The film set in the 1950s would have had a different ending if it was made then. Audience reception has changed, and it enabled Haynes to give a happy ending to the film. The second time when Carol comes to her life, Therese takes her time to think and respond. It is not a quick yes but a slow but firm one. The relationship with Carol had taught her to take decisions just as her presence made Carol strong. Both achieved from the relationship and both discovered themselves. It was time to take the bold decision and stay together.

Space in queer films is very important the public space and private space need to be carefully designed and Heather Loeffler, the set decorator, helped by Judy Becker, the production designer and Jesse Rosenthal the art director, creates various public and private spaces for the characters to perform. Becker explains that she used a limited and muted colour palette to set the tone and mood of the film. "It was meant to reflect the particular era of 1952, which was more like the 1940s," she explains. "Society was still set in the mind-set of World War II and that period" (Stamp). Red was Becker's favourite palette, used lavishing in the film. Carol's lipstick, nail polish, the red cap used by the store employees, the red toys that filled the store. She altered colour palettes to reflect the changes occurring in the characters. "In Therese's apartment, we started with palely tinted whites with a lot of brown in them. When she's trying to pull herself together and move on with her life, she paints the apartment a blue-green, which is a color more associated with the later 1950s and is symbolic and emblematic of moving forward in life and in time" (Stamp).

Lighting in public spaces has been carefully modulated to give a convenient cover to the infatuated couples. The motel rooms are crappy, the bars dimly lighted, dimly lit alleys and streets. Close-up and extreme close-up shots are used to bring in the feel of a hidden affair, something that is not to be set in a large frame. The technique of blurring is used in the film. There are shots through doors and window that give a blurred image of the subject. The car windows fogged with rain from where the world is looked upon by the characters show they have a different view from the outside world.

Edward Lachman works the camera to give a lesbian angle to the cinema by giving little importance to male characters in the cinema. The minimum point of view shots from the masculine perspective are notable. Though the film opens with a masculine PoV, it soon shifts to the feminine with reduced importance for male characters. Male reactions on the screen are minimal. Jack in the opening shot talks a lot, but the camera is posed at the eye level of the female characters and their reactions fill the screen. The opening scene with Jack is the only shot in the entire film with a male PoV. Extreme close-up shots of male hand (the waiter), shoulder etc. reduces the masculine presence in the film to mere parts. Out of focus, shots of masculine characters and close-ups show how irrelevant they are in the lesbian world. Dialogue scenes favour female characters and male facial reactions to the responses

are not shown. Camera has been effectively used in the cinema to project the feminine world reducing masculine characters to the level of mere motionless properties.

The careful way Todd Haynes has made Carol is visible in the deep attention he gives to all areas that make a film a visual and auditory experience. Costumes in the film stand out as Academy award winner Sandy Powell carefully designed the costumes for the two characters, one rich and old, the other poor and young. For Carol Aird she gave plain silhouettes, luxe fabrics, and stylish accessories, and for Therese Belivet she gave a discreet dress and pullover in muted tones and a youthful headband. The clothes fashionable during the 50s were lavished on Carol, who had the luxury of having expensive clothes. The dress she has on her while she visits the department store, vintage blonde mink fur coat with coral coloured scarf and hat, makes her standout. Costly jewellery, expensive hats from Bespoke Hat Co., Salvatore Ferragamo shoes, expensive leather gloves all were based on the original patterns of the 50s. Designing clothes for Carol Aird, a person who went against norms, was challenging for Powell. She talks about the scene in which Carol Aird has to be Therese for lunch and an evening party with Harge, her husband "Carol has the jacket on when she's with Therese—so it looks like a jacket and skirt suit. When the jacket comes off, she's got the dress with the slightly low-cut back, so when she's dancing it looks more evening-like, even though it isn't a gown, which is why Harge's mother is disapproving of her. . . Wearing a cocktail-length dress to such a formal party is her little act of rebellion" (Miller).

*Carol* breaks conventional film viewing experiences designed around heterosexual narratives. The squeezed shoulder scene, brushed hand, eyes locked with love scenes in the film may not get acceptance from a heterosexual audience or the full implication of these signs of love may go unnoticed and will be labelled just as friendship. But when Carol props over Therese, who lies spread before her on the bed, and removes her clothes and says "I never looked like that," the heterosexual audience may find it unacceptable. Cinema was structured to be heterosexual and any homosexual perspective would be unacceptable. Todd Haynes said in an interview about breaking conventional societal boundaries. "Heterosexuality is part of the structure of a society that has its rules in place about what's normal and not normal. Narrative structure comes out of that society and is adhered to in dominant film practice over and over. These rules can be broken and looked at from different perspectives; you might call that a gay approach to filmmaking" (Leyda 32).

Todd Haynes has made a bold attempt in presenting the love affairs of two women set in the post-war America. He properly understands social norms and believes that heterosexuality is an "imposed structure that goes along with the patriarchal, dominant structure that constrains and defines society" (Leyda 32). Cinema, according to him, functions under the social norms and to "support basic ideological positions and structures in society" (Leyda 32). Thus closure and romance in films are structured and for Haynes "the narrative is structured, the way that films are machines that either reiterate or reciprocate society—or not (Leyda 32)." Ignoring these readymade models Haynes goes ahead and plans an ending in which his lesbian lovers unite and by making such a move he subverts cinematic conventions. He asserts that making

homosexual films is not just a deconstructive operation but also an opportunity for restructuring systems of meanings.

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# Dalit Literature and the Indian Historic Consciousness

**Manoj S.**

**Abstract**

Dalit literature is a significant part of the evolution of Indian literature. Indian literary history has long been dominated by upper-caste authors and themes, reflecting the cultural and social hegemony of the upper castes. In the early twentieth century, Dalit writers began to emerge writing about their experiences and struggles against caste-based discrimination. Dalit literature, therefore, represents a break from the dominant literary tradition and is a powerful expression of Dalit consciousness. It seeks to challenge the norms and values of mainstream society, and give voice to the struggles and aspirations of Dalit people. The emergence of Dalit literature has also had a profound impact on Indian literary history, as it has opened up new possibilities for literary expression and widened the scope of Indian literature. Dalit literature has been recognized as a distinct genre of literature, with its own unique themes, motifs, and stylistic features. It provides a platform for the downtrodden to express their experiences, struggles, and aspirations. It challenges the dominant caste-based stereotypes that have characterized Indian literature for centuries and questions the assumptions and biases of the upper caste writers and introduces new perspectives on social reality. Traditionally established Indian writings on history and literature appear to give an incomplete and distorted picture of the country when read along with Dalit autobiographies which unravel hidden areas of India's social history and subaltern consciousness.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, Dalit consciousness, Indian literary history, oppression, discrimination, patriarchy, hegemony.

Dalit literature has already established itself as a vibrant part of India's national literature. Post-independence Dalit literature started emerging in the 1960's as the expression of resurgent Dalit spirit first in Marathi, then in Hindi, Gujarathi and Punjabi, inspired by the liberating

philosophy and teachings of Jyotiba Phule and Dr B.R. Ambedkar. In Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam, Dalit writing started developing almost independent of the influence of Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar, although in a later stage Ambedkar came to be acknowledged as a potential source of inspiration and guidance. Dalit consciousness and Indian literary history are intimately connected, as the emergence of Dalit literature is a significant part of the evolution of Indian literature. The awakening of the marginalized communities in India, who were historically subjected to discrimination based on their caste, which has been a deeply entrenched social hierarchy in the country, marks the advent of Dalit literature. Indian literary history has long been dominated by upper-caste authors and themes, reflecting the cultural and social hegemony of the privileged castes. However, in the early twentieth century, Dalit writers began to emerge, writing about their experiences and struggles against caste-based discrimination.

Dalit literature, therefore, represents a break from the dominant literary tradition and is a powerful expression of Dalit consciousness. It seeks to challenge the norms and values of mainstream society, and gives voice to the struggles and aspirations of Dalit people. The emergence of Dalit literature has also had a profound impact on Indian literary history, as it has opened up new possibilities for literary expression and widened the scope of Indian literature. Dalit literature has been recognized as a distinct genre of literature, with its own unique themes, motifs, and stylistic features. It provides a platform for the downtrodden to express their experiences, struggles, and aspirations. It challenges the dominant caste-based stereotypes that have characterized Indian literature for centuries and questions the assumptions and biases of the upper caste writers and introduces new perspectives on social reality. Dalit literature has also played an important role in promoting the use of vernacular languages in literature. It has encouraged the use of regional languages and dialects, which were previously considered inferior to the dominant languages such as Hindi, Sanskrit and English. It has fostered new literary forms and styles, such as autobiographical writing, testimonial literature, and political poetry and has also experimented with different narrative techniques and genres, challenging the boundaries of traditional literary forms. Another salient feature of Dalit literature is that it addresses issues of social justice and human rights, highlighting the injustices and inequalities that continue to exist in Indian society and serves as a powerful tool for social transformation and political activism. Omprakash Valmiki has confessed that, "the ugly truth of caste hierarchy and caste system and the ironies and cruelties hidden beneath them come out in their unconcealed nakedness and bitterness" in stories that "encounter and comment upon social relations (Valmiki 14).

It is as a literature of social protest and the expression of a hurt psyche that Dalit writing made its impact – an impact which was at first regional and sporadic. But as this writing began to present the insiders' picture of the misery and deprivation and the gruesome suffering of the Dalits in a stratified, persistently caste-centered society, it caught the imagination of a wider reading community. The challenging question which it raised was that of a harrowing contradiction between our professed democratic ideals and the actual condition of virtual

apartheid, bondage, and degradation in which they lived. Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, Prem Gorkhi's *Gair Hazir Admi* presented with the narrative form of the autobiography the down-to-earth experiences and struggles of the lowest stratum of Hindu society which continued to be crushed by the privileged and property-owning upper cates. Nehru's *Discovery of India* and Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* appear to give an incomplete and distorted picture of India when read along with Dalit autobiographies which unravel a hidden area of India's social history. Therefore, particularly in the global literary and intellectual context influenced by postmodernist theorists such as Lyotard and Foucault who have made a clear case for listening to the voice of the marginalized and suppressed, Dalit literature should be regarded as a category of writing having its own distinctive identity and rationale (S. Sreenivasan 43).

Dalit fiction offers a more extensive picture of the stark and crushing reality of Dalit life still enslaved by the hegemonic power of the upper castes, which is a major theme of Dalit literature. In Dalit fiction, the hegemonic power of the upper castes is often depicted through the portrayal of social and economic disparities, discrimination, and violence faced by Dalits. The upper castes are shown as having significant social, economic, and political power, which they use to maintain their dominance over Dalits. This power is not only reflected in their control of resources but also in their control of the cultural and social spaces that define the norms and values of society. In *Annihilation of* Caste by B.R. Ambedkar, the author argues that the caste system is maintained through the hegemonic power of the upper castes, who use their social, economic, and political power to keep the Dalits in a position of subordination. Ambedkar argues that the only way to break the hegemony of the privileged classes is to abolish the caste system altogether. In the novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, the protagonist Bakha, an untouchable, experiences discrimination and violence at the hands of the upper castes, who hold all the power in his village. The novel highlights the brutal reality of the caste system and the ways in which the oppressors use their power to maintain their dominance. The hegemonic power of the upper castes is presented in Dalit fiction as a deeply entrenched and oppressive force that operates at all levels of society. Through their writing, Dalit authors seek to expose the injustices of the caste system and challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuate the hegemony of the upper castes.

The novels of Bama, P. Sivakami (Tamil), Uttam Kamble (Marathi), Bhagwant Rasulpuri (Punjabi), Kolakaluri Enoch (Telugu), Sharankumar Limbale (Marathi), Narayan (Malayalam), and Mohan Parmar (Gujarati) portray both the individual sufferings of the untouchables and the hurt and scars in their repressed collective psyche. In the absence of Dalit historiography, their novels provide the authentic documents of a Dalit history of the immediate past which in fact represents a long historic continuum. The lack of documented history of the experiences and contributions of Dalits has led to a significant gap in our understanding of the Dalit community's struggles and achievements. Dalit fiction has emerged as a means to fill this gap and provide a voice for the Dalit community. Dalit fiction often draws on personal experiences, oral traditions, and community histories to create a narrative that reflects the lived experiences

of the Dalit community. These narratives often provide insight into the daily struggles faced by Dalits and the impact of caste-based discrimination on their lives. Dalit fiction thus creates a counter-narrative to the dominant historical accounts that have often excluded or marginalized the experiences of the Dalit community. By providing an alternative perspective, Dalit fiction challenges the historical erasure of the Dalit community's contributions and experience. The novel *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki provides a first-hand account of the author's experiences as a Dalit in rural India and provides powerful insights into the caste-based discrimination and oppression experienced by the Dalit community, which is often absent in mainstream historical accounts. Similarly, the poetry of Dalit writers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Arun Kamble, and Meena Kandasamy gives voice to the lived experiences of Dalits, challenging the dominant narratives of Indian society and creating a new understanding of Dalit history and culture. Dalit fiction plays a crucial role in making up for the absence of Dalit historiography and provides a voice for the Dalit community, challenges dominant narratives, and creates a new understanding of Dalit history and culture.

The achievement of Dalit short story is perhaps more impressive than that of fiction. It is more various, more experimental and technically more refined that that of fiction. The variety in the theme, tone, narrative method and symbolism of the short stories stands comparison with the best stories in mainstream Indian literature. Vinodini (Telugu) adopts a poetic and lyrical style in her story "Black Ink" which exposes with dramatic power, how irretrievably even a small girl of the high caste has been trained to hate the Dalits. Praveen Gandhi (Gujarati) uses an obliquely ironic narrative mode in the story "Born Dead" which explores the psychology of those Dalits who have newly achieved wealth and position. Adhavan Deetchanya (Tamil) breaks new ground in fictional representation in his story "The Title of the Story Could be at the End" by interweaving elements of fantasy and burlesque in a comic and ironic spirit. The Malayalam short story "Take back the Rosary" by T.K.C. Vaduthala is a symbolic representation of the ill-treatment meted out to the Dalit Christian converts by the well-to-do orthodox Christians in Kerala. The Dalit short story expresses with great artistry the terrible experience of living in a caste-bound repressive society as well as epiphanic moments of identity crisis perceived by the creative mind.

In its expression of protest and resentment, in its craving for freedom and justice, in its attempt at self-definition Dalit poetry, at large, makes use of symbols retrieved from history and Indian myths and legends reinterpreted from the point of view of the victims of an unjust social order. These symbols are often reinterpreted from the point of view of the victims, stressing the ways in which traditional stories and histories have been used to justify and perpetuate caste-based discrimination. For an instance, Dalit poets often uses the figure of Ravana, the demon king from the Hindu epic *The Ramayana*, as a symbol of resistance against oppressive Brahminical caste structures. Ravana is traditionally depicted as a villainous figure who kidnaps Sita, and is eventually defeated by Rama. However, Dalit poets may reinterpret Ravana as a symbol of Dalit resistance and rebellion, reiterating ways in which his actions were motivated by a desire to challenge Brahminical oppression. Dalit poets also use

historical events, such as the Bhakti movement for the life of the social reformer Jyotiro Phule, as symbols of Dalit resistance against caste-based oppression. By reinterpreting these symbols from their point of view, Dalit poets are able to challenge dominant narratives and ideologies and focus on the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities. It allows Dalit poets to assert their own agency and voice in the face of historical and cultural erasure, while also foregrounding the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality.

One recurrent motif of this poetry is its questioning, almost subversive attitude towards Hindu myths. Ekalavya, Dronacharya, Karna, Shambuka, Ahalya, Bali and other mythical figures are transformed into powerful symbols to express the deceitfulness, discrimination, cruelty and injustice of the dominant, elusive upper caste. Ahalya is treated as a symbol of high caste male cruelty; Bali symbolizes the unjustly confined hero craving for freedom and Dronacharya is represented as the deceitful guru. Ekalavya who gifts his thumb to Dronacharya and is thus deprived of his strength is the central mythical symbol with which the Dalit mind tends to identify itself. Malkhan Singh's Hindi poem, "Listen, O Brahmin", Dyanand Batohi's "Hear these poems, Dronacharya" (Hindi), Sivasagar's "Current History" (Telugu) and Vaddebogina Sreenivas's "Another Tajmahal" envision a modern Ekalavya who "is heating in fire/his old rusty arrows" to have his revenge on a system which has enslaved and suppressed him by fraud.

