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# Journal of Literature & Aesthetics

AN INTERNATIONAL PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL



**Articles on**

Crime and Punishment, Select Narratives of Virginia Woolf and Margaret Atwood, Folk Traditions and Modern Literary Evolutions, Anita Nair's Select Novels,Dialectics of Remembering/ Forgetting in Neoliberal India, The Walled City, ESL Teachers of India in the Globalized Scenario of Higher Education, Manjula Padmanabhan Bloodchild, Oil on Water, The Swan Book, Muslim Women's Writing from the Hyderabad State, Seventeenth Century England and the Construction of a Colonial Identity, The Silent Child, The House of the Spirits, Menolit Studies, Before She Sleeps, Double Yoke, Vishkanya or Poison Damsel

**Book Review**

Phenomenologies of Incarnation in Michel Henry and Emmanuel Falque: Saving Flesh,

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# Pathogens of Thought: Illness, Ideology, and the Body Politic in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

PEERZADA OWAIS ADIL



**Abstract**

This paper explores Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as a pandemic narrative, focusing on metaphors of illness and contagion to critique the spread of harmful ideologies. Through a close reading of the text, the paper reveals how Dostoevsky frames moral corruption and radical philosophies as infectious forces that destabilize individuals and society. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights, including Priscilla Wald's concept of contagion and René Girard's analysis of reciprocal violence, the study situates the novel within the broader framework of outbreak narratives. By examining the interplay of physical sickness and psychological turmoil in Raskolnikov's journey, the paper highlights the novel's prescient commentary on communal vulnerability and collective responsibility. This reinterpretation not only enriches Dostoevsky's critique of his 19th-century context but also underscores the enduring relevance of his work in understanding contemporary crises, from misinformation to societal polarization, as epidemics of thought.

**Keywords**: Ideological Contagion, Moral Corruption, Outbreak Metaphor, Philosophical Pathogens

## Introduction: Diseased Ideologies and Concealed Afflictions

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, first published in 1866, immerses readers in the oppressive atmosphere of mid-19th-century St. Petersburg, a city sweltering under the weight of summer heat, rampant destitution, and social stagnation. The novel traces the moral and psychological disintegration of Rodion Raskolnikov, a penniless ex-student who, convinced of his own intellectual exceptionalism, murders an elderly pawnbroker and her gentle, unsuspecting sister. Although Raskolnikov initially clings to a warped belief that "extraordinary" individuals exist above common moral standards, his grandiose arguments soon crumble in the face of lived reality. Crammed into cramped, stuffy apartments and navigating the city's refuse-strewn streets and dingy taverns, Raskolnikov rapidly loses his precarious grip on reason. Guilt gnaws at him, nightmares and hallucinations invade his fractured psyche, and the unwavering heat only intensifies his delirium. Under these conditions, moral compasses fail to point true; Raskolnikov drifts feverishly, unmoored in a world where the boundaries between right and wrong blur like mirages in stagnant air. Throughout this tense narrative landscape, illness—both as a physical condition and as a metaphor—emerges as a central theme. According to Antonin Artaud, French dramatist, poet, and essayist renowned

for his radical Theatre of Cruelty, assertion that "The plague takes dormant images, latent disorder, and suddenly carries them to the point of the most extreme gestures" (18) aptly captures the atmosphere of *Crime and Punishment*. In Dostoevsky's hands, sickness operates as a revelatory force, dragging hidden social ills into painful visibility. As the author himself cautions, "It is not a sickness that is in full view of all that is dangerous […] but one that lies deeply hidden, one which has still not come to the surface […] It is the same in society" (22). The recurring motif of disease in the novel does not function merely as a backdrop or incidental detail; rather, it stands as a guiding metaphor. Like an untreated infection, unspoken grievances and half-formed ideologies fester beneath the veneer of respectability, threatening to erupt and spread.

Before the reader learns of Raskolnikov's cruelty or his intentionally shabby attire—worn like a badge of intellectual arrogance rather than a mask of anonymity—they encounter his fragile mental state. Dostoevsky introduces him as "for some time he had been in an irritable and tense state resembling hypochondria (5)'". This term suggests more than mere hypochondria as we understand it today; it implies a nebulous malaise, a condition akin to the Russian khandra or the British spleen, a state of spiritual discontent, existential irritation, and gnawing unrest. Even as Raskolnikov's physical maladies intensify, they remain closely intertwined with his moral and philosophical unraveling. Convinced that true greatness can be gauged by one's capacity to transgress societal norms without succumbing to the common criminal's feverish guilt, he initially believes himself immune to the ailments that afflict lesser men. Yet his ongoing weakness, dizziness, and delirium betray the fragility of his convictions. Illness seeps into every facet of the narrative, prompting a reinterpretation of the text as a plague story where moral decay and philosophical pathogens circulate unseen, much like airborne germs.

Plague narratives have endured across centuries and cultures precisely because they offer a vivid lens for diagnosing the body politic. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the literal plague ravaging Thebes is a symbol of buried sins and secret transgressions. *Crime and Punishment* inverts this dynamic: crime itself does not beget the societal sickness; it merely reveals what already lurks below the surface. The intellectual climate of St. Petersburg, charged with dubious scientific theories, utilitarian doctrines, and radical philosophies, fills the humid summer air with insidious ideas as if they were microbes waiting for a susceptible host. Raskolnikov, weakened by poverty, isolation, and pride, becomes a prime candidate for infection, his constant ailments underscoring his inability to remain "extraordinary" and untainted by moral consequence. Through the fusion of corporeal and conceptual illness, Dostoevsky delineates a city - and, by extension, a society—on the brink of an epidemic of the mind and soul. While previous studies have examined illness as a motif in Dostoevsky's works, this paper uniquely frames *Crime and Punishment* within the paradigm of pandemic narratives, connecting the novel's critique of ideological extremism to modern crises like Covid-19. This approach underscores Dostoevsky's foresight in identifying the social and psychological dynamics of contagion—a theme of enduring relevance.

Over a century and a half later, *Crime and Punishment* still resonates because its depiction of ideological disease rings true in our own time. The novel encourages us to scrutinize not just visible injustices, but also the concealed, simmering resentments, faulty premises, and poisonous beliefs that infiltrate communal life. As Dostoevsky demonstrates, true peril often arises not from the overt acts of violence or openly espoused dogmas, but from the dormant pathogens of thought, prejudice, and unexamined assumptions. Just as Raskolnikov's supposed immunity unravels, revealing him as feverish and frail, so too can any community's sense of moral certainty succumb to the hidden illnesses that plague its foundations.

**Contagion, Responsibility, and Ideological Infection**

The concept of contagion, as Priscilla Wald underscores in her examination of the "outbreak narrative," extends far beyond the realm of epidemiology. While diseases spread through human populations with terrifying efficiency, Wald notes that "Contagion is more than an epidemiological fact. It is also a foundational concept in the study of religion and of society, with a long history of explaining how beliefs circulate in social interactions". From the very origins of the term "contagion," which literally means "to touch together," there has been recognition that intangible elements—ideas, attitudes, and ideologies—are transmitted much like pathogens. By the fourteenth century, this notion had already taken hold, as "contagion" came to refer not just to physical illness but also to the dangerous spread of corrupting thoughts. Historical anxieties reflect this broad definition: Edmund Burke, for instance, infamously described French revolutionary ideas as "a dreadful pestilence which beginning in France, threatens to lay waste the whole moral, and in a great degree the whole physical world" (qtd. in McWhir 29). Nor was Burke alone in linking ideological upheaval to disease. Lev Tolstoy's 1897 treatise *What Is Art*? characterized art itself as a form of infection, while in the eighteenth century, critics alarmed by the swift rise of the novel's popularity likened its proliferation among readers to the spread of plague (Tarr 141). Yet the logic of infection, whether biological or ideological, does not merely serve as a rhetorical device for condemning dangerous doctrines. Plague narratives and outbreak metaphors ultimately grapple with deeper questions of responsibility, interconnectedness, and human vulnerability. They resist simplistic assignments of blame to a single "patient zero," instead urging readers to consider how entire communities contribute to or resist the forces that threaten them. These narratives place the spotlight on collective responsibility and the invisible bonds that link every individual to the rest of society. Epidemic scenarios highlight that humans are, for better or worse, interdependent. As Wald points out, the outbreak narrative illustrates both "the perils of human interdependence and the triumphs of human connection and cooperation" (Wald 3). A pandemic can weaken or sever social bonds, but it can also spur groups to reaffirm communal values, find solidarity in shared struggle, and forge stronger, more resilient ties. In facing the specter of contagion—literal or metaphorical—societies reveal their structural fissures as well as their capacity for renewal.