In his celebrated poem "Steel Nibs are Sprouting" the Telugu Dalit poet Sikhamoni (the pseudonym of Karri Sanjeev Rao) treats Ekalavya as a potential symbol of hope and positive action and also creates complex associations by bringing together suggestive references to Shambooka and Manu:

> For the lesson you never taught, you demand our thumbs as gifts
> From the stubs of those thumbs there now sprout nibs of steel
> to write history anew
> Those who poured molten lead into our ears,
> Will need ladders to climb and pluck
> the hair from our lobes
>
> …
>
> The sword that severed
> Shambuka's head could remain
> Sharp and safe for centuries.
> It has just changed hands
> and no longer recognizes you.
> No Manu to save you now!

Sikhamani's poem leads us to the question of the methodology and aesthetics to be applied for understanding and interpreting Dalit poetry and Dalit literature in general. The Western model of formalism, deconstruction or any form of structuralism or stylistics or the traditional Indian theory of *rasa* or *dhvani* do not offer an adequate theory to evaluate Dalit

writing. Sharankumar Limbale has insistently emphasized "a felt need for a separate Dalit aesthetics" ("Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature" 116). In the article "Literature of Marginality" by J.M. Waghmare published in the book *Literature of Marginality: Dalit Literature and African-American Literature*, the author talks about a distinctive Dalit idiom and aesthetics:

> They are celebrating their heritage in their own idiom. They have their own aesthetics in rustic and rudimentary forms. They are harnessing and developing their own aesthetics … They can reconstruct their image and identity on it by way of new interpretations … The Indian Dalits are trying to develop their own aesthetics mirroring their perceptions of life and the world around. (22)

In recent decades, feminist voices within the Dalit literary movement have emerged to critique not only caste-based discrimination but also patriarchal oppression within Dalit communities. Dalit feminist poetry often explores the intersection of caste and gender, highlighting the ways in which women in Dalit communities face multiple forms of oppression. These poems may address issues such as domestic violence, sexual abuse and the denial of educational and economic opportunities for women. Dalit feminist poets also challenge traditional gender role and advocate for women's autonomy and agency. At the same time, Dalit feminist poetry also emphasizes the resilience and strength of Dalit women in the face of oppression. Many of these poems celebrate the contributions of Dalit women to their communities and highlight the importance of solidarity among Dalit women in the fight for justice. Dalit feminist poetry is an important expression of the complex experiences and perspectives of Dalit women, both within and beyond their communities. It is a powerful tool for challenging dominant narratives and amplifying marginalized voices, while also celebrating the richness and diversity of Dalit literary imagination.

The Dalits have the longest history of victimization and enslavement in the world and hence in formulating Dalit aesthetics the historical consciousness should be accorded prime importance. In a scholarly article "Flowering of the Backyard" K. Satchidanandan speaks about three thousand years of Dalit oppression in a hierarchical caste society. But Bipan Cahandra, the author of *India After Independence 1947-2000* says that the caste originated in India about 2500 years ago and that "the most obnoxious part of the caste system was that it designated certain groups as untouchables and outcastes, and then used this to deny them access to ownership of land, entry into temples, access to common resources such as water from village tank or well." (445)

The caste system was used to keep the untouchables perpetually enslaved and oppressed under the pretext that their subalternity and suffering were divinely ordained. An inhuman institution like the caste system does not exist anywhere in the world and that is why the intellectual Robert W. Stern says that "of all Indian social institutions, caste is the most exotic to Westerners, the furthest removed from our experience." (*Changing India* 52).

The ending of slavery in America (1864) or the French Revolution of 1789 did not bring any hope of even partial liberation for the untouchables of India because they had been forcefully denied all access to knowledge, freedom and power. Even the American slaves had what they called "hush harbour" which means a place to gather and to discuss their views surreptitiously. These historical facts prove the continued virtual enslavement of the untouchables under a rigid and inhuman caste system. It continued even in the period of freedom struggle. In *The New Cambridge History of India* Paul R. Brass observes that the Indian Nationalist movement was "in the hand of primarily men from the elite Hindu castes, especially Brahmins in most regions, Kayasthas in North India, Banias in many regions and other regional high caste groups in other parts of the country." (Vol. iv, I., 206) Gandhiji described himself as a "varnashramadharma" Hindu.

The hurt and the scar and the resentment and the scorching pain in the Dalit psyche which expresses itself in literary art is informed by this historic consciousness of deprivation and the absolute denial of human rights. It is in one sense a consciousness of being excluded from history which is always written by, but nor made by the dominant class. The Dalits have nevertheless a rich heritage of folklores, fables, songs, legends, expressing pristine thoughts and perceptions, sense of communal living and an abiding mystical bond with nature and the cosmos. As K. Satchidanandan has splendidly stated that the Dalits and the tribals "were the first poets, the first philosophers, the first cosmologists, the first myth makers and the first artists and scientists" (*Beyond Borders* 9-10). This awareness of the original greatness of the Dalits forms part of their historical consciousness which should be renewed and energized for a focussed and meaningful study of Dalit literature.

In the twenty first century Dalit literature in India has continued to flourish and evolve. It has gained greater recognition and visibility in recent times, with many Dalit writers receiving prestigious awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnanpit Award and Crossword Book Award. This has helped to bring wider attention to the genre and its writers. During the contemporary period, the internet and social media have provided new platforms for Dalit writers to reach a wider audience, especially for those writing in regional languages. Online literary magazines and blogs, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and ebook publishing have all played a role in expanding the reach of Dalit literature. It has also gained recognition on the international stage, with translations into English and other major languages. This has helped to bring wider attention to the genre and its writers outside India, especially with new and young writers bringing fresh perspectives and styles to the genre. They have expanded the range of themes and issues addressed in Dalit literature, including gender, sexuality, and environmental concerns. Despite this progress, Dalit literature still faces many challenges, including a lack of support and recognition from mainstream literary institutions and the continued prevalence of caste-based discrimination in the society. Dalit writers also face financial and social barriers that limit their access to publishing opportunities and wider audiences. Dalit literature in the twentyfirst century continues to evolve and grow, with greater recognition and visibility, expanding reach, international recognition, new voices

and emerging styles, but at the same time facing challenges due to caste-based discrimination and other barriers.

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# Silences and Subliminal Protests: Dalit Women in the Folklore of Kerala

**Anne Placid & Binu K.D.**

**Abstract**

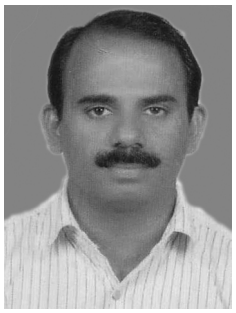
The oral traditions of Dalits are their oral histories that bear witness to their experiences of the caste oppression and the earliest inklings of resistance against caste system. Though the caste centre made concerted efforts to keep Dalits away from the world of letters, not to register their life and experiences in black and white, not to emphasize their existence, not to place them in the annals of history, the caste subalterns did register their presence through the realm of orality. As for the Dalit women, oral expressions were the means of breaking the silence imposed upon them by caste patriarchy. The article, by analysing select oral songs of Dalit women in Kerala, attempts to demonstrate how the gendered caste subalterns articulated their subjugated selves to register their "silent protests" against caste mores through the medium of orality. It is argued that the oral expressions of the gendered caste subalterns interrogate and subvert the position held by postcolonial critics like Spivak who affirms that the Subaltern cannot speak.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Oral songs, Silence, Gendered caste subaltern, Erasure, Trauma Literature, Testimonies.

## Introduction

The cultural oppression of the caste subalterns was far more dehumanizing than their social and economic deprivations. Dalits, the erstwhile untouchables, being the outcastes within the Hindu caste hierarchy, have been essentialized to silence by excluding them from knowledge and linguistic expressions and confining them to the realm of orality. Keeping Dalits and lower castes in the domain of orality was concomitant with the upper-caste agenda of denying them the power of agency and subject position. The non- subjectivity and silence of the subaltern

in history are a prevalent notion which is upheld by theoreticians like Spivak, articulated through her polemic essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (Spivak 1985). Dalit resistance and agency manifest in Dalit agitations and historical movements of the present and past were present in their nascent form in the silences and whispers of Dalit orality.



**Binu K.D.**

The institution of caste and its practices and the Hindu social order that normalised them were critiqued first by a long list of known and unknown poets of the Bhakti movement in different parts of India. This was later strengthened into action by lower caste social reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Periyar E V Ramasamy, and Mahatma Ayyankali, to name only a few, and culminated in the movement of Dr B R Ambedkar for the democratic civil rights of Dalits. However, the spirit of resistance to caste that inspired the lower caste social reform movements in the 19th century and the Ambedkarite movement in the 20th century was already manifest in its infant state in the oral forms of the Dalits.

As for Dalits, oral expressions were the means of breaking the silence imposed upon them by the caste system. The oral expressions of Dalits interrogate and subvert the position held by critics like Spivak regarding the silence of the subaltern. Though women have been historically essentialized into silence, Dalit women have never been silent in history. The paper examines how silence was imposed on Dalit women by the 'caste centre' and how they articulated their silent selves through the medium of oral songs. It also examines how the Dalit resistance and agency manifest in Dalit movements were present in their nascent form in whispers and silences of Dalit orality.

**Silence of the subaltern**

To speak, one requires the faculty of language which is a great signifier. Language sometimes closes, sometimes opens and releases, sometimes shouts, and sometimes silences. Language has an intimate relationship with the identity of a community just as language is a marker of an individual's identity. The use of language determines the projection of reality around and the pictures, visuals, vision, and images that one needs require the use of language accordingly. In other words, how one uses language to register and re-register the reality around is intimately related to the user's aim in interpreting that reality. When it comes to the caste subaltern, the user is insignificant due to his or her caste position and the interpreter shares no sympathy with the former. So, the language and the articulation inherent in the language of the subaltern are relegated to the position of silence or non-articulation which amounts to denying the subaltern his or her due voice and agency.

Another reason for the silence of the subaltern is the secondary status accorded to oral expressions with primacy ascribed to the written word. Though all languages maintain traces that attest to their origin from orality, the mainstream-endorsed epistemological affiliations and notions of reception push the oral traditions to the backyard. The prevalent logical and linguistic structures of the written tradition relegate the verbal and cognitive patterns in the oral

tradition to mundane and insubstantial. Derrida's stance in *Of Grammatology* is a pointer. He argues that orality should not be valued more than the written word (Derrida 43). This marginalization is more accentuated in the context of the oral expressions of Dalits who are at the receiving end of discrimination prevalent in the economic, cultural, and social spheres. Dalits' oral expressions, since they rest in the realm of orality, are considered to be silent and static by the mainstream.

Dalits, being the outcasts within the Hindu caste hierarchy, have been essentialized to silence for millennia by the connivance of the 'caste centre' which align with the socio, religious and political establishments. Hence, Poikayil Appachan, a pioneering Malayalam Dalit poet, lamented that there was no one to write the history of his race,

> "About my race I see no alphabet
>
> …….
>
> Oh, that there was no one In the ancient world
>
> To write the story of my race (Dasan 5)

Poikayil Appachan, in the above song, was referring to the silence of the caste subaltern in the annals of mainstream history. The silence in the elite historiography concerning the caste subalterns ensues from their lack of recorded history as well as the erasures their history was subjected to. The canonical texts make the caste subalterns invisible by effacing their very presence. They keep mum about the imposition of silence on the caste subaltern by the institution of caste.

Before analyzing a set of select oral songs of Dalit women in Kerala to understand how silence was imposed upon them by caste hegemony and how they disrupted that silence, it is necessary to examine the mechanism and operation of silence at different levels of Dalits' social and cultural life.

**Silence due to low caste status**

The caste system as a system of social stratification with 'an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt' (Das 25) has been controlling and regulating the lives of Dalits on the basis of arbitrary laws, keeping them to a marginalized position in the Hindu caste hierarchy. On account of their out-caste-ness Dalits had to suffer the most stringent restrictions and deprivations. Deprived of their dignity and self-esteem for centuries, Dalits were reduced to mere slaves of the dominant caste(s). Denied of their voice and agency, Dalits remained on the fringes of Hindu social order as its 'other'. As the 'other', Dalits were expected to render extreme silence and obedience to the caste master.

**Silence due to the oral status of Dalit utterances**

In many ways, the cultural oppression of Dalits was far more dehumanizing than their social untouchability and economic deprivation. On account of their out-caste- ness, Dalits were

kept away from the sanctum sanctorum of letters. Thus, all their expressions rest in the realm of orality. Keeping Dalits and lower castes in the domain of orality was concomitant with the upper caste agenda of denying them the power of agency and subject position. Since their expressions rest in the realm of orality, being ousted from writing and recording, it moves further towards silence and invisibility, viewed from the point of mainstream yardsticks.

**Silences within Dalit Orature**

The aspect of cultural erasure of the caste subaltern led to the absence or silence of the caste subaltern which gets overridden by the oral expressions. But the canonical rules which determine the value of cultural and literary expressions, rule out those belonging to Dalits oral domain. The caste codes that are inherent within all expressions on the mainstream devalue the same belonging to the Dalit world. But in fact, Dalits were not silent, they were indeed silent only to the 'caste centre'. They were articulate among themselves. Many a time the silences, pauses, and gaps in the oral expressions were more powerful than the articulations themselves. Some of the songs contain questions that are left unanswered. They are pregnant silences as the implications of the same are deep and vast. The subaltern voices of dissent, reactions, and jibes at the 'caste master' are assimilated in the oral songs which reveal their spirit of endurance, resilience, sense of humor, and perceptiveness. It is the collective memory of the caste subaltern that gets externalized in the songs- the collective memory that proclaims itself over time by negotiating through diversions, spaces, and associations.

**Breaking of the Silence**

The Dalit oral forms stand distinct from the literary forms of high castes since the performer and creator are artistically distanced from the creation in the latter, while no such separation exists in the former. Rooted in the terrain of Dalit life, they include agricultural songs, festival songs, marriage songs, songs for entertainment, narrative songs that praise the heroes or heroines, and *thottam*[1] songs that pertain to the deification of Goddess Kali as well as Dalit heroes and heroines. These songs reveal Dalits' silent subordination to the caste system as well as their attempt to break that silence by voicing their resistance against it. Since the feudal times, any direct dissent was not possible as the same would be immediately silenced with punishments, Dalits expressed their discontents indirectly through the oral medium. The agency of resistance was reposited either on a collective self, not individually defined, as seen in most of the oral songs, or on a deified lower caste hero or heroine as seen in *Theyyam*[2] performance.

**Dissenting Voices of Dalit Women**

In this study, the focus is on the select oral songs of Dalit women. It is a fact that women have been historically essentialized into silence. But unlike upper caste women, Dalit women have never been silent in history. It is also curious to note that the voices of Dalit women have remained silent even when the silence of upper caste women finds vent and voice in literary and cultural representations. The silence negotiates a space for the upper caste women, though it is yet to be heard, while the unheard voices of the Dalit women ditch them into

permanent silence.

The songs of Dalit women are vocal about their excruciating life experiences and their silent subjugation to caste and patriarchy in feudal times. "*Krishippattu"*[3]*,* for example, though primarily considered as songs for relieving the tedium of work in the fields, contains Dalit women's testimonies of sexual exploitations by upper caste landlords. The song goes on as mere stating of facts as found in the fields but the tone and choice of words on close reading reveal the sarcasm aimed at the upper caste landlord. The song "*Omanathampuran" (Dear Landlord!)* for instance, pokes fun at the landlord who looks at the age of the female labourers while dispensing the days' wages which reveals his lasciviousness. While the old women labourers get a meagre amount, the wages given to middle aged women are a bit more. A better wage awaits the beautiful young women!

The song titled "*Enne Nokkaruthe"* ("Please Don't Gaze at Me") demonstrates the vulnerability of Dalit women in the workplace. The song is cast in the form of earnest entreaties at the caste lord by a beautiful *Pulaya*[4] girl. The young *Pulayi*[5] who is busily engaged in weeding the field is obscenely stared at by the son of the landlord. The song expresses her frustration on being looked at erotically by the upper caste male. She asks him humbly not to look at her. In other words, she is telling him not to spoil her life. In feudal times, it was the silent prayer in the mind of every Dalit female that the lustful eyes of the upper castes may not fall upon her body. In those days it was the privilege of the upper caste male to enjoy the body of the Dalit female. It is the picture of the helpless Dalit woman at the sexual advances of the upper caste male that we find in the following song:

> I have been given a vast field Full of weeds and screw-pine Don't stare at me
>
> Look straight
>
> The young son of my landlord If I don't finish weeding today I won't get my wages
>
> If you show me Anantapuram forest I shall go and hide there (Chandran 14)

In the last two lines, the frustration of the Dalit female reaches a breaking point. She prefers fleeing from the field to a forest to hide there to escape his sexual gaze.