By invoking the image of plague, writers and thinkers expose what lies hidden beneath a façade of normalcy. In the case of Fyodor Dostoevsky, this framework becomes especially

illuminating. As Dostoevsky warns, "It is not the sickness that is in full view that is dangerous … but the one deeply hidden" (22). Here, Dostoevsky posits that societal maladies are often concealed, festering beneath the surface until some catalyst brings them into the open. By repeatedly using imagery of infection, disease, and fever, he positions his novels as projects of diagnosis—works that strive to unmask and confront the covert ideological infections that compromise the health of the social body. Dostoevsky's predilection for extremes—radical ideas, desperate acts, and fractured families—operates much like the stress test of a plague narrative, pushing human bonds to their limits and revealing previously hidden weaknesses.

Beginning with *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky's oeuvre delves into the corrosive power of dangerous ideologies when carried to their logical conclusions. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's physical state is a mirror of his spiritual and moral turmoil. Fevers, fainting spells, and bouts of delirium track the protagonist's inner collapse, illustrating how moral confusion and philosophical sickness manifest his body. Dostoevsky explicitly connects these themes to a global catastrophe in Raskolnikov's feverish nightmare near the novel's end, where "the whole world had been doomed to fall victim to some terrible pestilence" (419). In this dream, strange trichinae infect people not by killing them directly but by instilling unwavering certainty in their own "truths." Unable to compromise or understand each other, humanity fractures into hostile camps. The absence of shared understanding reduces the world to chaos. Robin Feuer Miller notes Dostoevsky's uncanny foresight in recognizing that "half-baked" ideas spread through societies like lethal viruses (Miller 53). In our own era, this foresight seems eerily prophetic. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, segments of the population rejected straightforward preventive measures, such as wearing face masks or accepting vaccines, due to misinformation and distrust. Like Raskolnikov's dystopian vision, when "people killed each other in some kind of meaningless spite" (Dostoevsky 420), modern societies have witnessed polarization and ideological rigidity splinter communities and subvert cooperation. Dangerous ideas, like pathogens, can corrode the vital tissue of mutual reliance and respect, leaving a weakened body politic vulnerable to further infection.

Dostoevsky's insight aligns with Michel Foucault's historical analysis, which shows how perspectives on crime and disease have shifted over time. Initially conceived as a disease of the social body, crime evolved into a condition pathologized within the criminal individual (Foucault 178). Raskolnikov's own philosophical musings in his article "On Crime" question whether illness begets crime or crime itself induces a diseased state of mind (Dostoevsky 59). His pervasive use of fevered language (likhoradka) attests to Dostoevsky's engagement with contemporary medical discourse (Emery and Geballe 896). In Raskolnikov's world, physical symptoms reflect not only bodily disorders but also moral and intellectual strife. These plague metaphors recur throughout Dostoevsky's later work, notably in *Demons* (Besy), where radical pamphlets and ideologized texts spread through the community like cholera, "infecting" individuals with extremist convictions. Anne Lounsbery observes that such texts circulate as though they were germs, highlighting the novel's vision of readers and listeners as

hosts susceptible to intellectual contamination (Lounsbery 28). In "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," Dostoevsky intensifies this theme by describing how a once-pure world succumbs to corruption "like a foul trichina […] like a particle of plague" (Dostoevsky 115). Lounsbery further notes that the trichinae in Crime and Punishment connect to this image, suggesting the Gadarene swine epigraph in *Demons*—in which demons possessing a man are transferred into a herd of pigs—reinforces the pattern of harmful ideas as contagious, possessing forces (Lounsbery 29). In sum, the metaphor of contagion in Dostoevsky's works and similar plague narratives transcends literal disease. It becomes a conceptual tool for examining how unexamined doctrines, extremist beliefs, and corrupting influences proliferate in societies, challenging collective responsibility and forcing a confrontation with deeply rooted sociopolitical ills. As these narratives reveal, the health of a community depends not only on managing physical epidemics but also on recognizing, containing, and ultimately curing the ideological infections that threaten to overwhelm its moral immune system.

**Half-Baked Ideas and Modern Resonances**

Dostoevsky's plague metaphor prompts us to ask: what specific ideas are so virulent that they can be likened to lethal pathogens? Among the most dangerous notions he tackles in *Crime and Punishment* is the embrace of utilitarian self-interest. Within the novel's universe, this mindset manifests in the character Luzhin, who argues that prioritizing one's own interests above all else will paradoxically lead to broader social benefit. Luzhin's rationale is "love, before all, yourself alone" (Dostoevsky 116). This foreshadows the logic of trickle-down economics long before such a term existed. By his reasoning, an accumulation of self-centered actions by individuals will aggregate into communal prosperity (Dostoevsky 116). This is not a benign intellectual position but one that reveals its toxic underbelly when taken to its extreme. Raskolnikov, who initially regards Luzhin's words with disgust, points out the murderous implications lurking at the end of this line of thought: "follow through the consequences […] and it turns out you can butcher people" (Dostoevsky 118). This moral arithmetic—sacrificing some lives for a supposed greater good—feels startlingly familiar in contemporary contexts. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, some commentators and public figures suggested that safeguarding the economy might necessitate allowing the elderly or vulnerable to die rather than imposing costly preventive measures. These modern echoes of Raskolnikov's "arithmetic" lay bare the ethical void at the heart of purely utilitarian logic. Just as Dostoevsky warned, when we reduce human worth to a crude cost-benefit calculation, we lose sight of the shared humanity that forms the bedrock of social cohesion. Pandemics, both real and fictional, remind us that individuals are never truly isolated from one another; our fates are inextricably intertwined. A virus can jump from person to person in a crowded marketplace, and a harmful idea can spread just as easily through the intangible networks of discourse, media, and rumour.

Raskolnikov's path to murder is itself shaped by the casual transmission of an "idea in the air." Early in the narrative, he overhears two men in a tavern discussing the alleged uselessness of an elderly pawnbroker and the potential boon her death might provide to others. Although

he has "just conceived" (Dostoevsky 55) this concept in his own mind moments before, hearing it spoken aloud confirms that such notions are circulating widely . Like airborne germs passing from host to host, these ideas embed themselves in receptive minds. Raskolnikov's recurring illness—his fever, dizziness, and general malaise—mirrors the body's attempt to fight off an invasive pathogen, even as he consciously embraces the noxious logic that leads him to murder. Instead of rejecting the lethal thought "germ," he internalizes it, becoming both victim and vector. Later in the novel, Svidrigailov's appearance of fever at the brink of his suicide further reinforces the theme that physical sickness and moral decay go hand in hand, symbolizing spiritual degradation as much as bodily decline (Dostoevsky 389).