*"Aiyilandi Kunnalari"* ("*Kunnalari of Aiyilandi"),* is yet another *Krishipattu* that sheds light on the vulnerability of the Dalit female. The *Thampuran*[6] (Landlord) tries to seduce *Kunnalari* who is working in the fields along with her companions. He asks her to come with him to his house. The irony and satire in the words of the Dalit women, though would have been spoken only among themselves, vividly conveys the Dalit women's understanding of the double standards of caste mores:

> The *Thampuran* who bathes on touching the male
>
> The *Thampuran* who doesn't bathe on touching the female.

(Sajitha 19, Translated by Anne Placid)

The song holds up to ridicule the upper caste's hypocrisy in the practice of untouchability. While the caste Hindus considered all Dalit bodies as 'untouchable' on account of their sense of purity and pollution, those of beautiful Dalit women, as is evident from the song, were exempted from the rule. The caste system in Kerala restricted the mobility of Dalit bodies by keeping them at measured distances depending on the gradation of castes and their polluting degrees based on caste laws. But the gendered caste subaltern gained immunity on account of the sexual potential of her body. However, this privilege extended to the gendered subaltern was a cover for brutalizing her body.

The song "*Ippol Aithamilla*" ("No Untouchability Now!") also foregrounds a similar theme. The sarcastic tone of the song highlights upper castes' grotesque sense of purity and cleanliness:

Thampuran stealthily came at night Came out also the lovely dame

In the daylight he never comes Defiling it is for him then!

(Chandran 93, Translated by Anne Placid).

The Dalit woman's body, a polluting thing in the day is found intimate at night. Lechery of the high castes and sexual exploitation of the Dalit women are the themes of the song "*Avalum Vannu*" ("She also Came") also.

Although Dalit women appear silent in the above songs, her silence never meant consent. Though she could not voice her protest directly, as no sign of resistance and disobedience from the Dalits would be brooked by the 'caste centre', the Dalit woman did not mutely submit to the sexual advances of the caste lords. By articulating her protest through her songs, the Dalit woman registered her reaction to caste patriarchy that considered her only as a sexual object. Contrary to the portrayal of Dalit women prevalent in mainstream writings as silent victims and object of pity, the above songs foreground the resistance of the Dalit females.

The song *"Kaalipulayi*" (*Pulaya* girl *Kali*) exposes the cunningness and lewd designs of the landlord and it voices a warning to the young Dalit women. As the story goes, the landlord who has cast his eyes on the good-looking young woman Neelipulayi finds her husband Pulayan a hindrance. Neelipulayi, falling into the trap of the honeyed words and hollow promises of the landlord kills her husband by serving him rice mixed with poison. Only later she realizes her folly and her regret as well as the heartlessness of the landlord are articulated in the song.

The seed-filled granary is not there for me *Kaali*

The dish and goblet is not there for me *Kaali*

The coconut groves are not there for me *Kaali* ……

You too search for your own ways (Sajitha 19, Translated by Anne Placid).

The song contains a fluidity regarding the addresser and addressee. The second person 'you' in the last line, taken to the larger plane, represents every Dalit woman as the singer cautions the beautiful Dalit women to be aware of the manoeuvrings of caste patriarchy. The wealthy high caste men, sexually exploit the Dalit women by giving false promises and abandoning them. Subsequently, they have to endure all the ignominy silently. Any attempt to voice their protest would endanger their lives as the upper castes could go to any extent to protect their caste honour. However, as is evident from the above song, Dalit women confided with their fellow women folk to caution them and thus broke the rule of silence.

**Conclusion**

Though a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of caste dynamics is absent in the oral songs of Dalit women, a cognizance of the same in the embryonic form is evident in them. As is evident from the above analysis, the gendered caste subalterns did not mutely submit to the economic and sexual exploitation of the upper castes. By articulating their protests through their songs, they register their reaction to the caste patriarchy that considered Dalit women only as sexual objects. Thus, the songs also foreground the resistance of the Dalit female. Dalit women's songs were a means of giving vent to their frustrations. Dalit women also warned their fellow women through their testimonies. Hence, Dalit folk songs intersect the genres of trauma literature and testimonial writings.

As already stated, Dalit women's songs mock at the caste purity of the upper castes. However, they may not have been sung within the earshot of the upper castes. This is to be thought so considering the predominance of caste hegemony and prevalence of caste slavery in Kerala during the time of the feudal *Zamindari* system of the Middle Ages and Early Modern Era when the caste laws were the most stringent in Kerala society. It is to be inferred, as the above songs of Dalit women reveal, the caste subaltern particularly the gendered caste subaltern did not silently succumb to the yoke of caste slavery but gave vent to their discontents with the prevailing socio-economic systems, at least among themselves.

The oral songs of Dalit women were an integral part of their community life, work, ,and cultural living which provided them a way to reconcile with the difficulties they faced on account of caste and patriarchy. They were also psychological means for them to maintain their sanity in times of most depressing experiences. Therefore, the oral songs are to be treated as the earliest records of Dalit oral history that provide us with the subaltern point of view and narrative about caste system and its oppressive operations upon Dalits. The Dalit oral expressions present in the forms of oral songs, stories, proverbs, riddles, religious rituals, and performances all are inextricably interlinked with the very life and existence of the creator and performer of these forms. The unlettered Dalit is like a library itself and so are his or her oral expressions. They throw light on the presence of a new past of the Dalits' history, social life, economic relations, work culture, kinship patterns, and gender relations which have gone unrecorded in mainstream

history. To push them to silence and erasure is to silence them eternally and to lead to the effacement of Dalits' historic imprints. Therein lies the significance of revisiting and reinterpreting Dalits' oral literatures.

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# Autism Memoirs: Masked Narratives of Normalization

**Anju Sosan George**

**Abstract**

Autism narratives are a journey towards individuation, a discovery of the self. However, in autism narratives, the person on the spectrum consciously reconstitutes his/her identity - from accepting negative connotations of being an 'autistic' to understanding the medical condition of autism as one of the many identities of that person. Identity is here treated as a complex idea, moving away from the general tendency to define analytical categories in singular terms. This paper attempts to examine the diverse features of autism memoirs, how many of those in the spectrum contest the culture of euphemism in which disagreeable realities are draped with decorous evasions or periphrases. The memoirs of Temple Grandin (Emergence (1986) and Thinking in Pictures(1995), Tito Mukhopadhyay (How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move (2008), and Donna Williams (Nobody, Nowhere (1992) and Somebody Somewhere (1995)are selected for close reading in this paper. It is argued that the contours of subjectivity drawn through an autism autobiography do not entirely challenge the socio-cultural representations of autism.

Self-formation is, in all cultures, a complicated process marked by owning and disowning specific dichotomies and histories. A reading of the autism memoirs chosen here for study reveals the person on the spectrum as unconsciously absorbing the cultural metaphors, and instead of contending them, implicitly striving for 'normalization'. I argue that this makes an autism memoir a 'masked narrative', an extension of social camouflaging (Mandy 2019). Implied in the paper is a critique of Enlightenment universalism, and of the post-Enlightenment Western self that emerged through a disavowal of all differences.

**Keywords** Autism, Autism memoir, Normalization, Signification, Social Camouflaging

Autism narratives are a journey towards individuation, a discovery of the self. This is largely true of all life narratives. However, in autism narratives, the person on the spectrum consciously reconstitutes his/her identity - from accepting negative connotations of being an 'autistic' to understanding the medical condition of autism as one of the many identities of that person. Identity is here treated as a complex idea, moving away from the general tendency to define analytical categories in singular terms.

Traditional criticism betrays enormous asymmetries, preventing conceptual differentiation and temporal sophistication necessary for the empathetic reading of any life-text. This paper attempts to examine the diverse features of autism memoirs, how many of those in the spectrum contest the culture of euphemism in which disagreeable realities are draped with decorous evasions or periphrases. The memoirs of Temple Grandin (Emergence (1986) and Thinking in Pictures(1995), Tito Mukhopadhyay (How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move (2008), and Donna Williams (Nobody, Nowhere (1992) and Somebody Somewhere (1995)are selected for close reading in this paper. It is argued that the contours of subjectivity drawn through an autism autobiography do not entirely challenge the socio-cultural representations of autism.

Self-formation is, in all cultures, a complicated process marked by owning and dis-owning specific dichotomies and histories. A reading of the autism memoirs chosen here for study reveals the person on the spectrum as unconsciously absorbing the cultural metaphors, and instead of contending them, implicitly striving for 'normalization'. I argue that this makes an autism memoir a 'masked narrative', an extension of social camouflaging (Mandy 2019). Implied in the paper is a critique of Enlightenment universalism, and of the post-Enlightenment Western self that emerged through a disavowal of all differences.

The unbounded power of language to create, name and understand a particular experience has been the thrust of recent autobiographical criticism. Under the influence of poststructuralism and feminism, Foucauldian feminists like Nancy Hartsock have argued that autobiography has created a new language and meaning which provide women with ways "of naming and understanding their own experience" ("Foucault on Power" 158). Rereading this as the power of an autobiography to produce the subject, and extending this argument to that of autism memoirs, it is evident that implications abound. Language becomes the means of naming oneself and every disability narrative becomes important as it reveals an "image people have of themselves" (Hyden 50).

The creative process of writing oneself abets self-understanding and the narration becomes therapeutic. Writers of the spectrum as Donna Williams avouch how her memoir helped in bringing "chaotic life experiences on paper in chronological order" (Somebody,3), the narration aiding coherent integration of thought. Predominantly quest narratives (Frank 75), the explicit politics of signification of an autism memoir is to contest stereotypes, beginning with attesting that one could "reason, write or narrate their life stories without neurotypical mediation" (Berube 24).

Ever since Grandin's iconoclastic memoir Emergence (1986) collapsed conventional boundaries of discourse (that were previously endorsed only by medicine or fiction), voices of dissent surrounding its authenticity emerged. A Forward by psychologist Bernard Rimland too did not alleviate apprehension on the credibility of the narrative. The vicariousness associated with autism spurred the understanding that the writers on the spectrum could not be expected to write with insight, sensitivity or authority(Smukler 20-21). It was decreed that Grandin's coalition with journalist Margaret M. Scariano in writing the memoir was the reason for " its coherence, its poignancy, its often "normal tone" (Sacks 253). Arguably in comparison to Emergence, her first memoir, Thinking in Pictures (1995) lacks the comfortable felicity of its prequel and reads more like a detached narration. It is not in the scope of this paper to discuss the diverse arguments regarding the authenticity of autism narratives, but the significant increase in the number of texts reasons the need of the person with autism to be heard as himself.

The narrative of an autism memoir is starkly honest and intensely personal. It also involves an elaborate exposition of the medical condition. The triad of difficulties (impaired social interaction, impaired social imagination, impaired verbal and nonverbal communication) is an example where each writer, specifies individual difficulties that the condition triggers, even while elaborating autism traits in general. For example, two diverse perspectives are explored in Grandin's memoirs. Primarily she records the processing of her mind as being highly visual and says, "I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-colour movies, complete with sound, which runs like VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures" (Thinking 3). Secondarily while in general, the neurotypical thought pattern moves from the general to the specific, for people of the spectrum, thought moves from the specific to generalization to conceptualization.

> For example, my concept of dogs is inextricably linked to every dog I've ever known. It's as if I have a card catalog of dogs I have seen, complete with pictures, which continually grows as I add more examples to my video library… my memories usually appear in my imagination in strict chronological order, and the images I visualize are always specific. (12)

This visual processing of the brain is not synonymous with the visual perspective, for the former is a pattern of brain function and the latter a perspective employed to thought (constructing visual images from information).

The arbitrary nature of language causes intense confusion. A person with autism does not inherently gain the meaning of words but achieves it only as a part of lifelong learning. In "Fractioned Idiom: Metonymy and the Language of Autism"(2008) Kristina Chew supplements this argument and explains that Saussure's notion of the 'arbitrary' nature of the sign, of the relation between the signifier and the signified, heightens the confusion in an autistic mind. Since "the sounds of words all seem attached to a meaning for no particular reason, each example must be learned, and nothing is natural" (Chew 138). This difficulty aggregated by

the lack of the Theory of Mind causes a "fractioned idiom" (Chew 142) in the people in the spectrum, which poses severe language incompatibility. Grandin interprets,

> Communicating with someone-anyone-continued to be a problem. I often sounded abrasive and abrupt. In my head I knew what I wanted to say but the words never matched my thoughts. I know now that not being able to follow the rhythm of another's speech was part of the problem and made me sound harsher than I intended. (Emergence 81)

The lack of Theory of Mind affects the narration in an autism memoir. The reason why Grandin's narrative is not an enjoyable read is because of many reasons.

1) The frequent narratorial gaps/discontinuities in the text
2) The sudden appearance or disappearance of characters
3) Abrupt introduction of a new thought without any background information.
4) Abrupt switching of topics
5) Inability to prioritize
6) Lack of empathetical connect with the reader

hinders the smooth reading of the text. For instance, in Emergence Grandin describes the memory of a car journey when she was a child where her mother had compelled her to wear a hat which she was uncomfortable with, which she throws out of the moving car:

> She [mother] yelled. I covered my ears to shut out the hurting sound. She made a grab for the hat. The car swerved. Suddenly we were jolting into the other lane. I leaned back against the seat and enjoyed the jostling. Jean was in the back seat crying. Even today I remember the bushes planted along the highway. I close my eyes and feel again the warm sun streaming through the window, smell the exhaust fumes and see the red tractor-trailer truck come closer and closer. (7)

The emotional intensity of the first-person narrative wavers. The voice of the narrator, seemingly childlike and often unreliable (Bates 50) focuses equally on the significant and insignificant details. The lack of an emotional connection with the reader could be because of Grandin's failure "to appreciate that her reader does not share the important background that she possesses" (Frith and Happe 85). This lack of an emotional affinity is not done deliberately but appears involuntarily due to her failure to realize her own or her reader's state of mind. As pointed by recent studies in developmental cognitive neuroscience,the differences in neurodevelopment conditions involving the mirror neurons in autism is responsible for delayed social understanding. It is the mirror mechanism system that acts as an inferential system that is activated to help enable our experience of another's action or emotion. In autism, this mirror mechanism is disrupted, leaving the individuals with autism "without this automatic flow of shared felt experiences of self and other behaviours and with, instead, 'disembodied' and declarative social knowledge (based on explicit inferential reasoning) as the primary foundation for social understanding and social learning" (Vivanti and Rogers 2014). Hence

the discontinuity in the narrative, which leads to a lack of a shared affect between the reader and the narrator.

Grandin's sentences are brief and succinct, majority of which follow a subject-verb-object pattern. Her narrative has a consistent, matter-of-fact mode of communication. The beginning of Thinking in Pictures reads:

> I have worked for many major livestock companies. In fact, one-third of the cattle and hogs in the United States are handled in the equipment I have designed. Some of the people I have worked for don't even know that their systems were designed by someone with autism. (54)

Such an objective statement surely does not smack of self-conceit, rather displays unbridled self-esteem. There is also a visible absence of descriptions and adjectives, making it a narrative devoid of the play of emotions. No affect binds the reader and the writer. Hence when Grandin speaks of visual images that she sees within her, she leaves her readers at a loss, due to her inability to recreate the same in her narration. It is to compensate for the lack of imagery in her narration that she uses specific examples to help her readers understand her and consequently makes the reading of the memoir more like a scientific text.

Autism memoirs have one active storyteller. They are not multiple voices synchronized into one narrative, but a unitary voice that is itself split into many. The process of storytelling is not compromised and as readers we learn to trust the chosen voice and the chosen perspective. Tito Rajarshi Makhopadhyay diagnosed as deaf, hyperactive and symptomatic of classical autism, wrote his first book at age six. The same, republished as The Mind Tree: A Miraculous Child Breaks the Silence of Autism (2000) holds within itself two memoirs; The Voice of Silence (written when he was 8 years old) and Beyond the Silence (written when he was 11 years old). In The Mind Tree he speaks to his readers simultaneously both in a first-person and in a third-person narrative. Sentences like "I think about the times when he would change the environment around him, with the help of his imagination" (8) clearly mark the distance between the speaker and the object. One cannot overlook the need of the child speaker to stress on distancing himself from autism. It is equally pertinent to note that the second memoir is completely written in first-person narrative, connoting that the writer might have come to terms with his autism with time.

In his second memoir, How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move (2008), Mukhopadhyay explains how the boundary between imagining and experiencing is a very delicate one (23). This results in an intense awareness of one's body or proprioception; clinically defined as an awareness of various parts of the body in relation to one another and their constitution as an organized whole (Mukhopadhyay 34). Proprioception resonates through his writing making the narrative distinctly stand apart from the neurotypical writing. Sentences as "Mother followed me around with her voice" (10) or when he writes in third person and notes how his body was scattered and how he "saw himself as a hand or a leg" (28) or when he remembers a woman's voice that "tasted like a tamarind pickle" (110) are examples. This confusion of relating to the mind and the body, combined with the feeling of being disconnected from

both, is featured in Mukhopadhyay's writing. Along with proprioception, Mukhopadhyay also employs synaesthesia in his writing. The incident where his mother tried to protect him from the scrutiny of neighbours illustrates the unique assimilation of ideas and words. Mukhopadhyay links colour yellow with people he does not like. Since yellow causes extreme visual stimulation, it is resisted by most people on the autism spectrum.

> Mother had to be careful that no one was around because she did not want those women to smile at her for explaining things to a boy who had not even learned how to talk yet. Their smiles were the colour of jaundice yellow and that colour was so dense, every colour could be choked by its strength. I believed that mother saw what I saw. And I believed that she was careful because she did not want to be choked by jaundice yellow either (10).

An autism memoir is linear in narrative. It is rendered in a chronological pattern beginning with the person's earliest memories. In Mukhopadhyay's memoir too the narrative begins from the period surrounding his birth. He narrates the family's ways of approach to his disability, his mother's attempt at teaching him and his break through facilitated communication in a chronological order. Though studies on the mental concepts of time, the organized perceptions of time and autonoetic consciousness on people of the spectrum are still ongoing, most of the autism memoirs structurally divide the narrative in a chronological framework of time.

A characteristic of the autism memoir is an intense self-absorption, where the narration sags under the imposing personae of the narrator. A definitive overshadowing of oneself over others (even family members who are not discussed) or events (politics, sports, arts, culture or governmental policies are avoided) is visible. The narrator's experiences reflected fiercely and passionately should be seen as the intensity of perspective provided by the condition, instead of deranging it as purposeful oblivion.

Alienation induced by social responses to one's autism is elucidated in the memoirs of Donna Williams Nobody, Nowhere (1992) and Somebody, Somewhere (1995). 1)From not being understood by others because of her external mannerisms (stimming, stammer, and fixations), 2) The continuous physical and mental abuse by her alcoholic mother and abusive relationships, 3) the stratified distancing she felt within herself. Williams defines her autism as:

> Autism had been there before words, so that ninety-nine percent of my verbal repertoire was a stored up collection of literal dictionary definitions…without the barest foundations of self, I was like a subject under hypnosis, totally susceptible to any programming and reprogramming without question or personal identification. I was in a state of total alienation. This, for me, was Autism. (Somebody, Somewhere 2)

These lines help understand how deep the sense of alienation could be for a person on the spectrum. As many on the autism spectrum are echolalic (imitate words) or have intense difficulties in communication, their lack of articulation is often read as their lack of comprehension. Williams' depiction of her mother referring to her in the third person neuter

gender, as 'It', on the assumption that the girl does not grasp the meaning of her words can be seen.

> Tap, tap came a knocking of a tiny hand at the door as it got dark. Not even three feet tall, she stood there drenched as the rain continued to pour down. A hand was on the handle to let her in. 'Leave It out there,' came a voice, referring to the child. 'It went out there. It can fucking stay out there.'…It went and sat under a tree in the company of the cat It had gone out to play with. (Somebody 10)

Pain at the realization of one's difference from others, the feeling of rejection, lack of belonging, fight against normality is a consistent theme in autism memoirs. Williams writes that she lived a life of "nobody, nowhere" (1) and speaks of a fractured identity saying, "It hurts to have a self" (226), often finding life to be a "a patchwork façade" (3). To counter the alienation through the narrative, William's first memoir shifts from Donna, and shuttles between 'Willie' the strong-willed-unafraid-impervious to pain-male persona, and 'Carol' the sympathetic-friendly-woman persona. It is also evident that Williams impersonates these characters to project herself as 'normal' as others around her.

> Like a parrot, the characters Willie and Carol handled the survival issue. I had waited in the shadows unable to identify with the compliance and behaviour I had to exhibit in the absence of its comprehension... The appearance of 'normality meant survival. Unless you eat, breathe, sleep and shit 'normality', you will be treated as less than zero and possibly not even survive at all. (Somebody 16)

In the second memoir, Somebody, Somewhere, the controlling impersonations are held back and Donna is sustained. She says, "I didn't need Willie and Carol anymore. I needed Donna"(7). The latter part of the text explores the rapidly merging boundaries of her autistic world (referred to as "my world") and the larger world (referred to as "the world"). Language becomes a defence mechanism against alienation as it "help[ed] people communicate like equals" (Somebody 98) and writing her memoir helped her to realize that she "couldn't go forward with the old definitions" of her life where she was only a silent sufferer of maladies, and that she would have to build new ones, "my definitions" (9). This would help her to "shatter the myths that had me tied in knots upon knots" (9) and move forward. Ironically, as explored in the latter part of the paper, this always does not seem to be true.

The relevance of an autism memoir is not just the bridging of gap between medical discourses and fictional representation of autism, but also in introducing the reader to an innate knowledge of autism which has helped carers of nonverbal people under the spectrum to understand them better. These narratives are a frequent reminder that what is socially considered as madness or eccentricity has a specific cause and reason. For example, Mark Osteen in his social realist essay "Urine Town", narrates of his failed attempt in prompting his autistic nonverbal son, Cam, to urinate in the toilet instead of the carpet or on the couch (Autism and Representation 217). Osteen after reading William's Nobody, Nowhere relates to her description of a parallel life situation where she says, "the more I covered the carpet,

the more of a 'me' in the world there was... The smell belonged to me and closed out other things" (61). This inner knowledge further helps him in rationalizing Cam's actions. Margaret L. Bauman, the Director of Autism Research Foundation, in her Foreword to Mukhopadhyay's memoir rightly notes, "May you continue to help us all to ask questions and to find answers to autism" (iv).

A reader's identification with the narrator's experience in a memoir advances to the text shedding its subjective nature and becoming the representation of a collective. The activated mirror neurons in the reader who reads the work, initiate resonance circuits which leads to imitative learning and synchronization of group behaviours (Horsdal 25). This generalization entails significant danger in an autism life writing, for each person's experience in the spectrum is different from the other. "I do not speak for all autistic people. I will not try to. I do not want to" says Sarah Kurchak in her recent autism memoir. One has one's symptomatic difficulties and has one's means to overcome them. Individual needs and medical support vary vastly. Hence the 'authentic' voice of the writers who have conquered autism might visibly throw readers who search for a comprehensive answer into confusion. To counter such generalizations, disability advocates suggest the reading of several narratives by individuals with the same disability to gather an understanding that every experience is diverse and unique on its own.

Disability narratives feed the public's appetite for confessional writing, leading to as Mitchell notes, "emotions of pity and/or sympathy evoked by the reader's identification with the narrator's personal plight" (Body Solitaire 311). The privileging of sentimental stories by the publishing industry, positions disability either as loss or as a triumph, making it as a narrative where disability is overcome through one's effort. The future challenge of autism life writing will be to visualize itself as the life of a particular individual and not as Nancy Mairs calls it, a "victim art" (Plain Text 1986 20).

The rendering of one's life enables the writer to form solidarity between oneself and one's disability. For a person on the spectrum, this cohesion of identity is crucial, in that it helps identify and accept oneself as having autism. Ironically the means to assume this oneness through the narrative has led to blindly borrowing and echoing words, metaphors or patterns that have been conventionally used by the neurotypicals in describing them. Mirroring the neurotypical description of autism as malignant, people on the spectrum too start to address autism in similar terms. For example, autism memoirs are seen to repeatedly describe autism as a "war", and their survival as a victory over this war. Both of William's memoirs start with war imagery. Nobody Nowhere begins by saying, "This is a story of two battles, a battle to keep out "the world" and a battle to join in. It tells of the battles within my own world and the battle lines, tactics used, and casualties of my private war against others" (2) while Somebody Somewhere opens saying that "this is the story of how someone picks up the pieces after a war" (3). Dawn Hughes, an anthropologist with autism, refers to herself and her gorillas as "the hunted and the haunted" in her memoir The Songs of the Gorilla

Nation (4). Krishna Narayanan in his autobiography Wasted Talent: Musings of an Autistic (2003) describes his autism as,

> I was a total prisoner of autism. It enveloped me and my life was utter misery because the tyranny of autism immobilized me…Mom and I launched a long drawn-out war against autism. The victory belongs to the more vigilant jouster. Riding on my horse- my young and innocent mom- I fought a relentless, tireless, epochal war. The war is hard and destructive, my horse is spent, exhausted. Now, I have a new horse- my dad- and the war is not over yet, we move on (7).

Vivid images of an intense struggle permeate through his words. The publisher's representational drawing in the book indicates a little boy on a horse with a woman's head. The boy is dressed in armour and has a pointed arrow in his hand. Anxiety writ faces, rough terrain, houses eaten by shrubs frame the background. Lurking in the shadows, sword drawn, intending harm to the boy is a dark figure, presaging autism. The boy as a jouster would overcome because of the relentlessness of his mother, the steed. The fear autism generates in the individual is reflected in this analogy. This war image, used continuously by the person on the spectrum to indicate his struggle cannot be read as a mere coincidence. Curiously Narayanan writes it when he is a teenager, Williams writes it when she is much older.

Since language becomes a relational medium through which the person on the spectrum understands himself, the words he uses to define himself become crucial. Equally pertinent is the need to understand whether the person on the spectrum is reproducing what he imbibes from outside or if he challenges the existing definitions of autism. The final segment of the paper attempts to understand how the subjective self of a person on the spectrum is deeply influenced by socio-cultural discourses.

The stereotype of the person with autism as the other, the alien or the changeling keeps repeating itself in autism memoirs. Grandin says that "much of the time I feel like an Anthropologist on Mars" (qtd. in Sacks 259). Williams explains how she created an alternate world of escape in her mind, as the real world was to her an "the alien world" (Somebody 32). She calls her autism "the Big Black Nothingness" (Somebody 100). Grandin describes her mind as, "My mind works similar to an Internet Search engine, set to locate photos. All my thoughts are in photorealistic pictures, which flash upon the 'computer monitor' in my imagination" (How does 1440). Grandin and Williams may have unconsciously voiced the cultural trope of the Aspergers. However, when one refers to oneself as a 'computer' or an 'alien', the signification extends beyond one's mathematical inclination or a random statement to unconscious acclimatization of cultural tropes.

Much of the autism metaphors perpetuate ableism ( Christian 2018). Jim Sinclair in "Cultural Commentary: Being Autistic Together" (2010) assimilates many of the common terms which have been attributed to a person on the spectrum. Evidently, the triad of impairments associated with the person has furnished these images. As Sinclair opines, the inability for social relationships and the disconnectedness from social participation has led

them to be described as embodiments of "aloneness," "withdrawal," and "disconnectedness," people "living in their own worlds," being "trapped" inside "shells" or behind "invisible walls" (2010).

Culture has continuously translated the unapproachable person with autism as someone who has a wall around him. Parental memoirs indicate that the child on the spectrum had initially appeared to be in a distant and in a locked-in state, unapproachable, as if behind a mirror or a glass door. Many of these images which the neurotypical has used to define the person on the spectrum, has recurred in autism life writing. Mukhopadhyay in How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move? (2008) titles his first chapter as "Through the Mirror"; where the 'mirror' symbolizes autism. He writes of how "the mirror heard everything" and how "stories waited for me behind the mirror" (5):

> Right now, I am thinking about a mirror. It was a mirror in one of the rooms upstairs, in the house where I spent my second and third years of my life… I would stand in front of that mirror, not to admire the landscape in its reflection. I would not stand in front of it because I believed that the mirror wanted to tell me a story. And I believed the mirror wanted to tell me a story because I wanted to tell it a story. I would tell my story to the mirror, and the mirror would tell me back its story (5).

Mukhopadhyay extends his autism into the concreteness of the mirror and adds "The mirror heard everything. I knew the mirror heard everything because only when I stood in front of it could I hear the walls and the floor talk" (7). His sharp symbolism reminds the readers of how in his mute state he could hear everything, though he appeared to the world as "meaning blind" (Williams, Somebody 54). If 'mirrors' were a repetitious image in Mukhopadhyay's words, the image of 'doors' recurs in Grandin's text. In Thinking in Pictures she explains her need to use physical doors or gates to symbolize each transition in her life:

> People with autism have tremendous difficulty with change. In order to deal with a major change such as leaving high school, I needed a way to rehearse it, acting out each phase in my life by walking through an actual door, window, or gate. When I was graduating from high school, I would go and sit on the roof of my dormitory and look up at the stars and think about how I would cope with leaving. It was there I discovered a little door that led to a bigger roof while my dormitory was being remodelled. . . When I walked out, I was now able to look up into the partially finished new building. High on one side was a small wooden door that led to the new roof. The building was changing and it was now time for me to change too. I could relate to that. I had found the symbolic key. (18)

Grandin's usage of the image of doors was not only to initiate herself to a change in her life, but it also was a symbol of her difficulty in social interaction. As Annette Woods in her study on Grandin infers, "her isolated social life was symbolically epitomized in an image of glass." (Temple Grandin 16). Grandin mentions in Thinking in Pictures, how once to wash the bay window, she had to crawl through a sliding door. The door was "jammed while I was washing the inside panes, and I was imprisoned between the two windows" (20). To her, the incident was an explanation of how relationships were maneuvered:

> It struck me that relationships operate the same way. They also shatter easily and have to be approached carefully. I then made a further association about how the careful opening of doors was related to establishing relationships in the first place. While I was trapped between the windows, it was almost impossible to communicate through the glass. Being autistic is like being trapped like this. The windows symbolized my feelings of disconnection from other people and helped me cope with the isolation. (20)

More importantly, Grandin notes how, "Throughout my life, door and window symbols have enabled me to make progress and connections that are unheard of for some people with autism" (22). This door and the wall image continuously recur in Donna William's memoirs too. In Nobody, Nowhere she dreams of being surrounded by high walls (180), her grandfather, the only sympathetic family member by his death, "leaving through the wall" (180) and her abusive mother grabbing her and making her stay inside the wall (180). She describes her nightmares as:

> In my second dream, I was surrounded by a high wall. My grandfather was leaving through a hole in the wall, and I reached out to try to stop him. I waited until he had left, then went after him. After I climbed through the hole, I found myself again, as before, in a barren land. I called out. My voice was hollow, like an echo. Nobody answered.
>
> I ran back through the hole in the wall, and my mother grabbed hold of me. I knew that she was going to try to make me stay on this side of the wall. (180)

It is interesting that these images used by culture to depict autism, are seen to be appropriated by people on the spectrum themselves. Thus the wall image or the mirror image becomes a metaphor not only of autism, or the loneliness of the person on the spectrum, but also becomes reflective of how unconscious absorption of the neurotypical world has emerged.

On the contrary, the constant images of "doors", "journeys", "reaching out" can be reread as an attempt to enter a neurotypical world and to be "normal". The journey motif is thus strikingly visible as "emerging" from autism seems to be common usage in many of the life writings. Grandin titles her memoir Emergence, Mukhopadhyay also writes about how he wanted "to go through the mirror to the other side" (How Can I 12). Williams in Somebody Somewhere writes exuberantly of how she found herself:

> I was alive with the vision of light at the end of the tunnel of inner darkness and inner silence, a tunnel of meaning- deafness, meaning-blindness, and the inability to feel for one's own experiences. All that mattered was to know I could see the end in sight, the birth of hope in the void of hopelessness. I bounced around everywhere, smiling. I had the keys to the door of 'the world' (97-98).

It is evident that through the narration of life writing, identity is in the making. Nevertheless, imitation being a characteristic feature of autism, the narrator too will tend to imitate what is being said or read about him, which will consequently reflect in the creation of identity. When Mark Osteen declares that the author resorts to "strategies of bricolage- echolalia, imitation, fixations, alter egos- to construct a self by assembling spare parts" (Autism and

Representation 274), it leads to massive implications as even while stating overtly that they do not want an identity without autism, the subliminal message indicates a yearning to belong to the neurotypical world - a yearning for normalcy. This explains the recurring usage of the word 'normal' in autism life writing. One is left to wonder if an autism autobiography is a masked narrative of normalization where the person on the spectrum is forced to learn to adapt to the rules of the larger world. The repetition of the words and images mentioned above, consciously or unconsciously used in autism life writing presents a dichotomy, indicating an ongoing journey of normalization. Hence it is no surprise that Grandin's glass door leads to the outside world, Williams' moves out of her shadows, or why the majority of life writing connotes emergence. The contours of subjectivity drawn through autism autobiography do not completely challenge the socio-cultural representation of autism.