René Girard's examination of plague metaphors in literature provides a valuable lens for understanding why these ideologies function as contagions. Girard argues that such metaphors represent reciprocal violence and the dissolution of communal bonds, noting that Crime and Punishment stands as a prime example of this dynamic (Girard 835). When every individual asserts their truth as absolute—when empathy and compromise vanish—society disintegrates into factions poised to devour one another. In Dostoevsky's narrative, the presence of illness, both literal and figurative, underscores the fragility of human interconnectedness. Even those who aspire to stand apart and claim superiority, like Raskolnikov, are embroiled in the swirl of collective contagion. Their determination to transcend ordinary morality ends up entangling them more tightly in the moral and intellectual malaise that grips their community. By blending fever, disease, and inflexible ideologies, Dostoevsky exposes the vulnerability of even the proudest, most self-assured individuals to infectious ideas. The novel's resonance with modern crises arises precisely because it confronts how easily destructive notions gain traction when people fail to recognize their common humanity. In both Dostoevsky's time and our own, half-baked ideas prove as insidious as any germ: they infiltrate communities, weaken social ties, and foment turmoil. The metaphorical plague that courses through the pages of Crime and Punishment admonishes us to remain vigilant, questioning the logic of those who would reduce human lives to disposable commodities and confronting the forces that threaten to unravel the social fabric upon which we all depend.

## Conclusion

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* presents a world in which illness—both literal and metaphorical—serves as a critical diagnostic instrument. The novel's oppressive setting and morally fraught atmosphere give rise to a vision of disease as more than physical debilitation; it is an entry point into the invisible currents of thought and feeling that shape human societies. What appears on the surface as one man's crime emerges, under Dostoevsky's scrutiny, as a symptom of deeper pathologies: the half-baked ideas, misguided rationalizations, and corrosive beliefs circulating through the cultural bloodstream of St. Petersburg. These intangible contagions, like germs in stagnant air, threaten to infect all who breathe them in. By drawing on metaphors of plague and fever, Dostoevsky illuminates how private convictions and public discourses entwine. Raskolnikov's collapsing worldview, his bouts of delirium and distress,

and his ultimate failure to transcend ordinary morality all reflect the interplay of internal weakness and external ideological pollution. In his novel, Dostoevsky anticipates modern understandings of how misinformation, radical doctrines, and simplistic economic formulas proliferate, damaging the connective tissues of trust and empathy that hold communities together. Like epidemics, such "infections of thought" expose structural flaws and test our capacity to recognize common humanity.

This reading of *Crime and Punishment*—as a narrative of concealed afflictions and insidious transmissions—encourages us to confront not only the overt acts of violence or despair that define a troubled age, but also the silent, slow-moving agents of decay that lurk behind them. Over a century and a half since its publication, the novel retains its potency because it understands that the gravest dangers often stem from what remains unseen and unchecked: the persistent pathogens of prejudice, complacency, and skewed logic. In diagnosing Raskolnikov's sickness, Dostoevsky diagnoses the body politic as well, warning that unless we learn to identify and address these hidden infections, we may all become fevered wanderers in a moral wasteland.

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# Literary Echoes: The Interplay of Memory and Feminist Art in the Select Narratives of Virginia Woolf and Margaret Atwood

NEELOFAR SHAFI & HAADIYAH CHISHTI



Neelofar Shafi



Haadiyah Chishti


## Abstract

This paper explores the interplay between memory and artistic expression in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), two works rich with feminist themes and gender dynamics. The study focuses on the experiences of two female artists - Lily Briscoe in Woolf's modernist novel and the unnamed narrator in Atwood's postmodern narrative - who use memory as a tool for navigating trauma and reclaiming agency. Within patriarchal constraints, memory emerges as a means of healing, liberation, and renewal. By revisiting their past, these characters reclaim control over their narratives, defying societal limitations and exploring their creative potential. This paper examines how these novels engage with modernist and postmodernist frameworks, offering distinct artistic responses: one centered on embracing art as redemption and the other on rejecting it to sever ties with patriarchal oppression.


**Keywords:** memory, art, modernism, postmodernism, feminism, gender

## Introduction

The interplay of memory, gender, and artistic dissent has been a focal point of feminist literary criticism, providing insight into how women navigate societal constraints to reclaim identity and agency. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) exemplify this dynamic, presenting female protagonists who grapple with creativity and self-expression within patriarchal structures. While Woolf's Lily Briscoe channels memory into her art as an act of defiance, Atwood's unnamed narrator rejects her artistic identity, severing ties with societal expectations and embracing a liberated sense of self. This article explores how memory and art function as tools of feminist resistance in these texts, framing them within the distinct literary paradigms of modernism and postmodernism.

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchy in constructing "power-structured relationships," where one group dominates another (23). Millett's critique of systemic gender inequities aligns with the feminist tensions in Woolf's and Atwood's works, where memory becomes a medium for reclaiming lost identities and art transforms into a vehicle of resistance. Both authors challenge traditional notions of gender and creativity, demonstrating how female protagonists confront historical oppression while redefining their roles as artists.

While the broader feminist concerns of Woolf and Atwood are evident across their oeuvres, their thematic preoccupations take distinct forms in *To the Lighthouse* and *Surfacing*. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) critiques the constraining expectations of marriage and domesticity, highlighting the protagonist's struggle to find fulfillment within societal constraints. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) critiques patriarchal control over women's bodies and autonomy in a dystopian setting. These works, though separated by literary and historical contexts, share a commitment to exposing and challenging the systemic devaluation of women's creative and intellectual potential. In *To the Lighthouse* and *Surfacing*, the protagonists' artistic journeys are intricately tied to their memories and the challenges posed by patriarchal systems. Lily Briscoe's painting reflects her ability to channel personal loss into creative triumph, with Mrs. Ramsay's memory serving as a source of inspiration and defiance. Conversely, Atwood's narrator, burdened by traumatic memories and societal expectations, rejects her role as a commercial artist, destroying her drawings as a symbolic act of liberation. This divergence highlights the distinct approaches of modernism and postmodernism in conceptualizing art and resistance.

Both novels also share structural and thematic parallels. Each is tripartite in design, reflecting the psychological and emotional journeys of their protagonists. In *To the Lighthouse*, the sections— "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse"—trace the passage of time, personal loss, and artistic fulfillment. In *Surfacing*, the narrator's journey unfolds through her return to her childhood home, her search for her father, and her eventual psychological transformation. These narratives emphasize memory as a means of navigating loss and reclaiming agency, ultimately enabling the protagonists to redefine their identities. The modernist and postmodernist frameworks of these novels further underscore their artistic philosophies. Woolf's modernist ethos, articulated in her essays "Modern Fiction" and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," emphasizes the importance of capturing fragmented human experiences to uncover deeper patterns and meaning. This aligns with T. S. Eliot's view that art offers a way to impose "order" on the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy" in contemporary life (177). Lily's painting exemplifies this modernist motif, transforming personal and societal chaos into coherence through creative expression.

Atwood's *Surfacing*, by contrast, embodies postmodernism's skepticism toward grand narratives and its critique of commodification. Jean-François Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv) resonates with Atwood's portrayal of art as a product of patriarchal commodification. The narrator's rejection of her art reflects a postmodern rejection of fixed meanings and hierarchies, prioritizing personal liberation over traditional artistic production. By situating *To the Lighthouse* and *Surfacing* within the broader contexts of modernist and postmodernist literature, this article examines how Woolf and Atwood engage with feminist themes of memory, creativity, and resistance. Their works challenge patriarchal systems, offering nuanced explorations of the transformative power of art and memory in reclaiming female autonomy and identity. Through distinct yet complementary approaches, these novels illuminate the enduring relevance of feminist artistic dissent in navigating gendered constraints and asserting individuality.

**Art, Memory, and Feminist Resistance in *To the Lighthouse***

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a quintessential modernist novel that explores the intricate interplay of art, memory, and feminist resistance. The novel revolves around the Ramsay family and their guests at a vacation home, weaving a narrative that delves into the complexities of human relationships and creative expression. At the heart of the story are Lily Briscoe, an artist striving for independence and recognition, and Mrs. Ramsay, a matriarch who represents both traditional gender roles and a source of inspiration. Their lives, though distinct, intersect in their shared struggle against the confines of patriarchy.

Lily's artistic journey highlights the challenges faced by women in asserting their creative identities within a society that devalues their contributions. Despite societal dismissals, such as Charles Tansley's assertion that "women can't paint or write" (Woolf 133), Lily perseveres in her artistic endeavors. Her painting becomes a symbol of defiance against gender-based prejudices. As Woolf observes through Lily's narrative, art serves as a means of imposing order on life's chaos, transforming fleeting moments and fragmented memories into a cohesive vision. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors Lily's creative process, emphasizing the non-linear nature of memory and the ways in which it informs artistic expression. Woolf's modernist approach, articulated in her essay "Modern Fiction," calls for a focus on the subjective experience, urging writers to "trace the pattern…which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (161). In *To the Lighthouse*, this ethos is reflected in the narrative's focus on Lily's internal reflections and her evolving perception of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily's relationship with Mrs. Ramsay is central to her artistic journey. Mrs. Ramsay, who embodies traditional gender roles, inspires Lily through her ability to create harmony amidst the chaos of life. As Groover notes, Lily's painting derives its significance not from its permanence but from its capacity to foster a "sympathetic connection between self and other" (227). Similarly, Bezrucka compares Mrs. Ramsay's role as an "artist of life" to Lily's creative vision, highlighting their shared ability to bring order and meaning to transient experiences (333).

However, Lily's path diverges from Mrs. Ramsay's as she rejects societal expectations that confine women to roles of domesticity and subservience. While Mrs. Ramsay fulfills the traditional expectations of a wife and mother, she recognizes and admires Lily's independence, observing, "There was in Lily a thread of something…something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would" (Woolf 157). This acknowledgment underscores the internal conflict faced by women navigating between societal acceptance and personal autonomy. Lily's struggle against patriarchal norms is further exemplified in her interactions with Mr. Ramsay, whose demands for sympathy and validation disrupt her artistic process. Woolf portrays Lily's canvas as a "barrier," symbolizing her resistance to Mr. Ramsay's overbearing presence (Woolf 125). Despite these interruptions, Lily's resolve remains unshaken. Her final act of completing her painting becomes a declaration of her individuality and a testament to the transformative power of art. Solitude emerges as a recurring motif in Lily's journey, reflecting Woolf's assertion in *A Room of One's Own* that "a woman must

have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (6). Lily's preference for isolation allows her to immerse herself in her creative process, free from the constraints of societal expectations. Sitting alone, she finds the clarity and inspiration needed to translate her memories into art, affirming that memory is not only a source of personal reflection but also a catalyst for creative expression. The completion of Lily's painting, marked by a single decisive line, signifies her triumph over societal constraints and her reconciliation with loss. This act aligns with modernist ideals, which view art as a means of finding coherence in a fragmented world. The line, described as being drawn "with a sudden intensity," bridges the gaps left by Mrs. Ramsay's absence, affirming Lily's artistic vision and her ability to create meaning from life's ephemerality (Woolf 189).

Woolf uses Lily's journey to critique the patriarchal structures that inhibit women's creativity and independence. Characters like Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley embody the societal forces that dismiss women's artistic potential, reinforcing stereotypes that undermine their capabilities. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2014) highlights the harm caused by such stereotypes, noting that they "limit women's or men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers, and make choices about their lives and life plans" (para. 6). Through Lily's defiance, Woolf challenges these prejudices, illustrating the resilience of women artists in the face of systemic barriers. Lily's artistic journey is not merely a personal triumph but a broader feminist statement. Her decision to remain unmarried and prioritize her painting challenges the societal expectation that women's worth is tied to their relationships with men. When Mr. Ramsay questions her contentment, she responds, "Everything," reaffirming her fulfillment as an artist (Woolf 127). This rejection of marriage as a form of submission underscores her commitment to autonomy and her belief in the transformative power of art.

By intertwining themes of memory, solitude, and artistic resilience, *To the Lighthouse* highlights the enduring relevance of feminist resistance in the face of patriarchal constraints. Lily's painting, informed by her memories of Mrs. Ramsay, becomes a testament to the potential of art to navigate loss, reclaim agency, and create meaning in an unstable world. Woolf's portrayal of Lily offers a vision of art as both a redemptive force and a powerful tool for challenging societal norms, affirming the transformative possibilities of feminist creativity.

**Atwood's *Surfacing*: Rejecting Commercial Art**

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* presents a nuanced exploration of gender, memory, and art, building on themes of feminist resistance and personal reclamation. Unlike Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which celebrates art as a redemptive and unifying force, Atwood's postmodern narrative critiques the commodification of cre`ativity, depicting art as a source of entrapment within patriarchal structures. The novel focuses on an unnamed narrator who embarks on a journey of self-discovery, ultimately rejecting her role as a commercial artist to reclaim her agency and connect with nature. Existing scholarship on *Surfacing* has primarily emphasized feminist and postcolonial interpretations. For instance, Banerjee and Mukherjee (2017) identify

the narrator's search for her father as a symbolic quest for identity and a reconnection with nature (40). Wright (2012) categorizes *Surfacing* as postcolonial Canadian literature, highlighting its portrayal of "shifting power dynamics" among indigenous populations, English settlers, French Canadians, and Americans (223). Wright further argues that the narrator's journey dismantles binary oppositions, enabling her to achieve "a new kind of dynamic awareness" (214). While Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay strives to impose order amidst chaos, Atwood's narrator resists societal norms and institutions, including patriarchy and marriage, in pursuit of liberation.

Despite these interpretations, the theme of art in *Surfacing* remains largely underexplored. The narrator's dissatisfaction with her role as a commercial artist reflects the constraints imposed by patriarchal society. She views her career as an illustrator as a compromise for financial stability rather than a true expression of creativity. Reflecting on her work, she observes, "I do posters, covers, a little advertising and magazine work and the occasional commissioned book like this one" (Atwood 56). Her current project, illustrating Quebec Folk Tales, is marked by frustration and disconnection, as she struggles to produce meaningful work under the pressure of male-dominated expectations. This mirrors Lily Briscoe's challenges in *To the Lighthouse*, as both women confront societal interference in their artistic endeavors. Patriarchal influence further stifles the narrator's creativity. Her ex-husband dismisses her aspirations, asserting that "there have never been any important women artists" (Atwood 56), echoing Charles Tansley's condescending remark in Woolf's novel. Male publishers and societal norms dictate the narrator's artistic choices, compelling her to compromise her vision to align with commercial demands. She reflects, "So I compromised; now I compromise before I take the work in, it saves time" (Atwood 57). This submission to commercialism highlights the commodification of women's creativity under patriarchal capitalism.