Social camouflaging, motivated by alienation and threat is widespread among people of the spectrum. Camouflaging, the process by which individuals tend to hide their autism (Bernardin 2021) can be detrimental to mental health. This conforming to conventions of nonautistic behaviour is also referred to as 'masking', 'compensation' and 'pretending to be normal'( Inderbitzen 2021). Various studies on the same, report that "in many cases, it is an attempt to manage the mismatch between their natural way of being and the demands their social environment places on them" (Mandy 2019). The external thrust towards notions of normality creates regressive spaces within, adding to the pressure. Autism memoir too evolves as a narrative of this implicit camouflaging.

It is assumed that the genre of disability life writing helps the writer to counter "stigmatizing or patronizing portrayals of disability" (Couser Signifying Bodies 31). Though this is possible in discussions on disability, it cannot be generalized into autism memoirs. With the unconscious absorption of metaphors that are circulated around a person with autism, his knowledge of himself, and his identity are being shaped in more ways than others. To represent himself, he borrows the neurotypical tongue and does not realize the implicit attempt for normalization. The more the attempt towards normalization, the more one finds oneself inadequate. Hence persons on the spectrum must learn to mark their unique experiences in a unique language. Only then could a work by someone in the autism spectrum bring about change in the stereotypes of the cultural repertoire. Undoubtedly, autism memoirs have helped to wedge an important gap in our knowledge of autism. (Total words-6110)

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# Ambedkar and Ayodhya: Aporia in Action

**R. Devanand**

**Abstract**

Indian Mind from Harappa to Ayodhya has tremendously suffered a sea change. The two nouns mentioned in the first part of the title are treated in this paper as metaphors, as the twin ideas symbolize apparently contradictory forces that essentially shape/d Indian society through various historical ages, ideological agencies and socio-cultural institutions. Built-in deconstruction in the title is analyzed in this paper to gain some insights into a contemporary event, whose aporetic element cannot be ignored. For Socrates, Aporia had a cleansing effect and for William Blake it was almost an apocalyptic fervor. December 6th marks a couple of significant events in modern Indian History. This paper attempts to examine if Shourya Diwas, that is the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 in Ayodhya has got anything to do with the Mahaparinirvan Diwas, that is the demise of Dr. B R Ambedkar in 1956 sans any radical political perspective, but as an academic endeavor. The thread of our societal survival instinct binds these two metaphors to maintain a certain tension. One symbolizes the historical victimhood of foreign invasion and the other symbolizes internal socio-cultural victimhood. However, this paper does not intend to comment on what Ambedkar wrote on Rama or any other mythological characters. This is just an attempt at making sense of the seemingly differing metaphors for a fruitful academic engagement.

**Keywords:** Aporia, Myth, Metaphor, History, Victimhood.

Its dubitable that the two metaphors that are apparently contradictory may fuse at a point of history for a socio-cultural change. Distance between Ambedkar Nagar and Ayodhya is just seventy-five kilometers, situated in Uttar Pradesh do not necessarily make any territorialization of the issue, in this paper, for it is these issues like region/locality that our society could wield its divisive forces and keep societal division alive, intact and relevant much to the dismay of less privileged and for the benefit of the privileged ones who have always hijacked natural resources.

Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy defines the term *Aporia* as "a serious perplexity or insoluble problem." (pp 19). Ambedkar took almost two years to complete his work *Riddles in Hinduism* although it was not published during his lifetime. This work makes a scathing and logical critique of almost all well-known mythic characters of religious texts in order to "enlighten the masses" as the subtitle of the work suggests. Treating mythological characters or the epics as if they are the figments of history has its own limitations. John Keay's description of myth as "*the smoke of history*" hints at the necessity of studying mythology with vigorous academic seriousness. Thanks to the forthcoming metamorphosis in our history texts, mythology is going to be included in History syllabus by UGC. Verifiable facts are the source for history, while myths thrive on the limitless imagination of their creators. Thus the incompatibility between myths and history continues to confound the casual readers.

Did God create Man or the other way round? This question is akin to "Egg or the chicken first?" kind of unresolvable issue. Such riddles will exist as long as the human race lasts. Let me tentatively and rationally take the stance that Man created God. Why did he do so? Man must have felt the desperate need to express his inherent gratitude, to find answers for his in-built doubts over the mysteries of universe, to admit the prowess of all-encompassing forces of nature, to establish certain fair play and natural justice in the power politics of early societies so that the fear factor may work against the exploiters, and the list can be lengthy. Hence the metaphor of God is conveniently and quite often employed by the thinkers to probe the conventional understanding, established arrangements and social norms for better understanding of the deep-rooted social prejudices.


.... I take my vow that I shall lay down may life in defence of our land.

Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar
(14th April 1891 - 6th December 1956)

**Fig.1**

[Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and speeches Vol. 17 (Part 01) Reprinted by Dr Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, GOI, New Delhi- 01.]

Archeological evidence of temple remains in Ayodhya, May 2020.

[https://www.wionews.com/photos/in-pictures-temple-remains-and-idol-residues-found-in-ayodhya-300141#pillars-300130]

**Fig.2**

Statueising Rama in the present Ayodhya that fondly reminds the believers, of mythological coronation of Rama is certainly a moment of religious pride and gratification that was snatched by the medieval Indian invaders so far. Such moments of balancing historical wrongs maybe viewed from different ideological perspectives. Demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 did trigger communal clashes that took the lives of thousands of people and deeply hurt the fine fabric of social harmony in India. It is said that a mosque was built in Ayodhya on the orders of Babur in 16th Century. Archeological Survey of India, in 2003 report, hints that there was a temple at the disputed site, while the Central Sunni Waqf Board argued that the report was unsigned. A key argument of the Hindu side parties is that the historical texts like Skanda Purana and other travelogues imply that Ayodhya was the birth place of the mythic character Rama as a matter of faith, while the Muslim side parties counterargued that a mosque was there since 1528. This saga of communal clashes do not seem to end anywhere in the near future. However, all these events, from the construction of Mosque in the medieval India till the modern times, essentially define and shape a nation that has always been in the turmoil of both external invasions and internal social dissensions. The day- December 6 marks a couple of significant events in modern Indian History-

1. Demise of the legendary chief architect of our Constitution, jurist, social reformer – Dr. B R Ambedkar (in 1956), that is his Mahaparinirvan Diwas.

2. Demolition of the Babri Masjid (1992) in Ayodhya, that is termed as Shourya Diwas.

Can the latter event be just a coincidence and treated as a mere anomaly in the vast series of cause and effect for invasive forces on medieval India had deeply wounded religious belief system of the Indian subcontinent and therefore be a logical conclusion for the historical antecedents? Answer to this enquiry determines one's ideological slant and it is unlikely to be objective. It may not merely be an accidental event. Ambedkar hoped that "*Hindu society should be re-organized on two main principles: Equality and absence of casteism…*" This wishful thought has still remained a distant dream in a land where the social arrangements have time tested social structure that refuse to vanish or at best they express in different forms as M N Srinivas reckoned in his stimulating sociological classic work: "*Caste: Its twentieth Century Avatar.*"

The socio-intellectual rebellion that Ambedkar had started in mid-20th century to bring about social and political equality in a society, that quintessentially thrived on in-built inequality, has refused to die of irrelevance. The reformist movement initiated by him juxtaposed at a time when revivalist movements headed by the intellectual stalwarts like Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi, Tilak did actually change the destiny of billions, if not in any single political stroke. Maybe this is the reason why Ambedkar occupies a distinct place among the intellectuals who have shaped India's political and social discourses. Baba Saheb guided millions of Dalits in his lifetime. His struggle became a medium for bringing subalterns, snubbed as unproductive and as a burden, to the societal mainstream through political empowerment. In a conservative society, where one's lineage decided one's profession, bringing in positive changes against the insurmountable hegemonic social structure was not an easy exercise. As he steered a non-violent social revolution amidst the political chaos, scores of people found a voice and identity in him. His life struggle drives home the message of societal harmony through empowerment of downtrodden people. India's indestructible spirit of coexistence that is timeless should not be misread as meek obedience to external forces. If our society desires for transformation, it should be first of all free of hierarchies and human dignity is paramount to the existence of everyone. Today's young India needs to arrest the reactionary and divisive forces that draw strength by creating havoc, disharmony and injuring the fine fabric of social harmony. An impartial approach in making sense of the apparently contradictory ideas should be the pressing priority.

The hierarchical division of our society on the lines of caste that is associated with a sense of purity and pollution, as enumerated by Manu in his *Manusmriti* had deeply wounded the society. Being one of the tallest crusaders against the caste system and hegemony, Ambedkar had to symbolically demolish the sense of superiority associated with the mainstream religious rituals through his critique of the epics. His often-quoted proclamation in 1935, "I am born as Hindu, But I shall not die as a Hindu" certainly reflects not just a single man's frustration with the social system, but an entire community of downtrodden people's anxiety and utter dismay at a phase when national fervor took the center-stage to almost minimize the social turmoil. In his work *Annihilation of Caste* he proposes the idea of social endosmosis for a natural and free exchange of social values and ideas in a society that is deeply stratified and stone walling is historically done. Ambedkar made earnest attempts at strengthening the Hindu society and establish the same on the values of universal fraternity and equality.

In his *Riddles in Hinduism: An exposition to enlighten the masses*, Ambedkar presents twenty-four riddles that inherently destabilize the religious naiveté to take on the stratified society. Commenting on the polytheistic tendencies and practices of Hindu Society, Ambedkar rightly observes, "A Hindu will fast on the Shivaratri day because it is sacred to Shiva. He will fast on Ekadashi day because it is sacred to Vishnu. He will plant a Bel tree because it is sacred to Shiva and he will plant a Tulsi because it is dear to Vishnu" (p 13) However his radical, exhaustive, critical and comprehensive readings of Vedas and Upanishads are well documented in this work. Their nature of *Apaurusheya* is questioned to deconstruct the

vested interests of the creators of such religious works. However, a few eminent philosophers like Gautama, the founder of the Nyaya system of Philosophy and Kapila, the founder of the Sankhya system, who held the view that eternity cannot be predicated of the Vedas, denied the divine origin of Vedas, thus making way for more liberal interpretations. Jaimini of Purva Mimamsa goes further and says that Vedas are neither created by Man nor God. This riddle is effectively highlighted by Ambedkar. He depicts the persona of Rama both as an individual and a King. Rama's killing of Vali and abandonment of Sita, that are unpardonable in any standard of mythology or history, are critically analyzed, casting doubt on the indubitable personality of Rama. His comments on the conduct of Rama although did hurt the sentiments of several Hindus, never ceased to keep alive the tradition of rational thinking. Despite these developments, the popularity of serials like Mahabharata and Ramayana are eloquent testimony to our great regard for mythic characters like Rama. Valorizing mythic characters uncritically seems to be problematic and ahistorical that misrepresents the cultural history of India.

Ambedkar analyzes the Brahmanic literature that depicted the cults of Shiva, Krishna, Vishnu and Rama that is shrouded in mystery. His meticulous analysis of these mythic/ puranic characters, though rational, is not without any limitations. He says, "The mystery however deepens when one finds that some of the new Gods were definitely anti-Vedic... That Shiva was originally an anti- Vedic is abundantly clear." (p 105) While Krishna is largely anti-Vedic, Vishnu is a Vedic God. He takes the curious case of Rama, who is not known to the Vedas. Although Rama is not anti-Vedic, why was the cult of Rama started late in the phase of Indian history? Maybe it is to do with the rise and fall of the cults of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. Ambedkar finds an element of artificiality in the cult of Rama as he was given the status of an incarnation of Vishnu and Sita was the incarnation of Lakshmi. The contemporary political rhetoric on this live issue is likely to distort the realities and construct its own versions.

The day December 6 marks the Mahaparinirvan of Ambedkar. An important day in the contemporary history of Modern India. The cherished ideals like social justice, political equality and egalitarian social structure are still at the disposal of the oppressive forces that threaten the spirit of nationhood. The process of exclusion and social compartmentalization are still at work. Therefore, no force can attempt to invisibilize Ambedkar's legacy of Mahaparinirvan and glorify December 6 as "Shaurya Diwas" to mark the liberation of holy city Ayodhya from invasive forces. This need not be further problematized as the decision of the honorable Supreme Court in the Ayodhya title dispute has been logically resolved by correcting the historical wrongs. Diagonally opposite ideas need to coexist to ensure social cohesion and harmony. Binary opposition can still strike a balance, but not necessarily in the realm of politico-cultural issues. This clash of ideologies may stimulate the rightwing parties to perpetuate and promote its interests towards silencing the voices of dissent. The event was also seen as an opportunity for the rightwing ideologies to make inroads into the so-called low cate communities and impose its patriarchal and hierarchical system. However, the resistance was not pronouncedly expressed.

Ambedkar's increasing relevance in India gives immense hopes to everyone who dreams of a society free of hierarchies, a society based on equality, equal opportunity and human dignity. His legacy and relevance is also an undying challenge to the reactionary and divisive forces that seek to perpetrate hierarchy and social seclusion. It is time we recognize the power structures of caste system, hegemonic/hierarchical arrangements and patriarchy and prevent the attempts at diluting Ambedkar's legacy. We need to take a cautious and well-informed stance to make sense of this apparent aporia that poses a subtle socio-political challenge.

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# Cultural Conundrums: Unravelling the Dilemma in Amit Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad*

**Nimisha Yadav & Shrutimita Mehta**

**Abstract**

Humans have migrated to Western countries, searching for better prospects, opportunities, and a hospitable environment. In the new foreign lands, the migrants experience multiple different circumstances in which they attempt to improve their daily lives. With increasing globalisation and rapid advancements in various sectors, individuals from the Indian subcontinent move to the West to ensure a brighter future. However, after migrating to a foreign land, individuals do not always adjust entirely and often suffer from a cultural identity crisis. Several writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, and Rohinton Mistry have written about the struggle of the migrating population. Amit Chaudhuri is also one among them who has portrayed his characters' trauma and complexities when they migrate to a foreign land.

In his novel *Odysseus Abroad*, Chaudhuri portrays the suffering of a young Bengal boy, Ananda, who migrated to London to pursue his education in literature. Chaudhuri presents a vibrant picture of London through his characters and highlights the dilemma, sufferings, and loneliness Ananda faces in the foreign land. The paper attempts to analyse the novel *Odysseus Abroad*, to bring out the suffering Ananda faced in a foreign land, and highlight the clash between the Indian and Western ideologies by projecting the experiences of Ananda.

**Keywords:** Migration, Identity, Alienation, Culture, Loneliness

"*Our dilemma is that we hate change and love it at the same time; what we really want is for things to remain the same but get better*." – Sydney J. Harris.

Every society comprises groups of individuals involved in social interaction, having shared beliefs, cultural values and ideas. Individuals interact with one another in their day-to-day life

**Shrutimita Mehta**

to lighten their moods, communicate their thoughts, connect and much more. However, how an individual interacts and communicates depends on his cultural orientation. Every human being is shaped by culture, as culture is made up of patterns of behaviours, traditions, ethnicities, beliefs, and social norms shared by a group of individuals. For example, people in India have different cultural values, traditions and opinions than those in the United States. Different values create a cultural dilemma when an individual migrates from one place to another and struggles between two cultures. In the present era, migrating from one geographical region to another has become extremely common for the upcoming generations as they search for better prospects in a foreign land. People migrate for various reasons, such as a change of environment, a fresh start, work, better quality of life, or for economic reasons. For youngsters, education is a primary driver of migration as they find foreign lands full of benefits and better career prospects. People from different ethnicities, cultures, or religions traverse cities, countries, or continents to adopt the foreign place as their new home. This relocation of individuals to a foreign land is not a new concept in the 21st century, and this phenomenon is inseparable from the multiple set of challenges and problems faced by migrants. Although families migrate to different countries with huge dreams and expose themselves to different cultures and ideas, it is not necessary that they can adapt themselves easily to the foreign land and adjust comfortably to the new culture. For them, the notion of surviving easily in a foreign land shatters as soon as they step into unfamiliar surroundings. Since it becomes difficult for the migrants to settle in a different city or country, the question of which place to call their 'home' emerges in the inhabitants' minds. They are constantly in a dilemma of whether to call the foreign land their home or their native land their home. Despite trying hard to survive in the unknown land, these migrants suffer from loneliness, alienation, and dislocation, eventually making them question their identity. The inhabitants are constantly juxtaposed between loneliness and exile and hence use their memory to remember their native place to overcome the loneliness. Although people live in different cities or countries, they try to remember and follow their culture through various mediums. Sometimes they celebrate their festivals and visit their native restaurants to feel connected to their homelands. However, they repetitively find themselves in a dilemma of choosing between Indian and Western cultures, as they constantly juggle between two cultures. The migrants carry their cultural baggage and sometimes find adjusting to their new surroundings challenging. Authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Amit Chaudhuri and many others have delved into the lives of migrants and unveiled their challenges in a foreign land. Amit Chaudhuri, the well-acclaimed Bengali writer, has presented the life of a Bengali migrant in London and highlights the challenges the character faces in a foreign land.