The narrator's journey of self-reclamation culminates in a symbolic rejection of her past and its constraints. In a pivotal act of purgation, she burns her artwork, along with other remnants of her patriarchal life. She states, "I snap the catches of my case and take out the drawings and the typescript… The pages bunch in my hands; I add them one by one so the fire will not be smothered" (Atwood 189). This act signifies her defiance of societal expectations and her determination to sever ties with a system that exploits her creativity. Additionally, she discards the ring given to her by an ex-lover, symbolizing her rejection of male authority and reclaiming autonomy over her identity. The narrator's transformation is further marked by her communion with nature, which serves as a source of healing and empowerment. Diving into the lake, she confronts her traumatic past, including memories of an abortion and her father's death. This climactic moment is described as a vision of death: "It was there but it wasn't a painting…a dead thing, it was dead" (Atwood 152). Her immersion in the lake symbolizes a purification process, allowing her to emerge as a new woman: "When I am clean I come out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface" (Atwood 191). This ritualistic renewal underscores her break from societal constraints and her embrace of a more authentic self.

In contrast to Lily Briscoe's reliance on memory to complete her painting, the narrator in *Surfacing* rejects art entirely, associating it with the patriarchal commodification of her identity. Her journey is not one of artistic creation but of personal liberation. She connects with maternal visions, such as her mother feeding birds, which symbolize life and nurturing rather than consumption and exploitation: "She is feeding them; one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder" (Atwood 196). These visions help her reconcile with her past and find inner peace, enabling her to reject societal impositions.

Atwood's narrator also critiques patriarchal violence and its parallels with colonial exploitation. The narrator juxtaposes the abuse of women's bodies with the exploitation of the Canadian landscape, as exemplified by the killing of a heron and her reflections on environmental degradation. Critics Gautam and Sinha (2012) observe that *Surfacing* highlights "men's misuse and women's use of nature" (3). The narrative draws connections between patriarchal and imperialist structures, emphasizing the narrator's resistance to both forms of oppression. Ultimately, the narrator's journey concludes with a symbolic affirmation of life and hope. She chooses to embrace her pregnancy and her relationship with Joe, signaling her decision to prioritize personal growth over societal expectations. She reflects, "To prefer life, I owe them [her parents] that" (Atwood 202). This resolution contrasts sharply with the ending of *To the Lighthouse*, where Lily's artistic vision symbolizes redemption. Instead, *Surfacing* rejects art as a product of patriarchal commodification, emphasizing personal liberation as the ultimate goal. Atwood's *Surfacing* challenges traditional notions of art and its role in women's lives. By rejecting commercial art and reconnecting with nature, the narrator reclaims her identity and resists the patriarchal forces that have shaped her existence. The novel underscores the limitations of art within a commodified framework, advocating instead for personal freedom and spiritual renewal. This departure from modernist ideals, which emphasize art's redemptive potential, reflects the postmodern skepticism of grand narratives, positioning *Surfacing* as a powerful critique of societal constraints on women's creativity.

## Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* explore the journeys of female protagonists seeking order and meaning within their lives. While both works focus on memory, trauma, and gendered constraints, they diverge in their representations of art, aligning with modernist and postmodernist worldviews, respectively. *In To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe's commitment to painting represents a form of redemptive art, a tool for countering patriarchal limitations and asserting women's creative potential. Her act of completing her painting becomes a performative resistance, challenging male authority and dismantling societal restraints imposed on women. In contrast, the protagonist of *Surfacing* abandons her art as a rejection of the patriarchal commodification of creativity. By discarding her illustrations, she embarks on a path of self-liberation, choosing to redefine her identity beyond societal expectations. This rejection of art as a vehicle for salvation reflects a postmodern skepticism toward universal truths and fixed meanings. Instead of seeking coherence and permanence, *Surfacing* advocates personal narratives and individual renewal.

These contrasting responses to art reflect the theoretical frameworks underpinning the two novels. Modernism, as exemplified in *To the Lighthouse*, views art as a means of imposing structure and meaning on the chaos of human experience, while postmodernism, evident in *Surfacing*, challenges such grand narratives, emphasizing instead the fluidity of identity and the potential for personal emancipation. Despite these differences, both novels celebrate feminist resistance and the resilience of women in navigating oppressive structures. Through their nuanced portrayals of female artists, Woolf and Atwood critique patriarchal norms and highlight the transformative power of memory and creativity, offering distinct yet complementary insights into the intersections of gender, art, and autonomy.

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# Exploring the Nexus of Song and Poetry: Folk Traditions and Modern Literary Evolutions

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**Abstract**

The close commerce between song and poem is age-old and abiding. While looking into its folk origins and mapping out its evolution one encounters modern poetry's lively and imaginative interest in the past for its own sake. The role of the modern poet as an individual and private person may seem to be at odds with the essentially public nature of songs, folk and/or modern. In the Indian parlance we see the legitimate congress between song and poem in Rabindranath Tagore who called his Nobel-award winning book of poems *Gitanjali*, 'a song-offering.' This is also intensely true of the Assamese literary scene where song and poem, the folk and the modern not only live side by side but sustain each other. The role of Navakanta Barua and Keshav Mahanta, who were redoubtable and much awarded poets and song writers, is explored to illustrate this. This question was invested with a fresh urgency when academics and critics discovered poetry in the rock-songs of Bob Dylan and the consequent award of the Nobel Prize for literature to him.

**Keywords:** folk, modern, poem, poet, song, songwriter

Identity of origins does not preclude difference. Originating in songs, poetry evolved in its own distinctive way and songs grew to accommodate poetry. Notwithstanding its artificial confines and constraints, as it reflects what we may call a lettered reality, poetry began to matter significantly in songs since at least the pan-Indian Vaishnavite movement which was centrally musical. The appeal of songs is essentially auditory and it is not the exclusive preserve of the lettered. The Vaishnavite preachers reached out to the unlettered masses musically to get their message across. Rabindranath Tagore was vitally aware of this reach and appeal of songs and his songs continue to resonate in the popular psyche. Tagore's songs are as numerous as his poems and they had a centrality in his oeuvre.

This brings us to the core concern of this essay which is the coming together of the song writer and poet. This meeting is also evident in the world of Assamese letters that we endeavour to show through the songs and poems of Navakanta Barua and Keshav Mahanta. Besides being significant and popular modern creators they were also highly recognized and amply awarded in academic circles. The incentives to look afresh into this phenomenon came from

the discovery of poetry in the rock-songs of Bob Dylan by literary and academic circles. This led to his winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 2016.

While tracing the path of evolution and development of songs and poems the historical as well as ideational contexts demand probing. This enquiry necessitates a consideration of the changes in idiom in the passage from the folk to the modern and, in the world of Assamese letters, it is distinctly visible in the creations of Navakanta Barua and Keshav Mahanta:

> Navakanta Barua's genius linked the old and the new in Assamese poetry. Two distinctively diverse strains originated from his poetry-the aggressively cerebratory and experimental and the romantic and purely lyrical. He initiated the exploration of folkways which helped evolve the idiom of modern Assamese poetry. (Acharya 7)

While Keshav Mahanta's idiom remained closer to the folk in both his songs and poems, the changing styles in Navakanta's songs reveal the inevitable hardening of images and idiom to accommodate ideational complexities. His twin songs with the same title, *O Granny*, which exploit the folk idiom and intimate familial realities contrast visibly with poems like *Monor Khobor* and *Swam Across* (quoted below). In the songs of Bob Dylan, however, it is his initiation into folk songs by Woody Guthrie that gave him his idiom. It is this which brought him closer to the community and its realities, which in turn, helped change the character of Rock Songs.