Amit Chaudhuri, one of the prominent writers of the 21st century, was born in Calcutta and grew up in Bombay. He has an excellent record of fictional and non-fictional writings. He has written eight novels; the latest is *Sojourn (2022)*. His non-fictional books include

*Clearing A Space: Reflections on India, Literature, and Culture (2008)* and *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013). Apart from writing fictional and nonfictional books, Chaudhuri is a poet and a music composer. He explores the role and meaning of music in his book *Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music (2021)*. He has received various prestigious awards, the latest of which is the James Tait Black Prize, the UK's longest-running literary award for his book, *Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music.* His novel, *Odysseus Abroad (2014),* depicts the life of Ananda, a Bengali student studying English Literature in London at an unnamed university. The book focuses on the lives of the protagonist Ananda and his uncle, Radhesh, who had been living in London for a long time. Chaudhuri demonstrates Ananda's everyday lifestyle, who lives in a studio flat far beyond Indian soil, where he feels a clash between the Western and the Indian cultures. By delving into two different cultures, this paper explores the cultural identity crisis revolving around Ananda, who suffers from loneliness and alienation in a foreign land where he tries to feel connected with his homeland through different mediums.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines migration and states, "migration is movement of a person or group of persons, whether between or within a country between two places in its territory" (231). The inhabitants migrate for different reasons; among those reasons, education is an essential source of social change. People migrate to foreign countries to pursue higher education to find better prospects in other countries. In the novel *Odysseus Abroad*, Ananda, a 21-year-old Bengali, moved to London to pursue his interest in English Literature. Ananda, an aspiring poet, living in Bloomsbury, stayed alone in his flat studio, surrounded by loneliness. Chaudhuri's portrayal of Ananda vividly explains how difficult it was for Ananda to adjust to the new land. Although Ananda enjoyed his uncle's company, with whom he got to spend considerable time, the constant swinging between two cultures made things difficult for him. People who migrate to different countries find it hard to adjust as they are deeply attached to their roots i.e., to their homeland. After relocating to another country or city, an individual comes in contact with the new culture of that land which is quite different from his own; this sometimes creates a cultural dilemma.

In the 'Memorandum for the study of Acculturation', Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton and Melville J. Herskovits define Acculturation as "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (149). Ananda, an Indian who moved to a Western country, came in contact with the new culture and traditions. Although people living in big cities live in a multicultural environment where people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds coexist, the experience they get when they move to a foreign country is different. They find it difficult to adjust there, so they often either assimilate by adapting to their new culture or leave their original culture behind. J.W. Berry, in 'Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures', explains the concept of acculturation and says, "Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological changes that involve various forms of mutual accommodation, leading to some

longer-term psychological and sociocultural adaptations between both groups" (699). He also proposed that people who experience acculturation either assimilate, separate, integrate or marginalise. Ananda in *Odysseus Abroad* becomes bi-cultural, i.e., integrates with the new culture while continuing to retain his original culture. He prefers adopting the Western culture and makes all efforts to stay connected to his homeland and its culture in many ways.

'In this Global world', Vineet Kaul writes, "a cultural identity crisis happens when the codes of the cultural history with which individual identified himself clash with the codes of the newly- adopted culture" (347). From the beginning of the novel, Ananda starts experiencing the clash, and then through his experiences, he expresses how he is different and finds it odd in the new Western world. In London, Ananda wore a white kurta and pyjama, unconcerned about how people would react. He was fond of Indian classical music and expressed his astonishment at people listening to 'rap' in America. He could not understand the reason behind Americans loving the music. Chaudhuri writes,

> "It was a new kind of music called 'rap'. It baffled Ananda even more than disco. He had puzzled and puzzled over why people would want to listen and even move their bodies to an angry, insistent onrush of words…." (9).

Ananda continues his love for Indian classical music and Western poetry. He continued to practice Indian classical music and embraced his own culture in a foreign land. He practised his ragas twice a day and managed this routine while attending university. Chaudhuri says,

> "Ananda stubbornly sang Purvi going up to Haverstock Hill……He managed this routine because of his peculiar relationship with the university" (183-84).

Ananda felt indifferent to his Western surroundings, and Indian music helped him stay connected to Indian culture, thereby comforting him. This inability to understand 'rap' songs and the love for 'ragas' highlights the cultural differences experienced by the protagonist.

Ananda also finds adjusting to a different lifestyle hard and feels lonely and homesick. He questions the idea of living far off in the adopted land. He ponders over his own decisions and existence in the foreign land. While listening to the 'rap' song, he was irritated and started questioning his decision to come to London. Ananda says, "What am I doing in London? And what'll I do once I'm back in India" (10). The dislocation felt by Ananda highlights his loneliness and alienation in London. One reason Ananda migrated to London was his love for Western poetry. Ananda, himself a poet, migrated to his college because he was fond of Stephan Spender. He knew Spender had retired and was no longer in the university, but if Stephan had hovered in those corridors, Ananda wouldn't have been so unhappy in the university. "If only Spender had survived in the college to Ananda's arrival….. Ananda would have hesitantly shown his poems to Spender, who, in his excitement, would have published them, just as Spender's friend Auden……" (55). So, despite his love for Spender, Ananda felt alone and unhappy at the university. His passion for Western poetry, on the one hand, and that for Indian classical music, on the other, reflects the different cultural frameworks Ananda is made up of.

Just like Chaudhuri, Jhumpa Lahiri's creation, *The Namesake,* depicts the characters' clash of cultures and identities. In her novel, the protagonist Ashima leaves India for America with her husband, where she becomes insecure as she struggles to make herself feel like an American. Although she tried to stay connected to her Bengali culture, she constantly felt the feeling of exile in her newly adopted home. Not just Ashima but also her son, a first-generation Indian-American protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, navigates the complexities of his dual cultural identity. He struggles with his name, which connects him to his Indian roots but also sets him apart from America. Therefore, he faces the challenges and complexities of being caught between two cultures. As a result, both of them started questioning their identity and compared the Indian and American cultures, which made their survival more difficult.

In *Odysseus Abroad*, Ananda caught between two different cultures, compares the two countries on several fronts. After moving to his flat in London, Ananda realised the size of his apartment was small. He could not adjust to the idea of living in that flat and tried to find a connection between London and India. He says, "How is it that our cities are so different? How come I'm so little prepared for here?" (11). Even though Ananda's mental dilemma forces him to question his decision to stay in London, his specific interests connect him to London. The display of his Indianness, though he has a disinterest in Indian politics and his addiction to British politicians, their debates, and their mock outrage, indicates his beliefs and actions as an amalgamation of both Indian and Western sensibilities.

People migrate to different countries and search for love and belongingness in a foreign land. These migrants either search for a place to call their home or search for a sense of belonging among individuals with whom they can connect and share. Ananda could not connect with anyone besides his uncle in the foreign land. He spent time with his uncle, his only friend in London, and whenever his uncle was not around, he felt deprived and lonely. Ananda and his uncle, Radhesh, were companions who visited different restaurants and places together. To stay connected to their culture, they celebrated Durga Puja in London but were disappointed by the English as they were ignorant of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. They also visited Indian restaurants, which invariably saddened them as the sweets tasted different. Laddoos, dosas, and bhelpuri looked like original food items but tasted different. Ananda says, "Don't. They're faked. They'll be nothing like the original. It was the tragedy of London- to eat Indian food outside of the 'curry' and to constantly discover the unfamiliar in the familiar…" (207). Since food is also one of the prime elements of culture, Ananda uses food to elucidate the cultural differences between the two countries.

All countries have their way of living, rules, and beliefs. In India, people are differentiated on the basis of caste, culture, religion and race. Whereas in Western places, only class plays a vital role in creating a difference among individuals. After arriving in London, Ananda realised that class played an important role in creating a bias between people. Chaudhuri writes,

> "Class! He'd hardly been aware of it before coming to England- which was not so much an indication that it didn't exist in India as of the fact that the privileged were hardly conscious

of it, as they were barely conscious of history……Living in London, he was becoming steadily conscious of it….." (12).

Although Ananda was in a Western country, his beliefs and thoughts constantly clashed with his Indian beliefs. In India, he did not care about class but became very conscious of class while living in London.

Although, like Ananda, many manage to survive in the foreign land, they constantly feel lonely and isolated. "Ananda's social identity marks certain disturbances in his journey. Initially; he does not keep pace easily with western culture; he finds himself as an 'alien' in an unfamiliar land" (Ajay 226). Chaudhuri's portrayal of the hardships, embarrassment and struggles Ananda faces in an alien land makes the reader understand the dilemma of the migrating populations fairly vividly.

In today's modern world, where most big cities have people experiencing multiple cultures, diverse traditions, ways of life, and ethnicities, for migrating populations adapting to the new culture they come in contact with is not and does not come easy.

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# 'Action by Disclosure': The Narrative of an Adolescent with Mental Illness

**Jahnavi Gupta**

**Abstract**

In What is Literature? Sartre theorises prose-writing as "an action by disclosure" and simultaneously "an appeal" to readers to collaborate in its production. Using these conceptions, this paper attempts to study the reader-engaging form, writing style, and narration of the 'disclosure narrative' of the neurodivergent young adult narrator in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in Night-Time*. It will be argued that the disclosures by Christopher Boone, the adolescent narrator with autism, and the text's Sartrean appeal are enhanced by his notable self-conscious and unreliable narration, and the formal-stylistic experiments in the novel informed by his idiosyncracies.

**Keywords:** unreliable narration, neurodivergence, Sartre, YA novel, autismThere is no art except for and by others.

Sartre understands words used in speech and prose to be actions, using which one discloses a situation to oneself and others "in order to change it." Therefore, he calls prose-writing "secondary action," an "action by disclosure." However, for this revelation to "objectively exist" and for the change/action to ensue, a concrete act called reading by an agent different from the author is necessary. Since a literary creation can find its fulfillment only in reading, Sartre states that all literary work is essentially an "appeal" to the readers. Prose writing then is not only a disclosure but also an appeal, a request, to the readers to collaborate in the disclosure's production (7-66).

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (hereafter, *Curious Incident*) can then be understood to be a first-person 'disclosure narrative' of Christopher Boone, a young adult with a mental illness. Although Christopher meant for his book to be an investigative novel revealing the murderer of his neighbour's dog, Wellington, he is able *uncover* far more than what he intended to. Christopher *discloses* his struggles – as an

autistic teenager – on an individual and a societal level. He *sheds light* on the difficulty strangers, and at times even his parents, face in accommodating his difference. He also *reveals* the 'special' struggles of a family trying to raise a child with mental illness (Lambidoni 102). These *disclosures* constitute the Sartrean revelatory project of *Curious Incident.*

Equipped with Sartre's understanding of the dual purposes of writing i.e. to reveal in order to change and to appeal for the revelation's objective existence, the form, writing style, and the 'unreliable' narration of *Curious Incident* will be studied. These are proposed to be informed by Christopher's distinctive limitations and abilities as an adolescent with autism. Representing the lived experience of a mental illness in Christopher's voice not only helps contributes to the unconventionality of this narrative but also produces notable effects on the novel's form and writing style. Further, the 'unreliable' narration and the reader-engaging form of the novel make its *Sartrean disclosures* and its *appeal* to exist more compelling.

**Form and Writing Style**

Christopher's intended "murder mystery" is a composite piece of writing. It is punctuated with information often unrelated to the original mystery: pictorial data, equations, lists, maps, letters, multiple instances of reading and writing, information about his family relations, etc. His idiosyncratic preferences that range from the writing process (he uses prime numbers to number the chapters) to his daily habits (he does not eat food if different foods are touching each other) enliven the text. Christopher's murder mystery story widens, despite his intention, to familiarize the readers with him, his family, perceptions of a neurodivergent teenager, and the related *disclosures*.

Christopher is conscious of his linguistic limitations, his reading tastes and needs. This awareness guides his writing. In line with his abhorrence of lies and his inability to think or say anything contra-factual, Christopher states that "...everything I have written here is true" (Haddon ch. 37). He works hard to establish difference, essential to him, between his novel and "proper novels" — which in his view are "lies about things that didn't really happen" and use metaphoric/connotative language which he does not understand. Christopher also complains of not understanding certain phrases in everyday speech used by people around him or their non-verbal cues. This need for lucid language makes Christopher write simply and directly. Instead of assuming his readers to know his references, he chooses to explain the words and math problems he thinks are tough. His "murder mystery novel" has an appendix and a list of detailed notes for more information and clarity. Nevertheless, he often pause the narrative to break down concepts for the readers ("aneurysm" in ch. 53; the reason for the night-sky to be dark in ch. 17), a mindful practice he too expects from people conversing with him.

Early in the novel, Christopher explains, "If I try to say the joke to myself, making the word mean the three different things at the same time, it is like hearing three different pieces of music at the same time, which is uncomfortable and confusing and not nice like white noise...And that is why there are no jokes in this book" (ch. 13). Siegelman notes that

Christopher's literal understanding of language and inept social interactions often produce humorous happenings/conversations which he reports accurately in the novel (56). While talking to Mrs. Alexander during his detective work, the following ensues, "...I was about to turn and walk away when she said, 'I have a grandson your age.' I tried to do chatting by saying, 'My age is 15 years and 3 months and 3 days.' And she said, 'Well, almost your age'" (ch. 67). Christopher's unsuccessful attempt at chatting evokes laughter. Humor permeates the book without his knowledge, thereby leaving his meta-narratorial claim that his book will not be funny hollow. This failure helps present Christopher as a fallible human, navigating the world with a uniquely limited grasp over language and social skills. Further, his struggles expose the rote aspects of language use and social interaction, which are not as easy to acquire as is commonly perceived.

Christopher often likens the functioning of his brain to that of a machine ("bread-slicer machine", "DVD player", "computer"), which jams and needs rebooting in the face of an overabundance of information/sensory stimuli. For smooth functioning, he organizes the information into visual forms —patterns, plans, flowcharts, and diagrams. For instance, he creates a flow chart of the possible people and places he can go to after his father proves to be a liar and Wellington's murderer. This enables him to deal with a crisis and enhance his decision-making process. It is only natural, then, to find Christopher's investigative narrative laced with visual data ranging from mathematical sums to graphs to diagrams to maps (Siegelman 50). It gives readers a glimpse of his processes of meaning-making and comprehension.

Even where the non-linguistic elements do not provide entirely new information, they are not redundant. Since Christopher struggles to follow the social conventions of language use, the visual media assists in relaying his ideas to readers. Further, his ability to think and present his thoughts in sign-systems apart from the English language is foregrounded. The symbiotic existence of images with texts, here, hybridizes the purely linguistic form of the novel, which can neither be called a picture-book nor a graphic novel. Though there are differences in proportion and presentation of images and text in picture-books and graphic novels, both convey a temporal movement from page to page and panel to panel, respectively (Gibson 101). Such a holistic existence of images and text accompanied with the depiction of movement of time is absent in *Curious Incident.* Christopher's writing pushes the boundaries of the novel and refuses to be categorized into any known complex medium that combines text and image. The challenge to the logocentricity of the novel, and the society, is Christopher's *secondary action* as theorized by Sartre. Through it, Christopher advocates for a broader literacy/society that respects multiple ways of meaning-making.

Christopher is highly aware that he is writing a book that will eventually be read by people other than him. That is the reason he chooses and tries to stick to a particular form/genre (detective fiction/murder mystery) for his book and pays heed to his school teacher's, Siobhan, editorial comments. She suggests that he write something he would like to read. His favourite book is Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hounds of the Baskerville*, and that is why he decides to

write a detective/mystery fiction. The title of the book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is borrowed from Sherlock Holmes' dialogue in *The Adventure of Silver Blaze*. Additionally, he stresses the similarities between the eccentric and emotionally challenged Holmes and himself to credit his detection skills. The direct and indirect allusions to Holmes and Doyle help validate Christopher's sleuthing skills, his attempted generic writing, and highlight his preference to order and clarity which having a mystery at hand makes difficult.