The spread of literacy and the rise of the professional classes may have contributed to the ascension of poetry and the consequent relegation of songs to the position of a lesser pursuit. Songs, because of their folk origins, seemed to be the preserve of the unlettered masses. The post-Renaissance emergence of the 'individual' and the growing concern with the 'self' had taken poetry just far enough away for a detached appreciation. The fresh problematization of the song-poem divide began when poets as song-writers gained recognition and even dominance. The two most significant modern poets in Assamese, belonging to two different dispensations, besides earning scholarly approbation began capturing the popular psyche. Keshav Mahanta, who was a communist with institutional affiliations, had persisted with his faith in the sanctity of the individual. Navakanta Barua, on the other hand, was a free-wheeling liberal humanist. But the mutuality of their concerns brought them close and kept them together throughout. As Keshav Mahanta says in one of his poems, they were '*manuhkuliya,*' belonging essentially to the 'clan of man.'

In folk poetry the poet is anonymous; he is one of the community. It celebrates the simple joy of living. Keshav Mahanta's songs are informed by that ease of living. They are essentially descriptive pieces which leave aside questions of right or wrong. Songs are not at a distant remove from poetry. They are kindred pursuits and there are set rules, ways, and conventions. Despite the distinctive ways, his songs continue to enjoy the freedom of folk songs which have a near-visceral appeal. Poetry is apparently more rule-bound and offers the same challenges as one mastering any complex game faces. Without the reader's active cooperation, the game of poetry is just mechanical, never lively. Enjoyment follows understanding and

involvement sets in motion the act of transcendence when the game becomes easy and natural like breathing. Poet Mahanta, who purifies the dialect of the tribe to write his poems, knows what the farmer sees in and around him, where there is hope and despair, labour and harvest. It is then that the poet communes with the community in its idiom. The creator alone knows how arduous and involved the task is: to trace and tap in uncharted depths the dare of your blood:

Mur ei akhyam hriday
Tumar tezor xobdo bisari ji pau
Xi je mathu aposoy
Kon gobhirot tomar tezor xah
(Mahanta)

These lines are translated as follows –
My unavailing heart,
Seeking the idiom of your blood,
Finds only extravagance.
In what uncharted depths lies
the dare of your blood

Only those who have tasted the true joy of poetry can appreciate a Pete Seeger ballad, Bob Dylan's 'A Hard Rain...,' or Keshav Mahanta's 'Kauri Pare.' Complex and philosophically profound poetry affords the same kind of joy.

"The path from twilight to dawn is direct; the journey is long, accompanied by unusual means of transport. The vegetation of the roadside, the arrangement of homes and surroundings are different. These arrangements and the environment inevitably change the person and their creations. Yet, it still returns to the soil and mud." (Acharya 102)

In this journey, we find the interface between epics like the Mahabharata and folk realities. As the scene, the backdrop and the context begin to change, symbols and images gain in complexity as they do in addressing hitherto alien realties of the city. Modern poetry is of the city and songs too begin to take urban realities in its stride. The poet's experiences, practices, and expanses in the city illuminate our poetic tradition. Not just a descendant of Jyoti Prasad, but Keshav Mahanta's songs and poetry resonate with the robust presence of Mafizuddin Ahmed Hazarika, Rabindranath, Ambikagiri Raichoudhury. Tradition is not a load to be carried on changing shoulders. It is awareness and its expression will inevitably be fresh and challenging. This is feasible only through an individual enriched by the community's tradition. The passage of Keshav Mahanta's poetry to his songs is paved by the idiom of the community:

Etiya bhora ghumoti
Aru
Akaxot klanto ejak rati
(Mahanta)

This is translated as follows -
In this hour of deep, unsullied sleep

A host of drained nights
Crowd the evening sky

The stars of the city at night are bright- the sky too is as deep as the ocean but instead of dispelling isolation they seem to intensify loneliness. We need a ray of sunlight, of mornings and of evenings, which one finds at the core of Keshav Mahanta's songs and lyrics. Then it feels like being amongst people.

In his book of songs, *Mur je kiman Hepah (How Ardent is My Wish)*, we find the same idiom at work albeit a bit more personalized. It was for this book that Keshav Mahanta was given the Sahitya Akademi award for literature in 1993.

Mur je kiman hepah
Mur xobdor dhomonit bowau buli
Tumar tezor probah
Mur je kiman hepah
(Mahanta)

The following is an English translation of these lines -

How ardent is my wish
To make your blood
stream down the veins of my words
so ardent is my wish

Navakanta Barua, Keshav Mahanta's contemporary and fellow traveller, who had many awards and accolades for both poetry and fiction, registers his thrill at songs being given due recognition when Keshav Mahanta was awarded the Sahitya Akademi prize for his collection of songs, *Mur je Kiman Hepah*:

> When Keshav Mahanta was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of songs, I felt that an old, even ancient valuation was re-established. It is true that poetry in later ages emerged from the shell of songs, and that the rhythm and beat of songs have not remained the same as those of poetry. It is also true that there is a distinction between the measure of music and the measure of poetry. But a song is concentrated poetry bound by the constraints of melody.
>
> Songs are not outside the purview of literature. Leaving aside the oral tradition, during the Neo-Vaishnavite era, when the literary self-establishment of Indian languages occurred, its main subject matter was songs. In fact, the entire Neo-Vaishnavite movement was a kind of musical movement. Therefore, the songs of Chandidas, Vidyapati, Mirabai, Jnandev, Namdev, Kabir, and Nanak are the early examples in various languages that followed. Even before that, the Buddhist *Charyapada* was composed of songs.
>
> "All this while I have been trying to convey that Keshav Mahanta's literary achievements and musical works have always been intertwined with his political and social beliefs. Despite this, Keshav is never merely an amanuensis; he is not to be dictated to" (Barua 16)

Navakanta Barua the poet is never at a distant remove from his songs and lyrics. In fact, there are many instances of his endeavour to turn his poems or parts of them into songs. We cite two such instances to illustrate the point. The following song, 'Monor Khobor,' from his collection of songs and lyrics, *Din Rati Writu aru Monor Khobor* (2001), is virtually based on the first stanza of his near epical narrative of reflection, 'Ravan':

Monor khobor ase daworot tumar sokur
Monor khobor ase uxahot tumar bukur
Monor khobor ase jun-sesa xeta kopalot

Adha gorha bhrikutit tumar kumol kopalor

Likha ase gupon khobor
Mur moronor, jare –
Xopun amar hobo pare
(Barua 14)

These lines are translated as follows –

The mind's tidings are harboured
in the cloud of your eyes
In the breath of your heaving breasts
In the moon-cold pale forehead.

Your half-formed frown spells out
The secret tidings of your heart
Of my death, which can
Convey dreams to a realm
Beyond mortality...

In like manner his song, 'Xaturi Ahilu', also from the same collection, gives us the pith and intent of his poem, 'I swam across the throngs of jostling myriads':

Xaturi ahilu hezar lukor bheer
Pran xomudro sonsol gobheer
Amar karone ase mathu balir sor
Bisari napalu purno pranor teer
Akaxe xagore aatma amar nokore osthir
Tusso dukhor glanire aabora amar swopnoneer
(Barua 15)

This is translated as follows -

I swam across throngs of jostling myriads
The sea of life remains restless, profound
Sandbanks alone there strive for us
Arid sandbanks where dreams are lost

.....

Sky or sea stirs not our soul
Trifling losses enclose
this our dream-cove.

The distinction between songs and poems has been a subject of debate for centuries, with many artists, including Bob Dylan, straddling the line between the two. In examining the concept of "songs as poems," it is essential to delve into the historical context provided by Thomas Percy's observations on minstrels and bards, and how these relate to Dylan's work. Both Dylan and Percy illustrate the fluidity between oral traditions and literary forms, underscoring the enduring nature of storytelling through music.