He grafts information regarding the construction of his book –how he came about writing the book, how his father derailed the writing, reason for the unusual chapter numbers, etc.– within its narrative. Apart from providing the initial impetus to write, Siobhan offers to read chapters, suggest edits, and therefore heavily shapes the final draft. More acts of reading within the text inform the book's form, writing style, and plot. Chapter 127 details the incident where his father chances upon the book and reads the contents of Mrs. Alexander's conversation with Christopher regarding his mother's affair. Christopher's father hides the book and forbids him from writing further. However, it leads Christopher to find and read his mother's letters to him. These acts of reading – by Christopher and his father – help resolve the two mysteries of the text and set Christopher on an adventure to travel to his mother. Here, the book extends from being a murder mystery to reveal the earlier disintegration of Christopher's family and initiates another re-organization. These instances of writings and readings *within* the text combine to produce it and also feed into its *Sartrean request* to the readers *outside* the text to collaborate in its objective existence through their reading.

**'Unreliable Narrator'**

Shen, in the section "Unreliability" in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, credits Wayne C. Booth to have introduced the concept of unreliability to study "the intentionally encoded unreliability in fiction" (par. 2). He defines an unreliable narrator as one who does not speak for or acts in accordance with the implied author's norms (par. 2). Booth's focus however remains on the "narrator's misreporting and ethical misevaluation" (par. 3). Shen records that James Phelan builds on and furthers Booth's kinds of unreliability by first identifying a narrator's function at three levels: reporting, interpreting, and evaluating. These three levels then offer three spheres of narratorial unreliability—"of facts," "of values or ethics," and "of knowledge and perception" (par. 3). He offers six types of unreliability, which fall into two broad categories: "being wrong" and "being insufficient" (par. 4). The six types of unreliability he identifies are: (a) misreporting, misinterpreting, and misevaluating, and (b) underreporting, underinterpreting, and underevaluating (par. 4).

Using Phelan's categories to study Christopher's functions as the narrator, one concludes that certain narrative elements work to portray Christopher's *reporting* of events/conversations as nearly immaculate. When speaking about his memory, Christopher compares it to a film and says he has a "smelltrack which is like a soundtrack", which makes him "really good at remembering things" (ch. 113). He gives an example of the sharpness of his memory:

> If someone says to me, "Christopher, tell me what your mother was like," I can Rewind to lots of different scenes and say what she was like in those scenes. For example, I could Rewind to 4 July 1992 when I was 9 years old, which was a Saturday, and we were on holiday in Cornwall and in the afternoon we were on the beach in a place called Polperro. And Mother was wearing a pair of shorts made out of denim and a light blue bikini top and she was smoking cigarettes called Consulate which were mint flavor. (ch. 113)

As mentioned earlier here, he compares his brain to a machine/computer. It does breakdown under an overabundance of stimuli, but the analogy works to construct him as a factually correct and vouch his reliability as a narrator in that particular sphere.

The text, however, stresses Christopher's unreliability in *interpreting* and *evaluating* social situations, other people's words, actions, motives, and emotions. His self-centered and limited emotional focus takes precedence, and as a result, is often incapable of grasping the struggles of people around him. For example, when Christopher finds out that his father lied to him about his mother's death, his broken trust remains the focus –he has memory gaps, vomits all over himself, doesn't scream when his father undresses him, and refuses to respond to his father's questions (ch. 157). Despite the detailed portrayal of his sobbing father's apology, the father's reasons for lying about his mother, and murdering Wellington, our narrator is unable to sympathize with his father or understand his perspective (Lambidoni 97). He *mis/under-interprets* and *underevaluates* the emotional struggles of a man whose wife left him for his neighbour. All Christopher is capable of gauging is that it is not safe for *him* to be around his father anymore. His *insufficient* abilities to interpret and evaluate a situation do not and cannot extend for the benefit (or even in consideration) of others. He feels so unsafe that he leaves for London, a place he has never been to before. He plans to live with his mother even though in the past his mother had found parenting him difficult enough to quit it.

Sabbagh notes that Baron-Cohen was one of the first to suggest that the core autistic features —impaired social development, delayed and deviant language, and an insistence on sameness— are due to a fundamental deficit in the theory-of-mind reasoning (210). Understood as a unitary skill, Sabbagh breaks theory-of-mind into at least two component processes: (1) "detecting or decoding others' mental states based on immediately available observable information and (2) reasoning about those mental states in the service of explaining or predicting others actions" (210). In this light, it becomes easier to understand Christopher's reaction to his father's confession and his general self-centred tendencies. Christopher is incapable of gleaning his father's mental state —heartbreak, anger, and remorse. The context of the lie and the murder committed, combined with fifteen years of knowledge about his father as a parent, fail to affect Christopher's decision to leave him.

I propose that the purpose of making the high-functioning autistic Christopher the narrator of his own story is not to expose his reporting, interpreting, and evaluating abilities to be judged for accuracy and reliability. Christopher, too, is fully aware of his own "behavioral problems" (ch. 73), due to which he insufficiently *interprets* and *evaluates* what he *reports*.

He admits to struggling with discerning human facial expressions and practices to improve them with Siobhan (ch. 3). His torqued and peculiar understanding of and responses to things are intentionally obvious. Throughout the book, he mentions and demonstrates his lack of social abilities, his inability to understand metaphors and jokes, and his preference for an inflexible routine. His inflexibilities, inabilities, and seemingly selfish impulses are shown to be not active choices but by-products of having autism. His experiences and their faithful reports are meant to offer to readers Christopher's point of view, flawed or self-centered in some regards as it might be. Christopher's narratorial unreliability in this way highlights and strengthens his prose's *Sartrean disclosures and appeal*.

In "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*" Phelan develops the concept of "bonding unreliability" wherein "the discrepancies between the narrator's reports, interpretations, or evaluation and the inferences of the authorial audience have the paradoxical result of reducing the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience" (225). The first "literally unreliable but metaphorically reliable" and the third subtype "naïve defamiliarization" come closest to describing the effects of Christopher's narration (226, 229). By being unreliable in perceiving and understanding situations and others' emotions and the strangely unique but critical light he casts on the everyday interactions and concepts, helps construct a reliable picture of his psychological difference and the friction between him and the people he interacts with. In letting Christopher present his individuality and daily struggles, writer Mark Haddon "has made us feel enormous empathy for a protagonist who himself is almost incapable of empathy" (Siegelman 56). Christopher's narratorial voice and point of view help readers to see ordinary everyday tasks–buying tickets, entering the subways– as his extraordinary trials (54). One wholeheartedly joins the struggles and triumphs of this unreliable narrator.

However, casting Christopher as the narrator of his adventure, I think, is not to purely win the readers' sympathy, but also to *reveal* how exclusive and unimaginative the world he occupies is. The narrator, Christopher, never views his limited social and emotional responses as a serious lack. He blames people and the ways of the world as confusing. His perspective presents the world as odd and often serves to critique its 'normal'/'accepted' ways. He is dismayed that people cannot stick to their own rules. That even though everybody insists on telling the truth, they forbid him from telling "old people that they are old" and telling "people if they smell funny or if a grown-up has made a fart" (ch. 233). In chapter 71, he dismisses the term "special needs," which Siobhan insists on using for people like him in his school. Christopher reasons that everybody around him has special needs, including his father and Siobhan, and that invalidates the use of a different term to refer to him and other kids in his school. Haddon furthers Christopher's point by showing him using exceptional mathematical/ logical skills, attention to detail, and the ability to detach mind at will to cover the journey, despite lacking social skills and experience (Lambidoni 98). Further, Christopher's narration allows for the description of a recurrent dream he likes:

> And in the dream nearly everyone on the earth is dead, because they have caught a virus...And eventually there is no one left in the world except people who don't look at other people's faces and who don't know what these pictures mean
>
> and these people are all special people like me. And they like being on their own and I hardly ever see them because they are like okapi in the jungle in the Congo, which are a kind of antelope and very shy and rare. And I can go anywhere in the world and I know that no one is going to talk to me or touch me or ask me a question. (ch. 227)

The dream, for Christopher, becomes an alternate reality through which he is able to present his 'difference' as contextual and the present environment being insufficiently equipped to accommodate him. Lambidoni sees the dream sequence as one of the "powerful proclamations against being excluded, sorted out as an extraordinary exhibit, and also a plea for our society to make an effort to learn and understand those with different needs" (105). One way Christopher showcases his ability and imagination is by inserting his process of meaning-making through visuals within the ambit of the novel, as discussed in the earlier section. The new pattern in which images and text exist in *Curious Incident* preserves Christopher's difference as *another order* and not a disorder.

## Conclusion

Christopher's unreliable narration and his peculiar formal and stylistic experiments, strengthen his 'disclosure narrative,' a *secondary act*, which according to Sartre discloses/ reveals in order to bring about change. In his hands, we see the form of the novel expanding to deliver his *Sartrean revelatory project* about representing a neurodiveregent person's perceptions and needs, and our society's unaccommodating and dismissive attitude towards difference. Christopher is able to generate empathetic and engaged participation from his readers because of his peculiar fallibility, irreverence, and fresh perspectives encoded in his highly self-reflexive and mixed media writing. Despite Siobhan's attempts to tame and standardize his book, and often despite Christopher's own authorial intentions and decisions, the *Sartrean disclosure* and *appeal* of *Curious Incident* gains from Christopher's idiosyncrasies and powerfully persists.

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# December

**N. Sreekala**

December brings memories
sweet and bitter.
Born into a Christian neighbourhood
Schooled in an Anglo-Indian convent
Grew up imbibing the spirit of Christmas
Caste not mentioned at all in our home.
Such love and harmony in life!
Infant Jesus in the crib
all adorned with stars and gifts,
the three wise men from the East,
coming all the way in the biting chill
of winter to witness the divine birth
Angels lauding the birth of infant Jesus!
The mirth and merry making,
the stars, the Christmas trees
all decked, the carols, Santa,
the exchange of gifts and food
sumptuous!
So it was so until the dawn
of twenty-sixth December, 1971.
Shocking news of my dad's demise
at an age too young to die!
A fourteen year old foresaw
bleak and gloomy days ahead.
Christmas thereafter, a silvery sheen
with a black spot at the centre!
Life an uneven, comic blend of
mirth and sorrows!

December brings memories
sweet and bitter.
While every heart rejoices
in the holy event
and every home recreates
the aura of Bethlehem,
there looms large in my mind
the thought of Crucifixion.
A sequence of torturous scenes
parade through my mind.
Betrayal of Christ for thirty pieces
of silver, the Last Supper, Crucifixion
and Resurrection. . . .
Symbolic of man's deeds
in the scramble for power and money?
O Saviour of mankind, one who bore
the sins of man on thy shoulders
to redeem mankind!
Will there be a Second Coming
in human form as one among us?
The world so steeped in sins
looks for a saviour.
Is there no purging of the evils
in this world?
Is man bound to his fate?
Winning accolades for his findings
in Science and Technology,
he sinks into the dark abyss
of sins and bloody violence!
While these thoughts perplexing
keep me on the razor's edge,
how I yearn for a change,
be it life or death!

## Let the Skeleton Lie

Ideal couple, made for each other;
respectable place in society;
earnest in all social activities;
attending marriages, baptisms
and funerals without fail!
seems settled. . . .
No cares, no worries,
always on the move.
Lucky pair, by God's grace
no serious ailments!!!
Children settled, blessed
with grandkids.
What more do they need?
Outsiders' view.
Look around, study people.
Appearances deceptive!
Why make public
your private woes?
Why unleash your burdens
on the listener?
Sympathetic looks, words,
and sighs at the most!
Advice in plenty from all corners
till at last you're left muffled.
Strive, strive, strive with
all your might.
Do, do, do what you ought to do.
That's *Karma*.
Where man fails, the solution
the One above shall find.
Trials endless—a test dose
for the true devotee!
Who does not have
a skeleton in the cupboard?
Share only your happiness,
not your woes.
Let the skeleton lie, for you
to pamper with your tears
in the darkness of the night.
Life has its own course,
meandering around boulders
all its way.
Everything in a state of flux!
There's no stepping into
the same river twice.
No situation lasts forever.
When nothing is permanent,
why break your heart over
what's for Him to decide?
That very thought should be
solace and sustenance enough!

## All for Love

There was love in her eyes
There was love in her heart
There was love in her smile
There was love in her voice sweet
There was love in her magnanimity
She was all for love!
A bundle of contradictions,
much misunderstood
Often dubbed a crazy woman!
Not adorned with university degrees,
but for a conferred DLitt.
Had the alchemy of transmuting
the subtlest human emotions
into words simple and eloquent.
A bilingual, with reputation
spreading beyond national boundaries.
Accolades came her way
as prestigious awards so many!
A poet par excellence
A novelist and short story writer

with a style so simple and profound!
A writer with a large fan following.
She was Madhavikutty, Kamala Das
and Kamala Suraiyya at the fag end
of her life.

Born and brought up at Nalapat,
her ancestral home.
Childhood, adolescence and youth
she spent with the fragrance
of the yellow *Neermathalam* seeping
into her soul, her being, her writings.
Here was a woman craving for love,
love in all its manifestations.
Always looked back with nostalgia
for the love, care and warmth
that awaited her aplenty,
back in her grandmother's house.
Yearned a lot for that unstinting love
from far away metropolitan cities.

Krishna she fancied, was an enchanter,
her lover and she, his Radha!
Fact and fancy blending!
The music from his flute
mesmerised her.
Their warm exchanges of love
on the banks of the Yamuna,
and Radha's tearful parting
when Krishna leaves for Mathura. . . .
Symbolic of a married woman's
yearning for a soul mate?
Extramarital love, sex raw,
deception, homosexuality, loneliness,
freedom and women's rights—
the many themes of her writings!

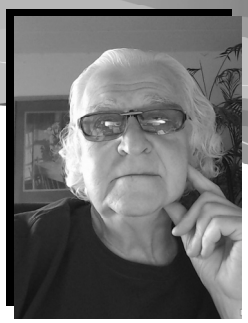
A woman far in advance of her times,
a misfit in the society she lived!
The true essence of love, did it
materialise for her?
More sinned against than sinning?

Lured into a relationship
in her late sixties with promise
of love, freedom and protection.
A mirage she realised later. . . .
An impulsive act, a headlong plunge
into the unknown, the uncustomary!
A gullible woman who believed blindly!
Did she regret her lost identity?
Did she yearn for a comeback?
Back to the shades of the *Neermathalam*
Back to the sanctity of the *Sarpa kavu*
Back to the greenery of Punnayurkulam
Back to her playmate Krishna!
A woman with the guts to speak out
her thoughts
Stifled by the cowardice of those
who feared their safety much more
than her's!
Kamala Suraiyya she remained
in her looks and attire to her last breath.

An enigma she is for me till date.
Yet my love for her has not waned.
Her young voice still reverberates
in my inner ear, as when I first met her
in the capital city of God's own country.
Born into one faith, fated to die
in another!
There's no going back in life—
a realisation too harsh, too cruel.

# Alberta Bound (V4)

**Michael Lee Johnson**



**I** own a gate to this prairie
that ends facing the Rocky Mountains.
They call it Alberta-
trails of endless blue sky
asylum of endless winters,
the hermitage of indolent retracted sun.
Deep freeze drips haphazardly into spring.
Drumheller, dinosaur badlands, dried bones,
ancient hoodoos sculpt high, prairie toadstools.
Alberta highway 2 opens the gateway of endless miles.
Travel weary, I stop by roadsides, ears open to
whispering pines.
In harmony North to South
Gordon Lightfoot pitches out a tune-
"Alberta Bound."
With independence in my *veins*,
I am a long way from my home.

## The Redemption

**M**y eyes green
are 2 glass windows
into the past.
I keep the blinds
pulled down tight.
Carnal knowledge
is a Biblical definition of sin.
I live in darkness,
the shame of those early years.
I pull myself out
redemption in old age,
a savior,
before the grave,
I flatter myself
in a mirror, no reflection.

## Tiny Sparrow Feet (V2)

**It's** calm.
Cheeky, unexpected.
Too quiet.
My clear plastic bowls
serves as my bird feeder.
I don't hear the distant
scratching, shuffling
of tiny sparrow feet,
the wing dances, fluttering, of a hungry
morning's lack of big band sounds.
I walk tentatively to my patio window,
spy the balcony with my detective's
eyes.
I witness three newly hatched
toddler sparrows, curved nails,
mounted
deep, in their mother's dead, decaying
back.
Their childish beaks bent over
elongated,
delicately, into golden chips, and dusted
yellow corn.