Percy's *Reliques* (1906), notably his essay on ancient minstrels, highlights the significant role minstrels played in the Middle Ages. They were performers who combined poetry and music, often composing their own verses or singing those of others, accompanied by the harp. Percy describes them as engaging not just in singing but in mimicry and action, which resonates with Dylan's dynamic performances. Dylan's debut album, featuring eleven songs by other composers and only two originals, exemplifies this shared and communal tradition of folk music.

The folk tradition, historically oral, has transformed over generations, becoming written, recorded, and disseminated in various ways. Even after the formal separation of verse from music, poets have continued to call their poems songs and themselves singers. This is evident in Daniel Karlin's analysis in *The Figure of the Singer*, where he argues that the boundary between song and poetry is often blurred. Karlin suggests that verse written to be set to music can be considered poetry, emphasizing the pragmatic nature of these distinctions.

> To say that verse written specifically to be set to music is not poetry, for example, is true only if the prior definition of poetry excludes verse written specifically to be set to music. This sterile circularity afflicts most of the attempts to distinguish poetry from song, or vice versa. If pressed, I would mark the boundary pragmatically. A poem performed to music becomes a song, almost without exception. A song lyric read aloud or on the page, however, does not always become a poem; you have to decide whether the element of music is necessary to its existence. In the great Irish tenor John McCormack's performance of Yeats's 'Down by the Salley Gardens' (originally entitled 'An Old Song Re-sung', and derived from an actual song), a fine poem takes to the air; on the page, Bob Dylan's rapid-fiery 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' is a fish out of water. Some song lyrics are 'poems in their own right', some are not, and opinions as to which is which may legitimately differ.
>
> (Karlin xi)

Dylan's work, much like the minstrels described by Percy, blurs the lines between song and poem. His songs, steeped in vivid imagery, powerful metaphors, and deep symbolism, address politics, social injustice, and the human condition, much like the epic poems of ancient bards. Dylan's denial of the label 'poet' and his self-identification as a 'song and dance man' reflect his desire to bridge the gap between high and low art, aligning himself with popular culture while maintaining the depth and complexity of traditional poetry.

Dylan's association with the bardic tradition is further supported by Richard F. Thomas in *Why Does Dylan Matter?* Thomas argues that Dylan's artistic principles and attitudes towards composition, revision, and performance bear striking similarities to those of ancient poets. Dylan's ability to create worlds through his music that reflect timeless human experiences places him in the lineage of bards who have shaped cultural consciousness through their storytelling.

> He (Dylan) is part of that classical stream whose spring starts out in Greece and Rome and flows on down through the years, remaining relevant today, and incapable of being contained by time or place…From the beginning of his musical career, Bob Dylan has been working with artistic principles, and attitudes towards composition, revision, and performance, that bear many similarities to those of the ancients. He has also been living and writing in a world that bears many striking similarities to that of the ancient Romans, whose republic was the model on which the Founding Fathers built our own system. I believe Dylan early on came to recognize that similarity, and it has been reflected in the worlds he creates for us in his music ever since.
>
> (Thomas 2-3)

The scholarly concern with distinguishing between poems and songs is not new. As Percy's *Reliques* shows, the concept of the bard and the minstrel has evolved over time, yet the essence of storytelling through music remains. The OED defines a bard as a poet associated with an oral tradition, performing for the ear rather than the page. This description fits Dylan perfectly, as his songs serve as modern epics, addressing contemporary issues and resonating with audiences on a deep, emotional level.

Percy's observation that minstrels were honoured for their ability to reflect the spirit of the times is particularly relevant to Dylan. His songs became anthems of the folk protest movement, embodying the passion and tumult of the 1960s. Dylan's continuous reinvention and his performative relationship with his audience further align him with the minstrel tradition. His statement during a 1964 performance, "I have my Bob Dylan mask on", highlights his use of various personas, echoing the mimicry and action of medieval minstrels.

A common argument against bestowing the title of 'poet' to Dylan is the medium through which his work is primarily encountered. Dylan's lyrics are deeply intertwined with music, and many critics argue that the full impact of his work is only realized through performance. The synergy of lyrics, music, and voice is essential to unlock the full power of a song, whereas a poem is ideally self-sufficient, standing alone on the page.

However, academics like Christopher Ricks contend that Dylan's lyrics qualify as poetry and place him among the greatest poets of all time. Ricks highlights Dylan's remarkable command of rhyme and his inventive use of language. For instance, in "Idiot Wind" Dylan writes:

> Idiot wind, blowing like a circle around my skull,

From the Grand Coulee Dam to the Capitol.
(Dylan 336)

This lyric, drawing a metaphorical connection between the human head and the head of state, is a testament to Dylan's skilful manipulation of words. Ricks argues that any case against considering Dylan a poet would need to confront the actual words and his adept use of them, rather than focusing solely on the medium.

This problem of medium, of "song" and "poem," has been addressed by the Nobel Committee, which honoured Dylan "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition". This musical tradition traces its roots back to the medieval troubadours, who skilfully blended words and music in their reflections on life and society. Honouring Dylan, often regarded as America's troubadour, brings us back full circle to the very origins of poetry.

Arguments for calling Dylan's songs poems do not necessarily have to hark back to the spoken origins of poetry. The depth and complexity of his lyrics, coupled with his sharp social and political commentary, compel us to read his lyrics as poetry. Considering the tradition of free verse in the 20th century, Dylan's lyrics certainly qualify as standalone poetry.

The idea of 'songs as poems' is deeply rooted in the historical interplay between oral and written traditions. Bob Dylan's work exemplifies this intersection, bridging the gap between ancient bards and modern minstrels. By drawing on the communal and performative aspects of folk tradition, Dylan continues the legacy of storytelling through music, embodying the timeless nature of poetry and song. As we consider the evolution of these forms, it is clear that the distinction between songs and poems is not a rigid boundary but a dynamic continuum that allows for rich and varied expressions of human experience.

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# Exploring Brownfields and Placelessness: An Ecocritical Analysis of Anita Nair's Select Novels

MEERA P.S. & JAYASREE A.



Meera P.S.

**Abstract**

Ecocriticism examines how literature mirrors and addresses environmental issues, highlighting the deep connection between humans and the natural world. The research article highlights the nuanced world of non-human entities, where economic prosperity is intertwined with the exploitation of resources, driven by the widespread embrace of modernisation resulting from globalisation.Through the novels *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe* and *Lessons in Forgetting*, Anita Nair vividly portrays the consequences of modernisation and industrialisation, manifesting as placelessness and the emergence of brownfields. The article examines how the selected novels reflect Lawrence Buell's concepts of placelessness and brownfields and challenge readers to consider the costs of unmindful progress. Nair's literary oeuvre ultimately prompts a reflection on the interplay between economic progress, cultural resilience and ecological sustainability in the Anthropocene age. This research article advocates for a balanced approach to development, emphasising that caring for one's place leads to broader environmental conservation and sustainable practices.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Anita Nair, Modernisation, Placelessness, Brownfields, Environmental Conservation

In the era of Anthropocene, characterised by the influence of human activities on the environment, the concept of place attachment takes on a significant resonance. Globalisation, with its far-reaching effects, has ushered in a deep transformation, promoting an intense reflection on the implications of a world shaped by self-centred materialism. A poignant quote captures this essence, highlighting how globalisation has led to a disconnect from the subtleties of tradition, resulting in a crisis that extends to humanity's relationship with non-human life and the natural world. The quote says, "Globalisation has brought in its wake a self-centered materialism and man; machine-like has lost touch with the subtleties of tradition. Man's insecurities can only result in sin, meanness, inanity and indiscretion . . . Man's anthropomorphic attitude towards non-human life and the landscape is part of this crisis." (*Nature, Environment and Literature*, 19). In such a situation, a new theory of nature writing called ecocriticism has emerged. Ecocriticism examines how nature is represented in literature, traces the process of environmental disruption, and offers solutions to the overall problem.