# Interview with Poet Michael Lee Johnson

**Michael Anthony Ingram**

*First aired verbally as an interview on Quintessential Listening: Poetry Online Radio, hosted by Michael Anthony Ingram, 07-26-23. These interview questions were asked directly to poet Michael Lee Johnson. Read all the way down.*

**What Is Poetry?**

**I**'d instead focus on what poetry is not. Poetry is not concerned with duty or absolute truth; try to find reality there, and you will become disappointed and disillusioned. It is a way of life, a passion, an empty bucket you put your words and energy. It makes you cry, laugh, and think thoughts in miniature and organize them as working on a puzzle solution.

**Your writing is dominated by what themes?**

**E**arly I wrote about romance and heartache. Later I wrote about street life, sex in and around the streets of the wicked cities, and the dark side of sin after midnight. My poetry also includes much of my native Indian poems, love, nature, the animals, the trees, and the rain. It has evolved from pictures and paintings into poems (ekphrasis), interesting topics like old farms in Kansas, the plight of native Indians, and the delineation of the lives of perceived special people and lands. Most recently, I have been working with musicians and composers, taking my poems to music. So, I am now a song lyricist with about 6-7 lyrics turned into songs on YouTube.

**Is there a message you are trying to convey with your art?**

**A**ll poets are storytellers. This is the beginning point. Every poem tells a long/short/image story of some sort. Storytelling is the creator of poetry. I create an emotional experience or slim slice of life that allows the reader to muse about that feeling. Even better, I love to have what I call "a kicker" line or 2 at the end that leave the reader in a dream state of interpretation, a pause in a feeling of their own.

**Over the years, how has your view of poetry and what poetry can accomplish changed? Has it changed because of what you have observed in the world?**

It has changed and evolved. In the beginning, I was often seeking my way out of my mental hell through poetry. I was selfish and self-centered. Over the years, as I stabilized, I became more assured of my visions, abilities, and purpose as to myself and my future possible legacy and less concerned about competition, what others think, whether my poetry is good enough, etc. I don't give a damn-I'm on my own mission, but a part of that mission is to help others come along with me on that journey which I likely would have never done earlier in my life.

**When you write, what emerges from within you?**

**O**ften it is a phrase, a line on TV, a beginner poem that never realized but now moves forward. Once the topic or clue comes into focus, I go in the other direction to focus on content and image development. I often use the Hemmingway notion, edit sober, create drunk. Not too drunk-just a drink or two works for me. As a depressant, it allows me to cut out the nonsense of the outside world and focus on the feelings and required focus needed to create impactful lines in a brief short burst. If I'm bright and squirrely tailed, I'm too cognitive planning, event making, dead on the creative block; with a drink or 2-I focus in on the slice of life story living inside my brain comes out as flow, not cognitive thought-out patterns. This is just my way, not for others.

**What does your work convey about the human condition?**

**M**y poems are all over every aspect of the human condition that deals with real-life experiences, emotional segments, intimacies of the moment, an isolated event, or sighting leading to a short itemized imagistic construction. Poetry could be thoughtfully and emotionally thought of as the essence of the human condition.

**What is the role of a poet in today's society?**

**A** poet is the ghost rider of the human condition, the conveyor of the emotional states surrounding my/our exposure to daily events, often small but at times significant episodes. A true poet explores the small details of everyday life uniquely, making the seemingly insignificant universally relatable to the private conditional emotions of all people inherent within themselves. A good poet preserves cultures within the emotional makeup of all who read his words-verbs and nouns in action.

# Dialogic Ethnographies: A Review of *Prose Writings from North East India : Prose Writings from North East India* Edited by Malsawmi Jacob & Jaydeep Sarangi

**Sahitya Akademi,New Delhi, 2021**
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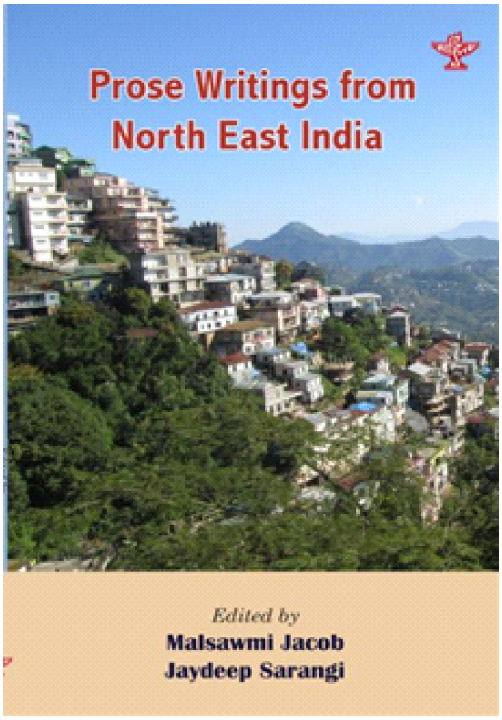
**Basudhara Roy**

The region geographically identified as Northeast India is a triangular shape of land that shares its borders with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. An area of roughly 2.62 lakh square kilometers comprising the eight Indian states (in alphabetical order) of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, the remarkable fact about this region is that it shares longer borders (more than 96%) with its neighbouring countries than with India itself. This geographical positioning renders its connections - historical, social, ecological, cultural and linguistic - with both India and Southeast Asia unique. Here is a rich melting pot of tribes, races, languages, histories, mythologies, and cultures. "About 220 languages are spoken in the whole of Northeast," Malsawmi Jacob and Jaydeep Sarangi point out. Equally remarkable is its biodiversity, its wide range of topographical and climatic variations and its diverse ecological habitats that render it a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot.

In their comprehensive and compact introduction to the book, Jacob and Sarangi write, "It is quite convenient to refer to the north-eastern part of India simply as 'the Northeast.' But, there is nothing called a "north-easterner" and the concept is purely geographical. […] However, we will continue to use the term here, both for the sake of convenience and out of habit. It's an amazing vital literary culture. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that the term only indicates a geographical location and not homogeneity of the people." An effective understanding of this region by the greater part of the nation's populace has been inhibited by geographical obscurity, historical apathy and paucity of healthy socio-cultural transactions. Mis-information and stereotypes abound in the public imagination and much polarization of opinion stems from lack of adequate knowledge about the region and its history. "Poor information is the bane of understanding, especially of a complex region," asserts Sanjoy Hazarika in his 'Author's Note' to *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast*, emphasizing that this "is inexcusable when vast amounts of information are accessible at the tap of a finger on a smartphone, an iPad or a laptop."

The body of English writing from this culturally rich region is relatively young and spans less than five decades. In this brief period, however, it has produced an outstanding range of writers who have enriched and extended the corpus of English fiction and poetry from India




through their sensitive handling of life and history, their keen decolonial insights, their informed radicalism and their sincere experimentations with language. "However, despite the prevalence of creative literature, prose writing of analytical nature is still comparatively rare," urge Jacob and Sarangi. Their edited collection, *Prose Writings from North East India* aims to address this gap. Comprising nineteen insightful and thoughtfully-crafted essays on the Northeast of India by some of its most well-known and greatly-admired writers like Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Malsawmi Jacob and Nabina Das among others, the collection offers an eclectic showcase of voices, ideas and stylistic diversity from each of the eight states that constitute the region. The collection "is not as representative as we would have wished", the editors point out but then representation always remains too complex an issue to do absolute justice to.

The nineteen essays authored by nineteen writers from eight states - one each from Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura, two each from Sikkim and Nagaland, three each from Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram, and four from Manipur – cover a wide thematic and aesthetic range. While Anasuya A. Paul offers a careful analysis of the political status of the North-East and Mitra Phukan writes of Assam's delectable cuisine, a large number of the essays here attempt articulate journeys into the rich literary traditions of the North East. Easterine Kire, for instance, examines the significance of the oral tradition of poetry in the worldview of the *Tenyimia* Nagas, Th. Ratankumar Singh explores the significance of mythology in Manipuri literature, Malsawmi Jacob attempts a historical re-telling of the lives of five women poets in pre-literate Mizo society, Nabina Das throws light on the deconstruction of gender binaries in the work of a few contemporary poets and Ananya S. Guha documents the aesthetic trends in the literature of Shillong. There are explorations of the Manipuri theatre in essays by M. Priyobata Singh and Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh and an essay on Anangomohini Devi by Bhaskar Roy Barman. In addition to these are essays such as those by Mamang Dai, Cherrie L Chhangte and Jodha Chandra Sanasam that explore the plural cultures of the region and fictional pieces by Tashi Chophel, Pem Choden and Vish ü Rita Krocha. Refreshing in theme and style are Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's dialogic extract from his novel on the linguistic dilemmas and linguistic politics of the region and prose pieces by Baruk Jacob and Zualteii Poonte. The last two, in particular, effectively blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction on the one hand and prose and poetry on the other with the result that their charm remains as deep as it is memorable. The first essay in the book by Mamang Dai, begins with a journey:

> I am driving down a road leading to my hometown of Pasighat in East Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. The weather is cold and clear. […] An age-old map of the seasons is unfolding. There will be songs, festivals and storytelling.

These opening lines are immensely symbolic for the book as a whole for here, too, is a gradual unfolding of age-old maps of history, culture and relationships. As one travels through the rich literary landscape of these essays, the collection speaks to the reader not only as a sampling of some of the best prose writing in English from the North East of India but also as an effective ambassador of its historical, cultural and literary epistemology.

In their Introduction to *Landscape, Culture and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India,* Neeladri Bhattacharya & Joy L.K. Pachau state, "Viewed from the centre, the Northeast is a frontier, a periphery of the nation, not just a cartographic location on the map like any other. Re-orienting the gaze – looking through the eyes of the locality – will help us reimagine the space." In my opinion, *Prose Writings from North East India* does precisely that. The book offers a neat geographical organization of its contents in alphabetical order with every state of the Northeast being duly represented. The coverage, though leaning heavily on the literary, is nonetheless extensive within this chosen field and keeping in mind the fact that books dealing with the politics of the region abound, this focus on the literary is an attempt to balance the image of the region as primarily one of contestation and conflict. Again, the seamlessness of the essays within their enthralling diversity offers a metaphoric experience of the connections that hold the region together despite its numerous differences. Of particular significance is the language of the book in which distinct patterns of orality structure linguistic pace, vocabulary and syntax. Lucidity, inherent musicality and a mythopoeic imagination characterize most of the writings here and the human and non-human worlds are bound together in an intense ecological wholeness. Baruk Jacob's 'Chhumleivak', for instance, describes the walk of a cloud through human streets while Mamang Dai tells us, "The land and the people share a bond that is both cruel and kind, like brothers claiming territory. Since both are equal to the other it is a state of mutual regard and awe, a state of kinship." Cherrie L Chhangte writes that "the first design produced by the Mizo is a design called kawkpuizikzial; it is surmised that 'kawk' (chakawk), a common leafy vegetable whose leaf tips curl in a rounded loop, inspired this design, and remained a recurring motif in different traditional puans."

More than two-thirds of the essays in the collection being pieces of non-fiction, one is tempted to speculate about the particular value of non-fiction in the world. Though the magic and imaginative power of fiction are natural advantages to it, the responsibility of non-fiction in the world is greater. Unlike fiction, it is commanded to live up to a certain 'truth' of the world, precision, consistency and relevance being integral to its performance. *Prose Writings from North East India* offers to its readers an opportunity of such a precise, consistent and relevant engagement with the region and a mode of dialogic ethnography to participate in the lived narratives of its history and culture. Published by *Sahitya Akademi,* the book attempts a re-imagination of the Northeast as a vital centre of literary, cultural and linguistic dynamism. This is a book that will, hopefully, find a place not just in libraries but in the active curriculum of our high education as a worthy cultural ambassador of the region's best.

# NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Anjana J.:** Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, N.S.S. College, Pandalam. She is a Research Guide with University of Kerala.

**Anju Sosan George:** Assistant Professor at the Department of English, CMS college, Kottayam. She is the author of Discourses on Disability( Cambridge Scholars Publishing,2023) and Disability Studies: A Bibliography( KDP, 2022). She is also an Associate at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla.

**Anne Placid:** Assistant Professor; HoD of English, Sri C Achutha Menon Govt College, Kuttanellur, Thrissur, Kerala.

**Basudhara Roy:** Assistant Professor of English at Karim City College, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, India. As a poet and reviewer, her work is featured in anthologies and magazines of international repute. She has authored two books, *Migrations of Hope* (Criticism; New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2019) and *Moon in My Teacup* (Poetry; Kolkata: Writer's Workshop, 2019). Her second poetry collection, *Stitching a Home*, came out in 2021.

**Binu K.D.:** Associate Professor, Department of English, Govt Law College Thrissur, Ayyanthole, Kerala.

**C T Indra:** Retired professor of English from University of Madras. Her areas of interest are Literary Criticism and Theory, Translation, and Hagiography. She has translated from Tamil into English short stories, plays, novella and critical writings. With R Rajagopalan she contributed to and edited *Language, Culture and Power: English-Tamil in Modern India 1900 CE-Present and Culture*, *Language*, *and Identity*: *English-Tamil in Colonial India*: 1750-1900 (Routledge 2018).

**Devanand R.:** Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Government First Grade College, Koratagere, Karnataka. Author of the critical work, "A Companion to Mahesh Dattani- The Playwright and his plays." He has published numerous research articles in peer-reviewed/journals.

**Jahnavi Gupta:** a researcher at the Department of English, University of Delhi. Currently she is studying the intersections of humour and science fiction. Her other academic interests include, children's literature, women's writings, graphic narratives, and short fiction.

**Kishore Ram:** Associate Professor of English at NSS College, Pandalam, Kerala. He was selected for the first International Fiction Workshop organized by the University of East Anglia, London. He is the author of three published works and several research articles.

**Lekshmi R. Nair:** Associate Professor of English at Government College Kottayam, Kerala. Her areas of interest include gender studies, science fiction and posthuman studies.

**M. Ramakrishnan:** Assistant Professor of Folklore, Department of Tribal Studies, Central University of Jharkhand, Cheri-Manatu, Ranchi.

**Manoj S.:** Assistant Professor of English at Fatima Mata National College (Autonomous), Kollam, affiliated to the University of Kerala. He has published research articles in leading journals and has organized and co-ordinated numerous national seminars on literature.

**Michael Lee Johnson:** lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era and is a dual citizen of the United States and Canada. He is a poet, freelance writer, amateur photographer, and small business owner in Itasca, DuPage County, Illinois. His poems have appeared in 42 countries; he edits and publishes ten poetry sites. He is the administrator of six Facebook poetry groups; he has several new poetry chapbooks coming out soon. Michael Lee Johnson has been nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards poetry 2015/1 Best of the Net 2016/2 Best of the Net 2017, 2 Best of the Net 2018. 231 poetry videos are now on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/user/poetrymanusa/videos. Editor-in-chief poetry anthology, Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze: http://www.amazon.com/dp/1530456762; editor-in-chief poetry anthology, Dandelion in a Vase of Roses available here https://www.amazon.com/dp/1545352089.

**Ms. Karthika R:** Assistant Professor of English at S D College, Alappuzha. She is actively involved in research projects funded by UGC and other agencies and has numerous publications to her credit.

**N. Sreekala:** formerly Associate Professor of English at Sree Narayana College, Chempazhanthy, Thiruvananthapurm, University of Kerala. She has been publishing articles and poems regularly in the inter-disciplinary magazine, *India Forward* since 2018. Her first collection of English poems, *Revelations* was published by Phrabhat Books, Thiruvananthapuram, in 2022.

**Nimisha Yadav:** Ph.D. scholar in the Centre for Language Learning at The NorthCap University, Gurugram, India. Her primary area of interest is Cultural Studies; her current research focuses on City Literature.

**Rajesh V. Nair:** Assistant Professor of English at School of Letters, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. He has published articles in areas such as life writing, graphic narratives, memory studies, popular culture and gender.

**Rajnath:** Eminent scholar, literary critic and editor. He was former Professor and Head of the department of English and editor of the reputed periodical *Journal of Literary Criticism* (1984 - 2008). His critical works include *T.S. Eliot's Theory of Poetry*, *Critical Speculations*, *Criticism and Culture*, *The Identity of Literature and Deconstruction: A Critique*.

**S. Visaka Devi:** Assistant Professor, Department of English, Pondicherry University. She has published poems and short stories under the pseudonym Vishaka Sajan.

**Sanskriti Razdan:** has completed her PhD in Historical Studies from G.D Goenka University, Haryana. Her research focusses on the role of Awadhi and Braj bhasha poetry. She is currently teaching at Mount Carmel College, Vasanth Nagar, Bangalore.

**Shrutimita Mehta:** Associate Professor at The NorthCap University, Gurugram, Haryana. Her areas of interest are Gender studies, Indian Writing in English, Postcolonial Literature, Partition Studies, Women Novelists and Twentieth-Century Writing.

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