Ecocriticism examines how literature mirrors and addresses environmental issues, highlighting the deep connection between humans and the natural world. This field of study

uses an ecological perspective to analyse literary works, aiming to increase awareness of environmental degradation and promote sustainable practices. As an interdisciplinary approach, ecocriticism fosters cooperation between writers and activists to tackle the urgent challenges facing our planet. The term "ecocriticism" first introduced by William Rueckert in 1978, has gained widespread use in examining global ecological problems. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty cites Donald Worster, author of *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination,* who states*:* "We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them" (xxi). Recognising the interconnectedness of one's action and the environment is crucial in addressing the underlying causes of the ecological crisis. This recognition calls for a fundamental shift in one's ethical framework by reevaluating one's decision-making process, priorities and values.

In this sweeping advance to modernisation, the once sturdy bonds between individuals and their surroundings begin to fray, giving rise to a disquieting phenomenon: the erosion of place attachment. The sensation of human detachment from place, often termed placelessness, stands as a critical catalyst for ecological crises. This detachment finds its roots in the forces of industrialisation and urbanisation as a result of globalisation, fostering a range of environmental challenges. Lawrence Buell, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, emphasises that ecocriticism will find its growth when it deals with "race, gender, sexuality, class, and globalization" (129). These challenges include disconnection from nature, the waning sense of attachment to localities, escalated consumption and resource exploitation, neglect of local ecosystems, escalating pollution, and rampant habitat destruction. In this article, the researcher delves into the complex interplay between Anthropocene, globalisation, self-centred materialism and evolving concept of place attachment.

Many contemporary Indian English writers significantly contribute to this critical discourse by exploring the nexus between the physical environment and human beings. They adeptly highlight the challenges faced by the environment due to unchecked modernisation, offering nuanced perspectives on the ecological implications of human activities. Novels like Rajat Chaudari's *The Butterfly Effect* (2018), Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993) examines how the repercussions of modernisation has contributed to the environmental crisis. These works urge readers to reconsider the destructive consequences of their reliance upon modern technology and practices. Anita Nair's novels also offer a unique perspective on environmental implications by interweaving the themes of nature with the complexities of modernisation.

Anita Nair stands as a prominent voice in contemporary Indian English literature, renowned for her insightful and evocative storytelling. With a literary repertoire that spans novels, short stories, poems, and essays, Nair has garnered acclaim for her ability to weave narratives that

reflect the complexities of human experience. She received the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 2012 for her literary and cultural contributions. With her masterful narrative skills and meticulously detailed depictions of settings, characters, and events, Nair prompts readers to contemplate their relationship with the environment. Her stories explore the tension between modern society and the natural world, underscoring the adverse effects of technological advancement on the environment. Her writing subtly weaves in eco-consciousness ideas, showcasing her deep concern for environmental issues and sustainability. In selected novels such as *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe* and *Lessons in Forgetting*, Nair's exploration transcends mere storytelling to become a poignant study of characters experiencing a disconnection from their sense of place, ultimately contributing to the degradation of the environments they inhabit.

As one delves into Anita Nair's novels, resonances with Lawrence Buell's concepts on the impact of placelessness, the emergence of brownfields and the environmental implications of modernisation become distinctively evident. Placelessness refers to contemporary spaces lacking a distinct identity or meaningful connection, leading to a sense of disconnection and meaninglessness in one's life. These spaces, marked by their industrial past and environmental consequences, serve as tangible symbols of the broader shifts and challenges faced by societies in this epoch. Lawrence Buell holds the view that the detachment from places or the feeling of placelessness sprouted as the result of modernisation. To reinforce the idea, Buell quotes, "modernization has rendered place-attachment nugatory and obsolete" (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 64). The convergence of Buell's ecocritical concepts with Nair's literary explorations offers a compelling avenue to understand and dissect the serious implications of our modern world's relentless march. Nair's works encourage the readers to reflect on how humans' relationship with place has changed in the face of modernity and globalisation and how it impacts their sense of self and meaning in an increasingly placeless world.

Anita Nair's novel *The Better Man* (1999) is set in the fictional village of Kaikurussi and follows the journey of the protagonist, Mukundan. Mukundan, a reluctant native as described by Nair, returns to Kaikurussi after many years away and finds himself confronted with profound changes in his once-familiar village. Kaikurussi, once a tranquil village rich in tradition and rustic charm, undergoes a drastic transformation as urbanisation takes root. Mukundan's observation of the proliferation of metal gates underscores the initial visible impact of urbanization on the village landscape. Reflecting on the changes, Mukundan notes, "Once upon a time his house had been the only one to sport a metal gate. Now every house seemed to have one, contending with one another as if to see whose could be bigger and more ornate… the gates and the terraced houses that seemed to have sprung up" (*The Better Man* 24). This observation poignantly captures the changing visual and cultural fabric of Kaikurussi amidst the development process.

Nair's humorous reference to Kaikurussi as a "city" encapsulates the evolving perception and phases of urbanisation in the novel. She illustrates the impact of urbanisation through the

emergence of a "motley collection of shops" and the increasingly bustling atmosphere, leading locals to affectionately refer to their village as "The city, ha!'" (*TBM* 49). The term "city" is used both ironically and playfully, highlighting the contrast between the traditional, rural setting of Kaikurussi and its increasingly urbanised environment. The term "city is not just a lexical shift but embodies the altered mindset of the inhabitants, adapting to a more urbanised lifestyle. This reclassification highlights the impact of modernisation, from the proliferation of shops to the changing nomenclature, illustrating the multifaceted dimensions of urbanisation in Kaikurussi.

The construction of roads achieved by demolishing the mountain and its resources. Nair's vivid picture of Pulmooth Mountain in *The Better Man* illustrates the devastating consequences of road construction. The formerly spectacular and towering mountain has been reduced to a simple flat area, demonstrating the magnitude of human-caused damage. This serves as a powerful reminder of the irrevocable harm wrought upon natural landscapes driven by the desire of mere convenience and accessibility. Nair vividly captures this in the lines: ". . . even the Pulmooth was no longer that huge mountain that reached into the sky insurmountably" (*TBM* 51). She describes the mountain "that was as flat as a football field on top" (*TBM* 47). Constructing roads by cutting through mountains disrupts the natural habitats of various plant and animal species, potentially leading to the displacement or even extinction of certain species. Recognising the interrelationship between human actions and the environment, it is crucial to understand that building roads through mountains can have significant implications for ecological systems and biodiversity.

The setting of Kaikurussi, which once thrived on traditional livelihoods, has now been altered by urbanisation and the influx of technology, leading to the disappearance of many customary jobs. The rapid developmental processes, particularly the surge in construction activities, have profound and adverse effects on the environment in Kaikurussi. The intensified urbanisation, marked by the construction of numerous houses, contributes to deforestation and alters the natural landscape. The once-insurmountable Pulmooth mountain is no longer perceived in the same imposing manner, indicating the changes in the topography due to human activities. The construction of houses often involves clearing land, leading to deforestation, loss of biodiversity and disruption of ecosystems. The burgeoning demand for higher wages is a key driving force behind the shift in employment preferences from traditional household work to construction sites in the novel. As people increasingly engage in construction projects, the proliferation of new houses becomes a visible and recurrent theme. The repetitive chant of "Houses, houses, that's all you see everywhere" (*TBM* 113) encapsulates the pervasive impact of urbanisation on the village landscape. This growing focus on construction not only alters the physical environment of Kaikurussi but also reflects the economic aspirations of its residents. The rush toward construction work, accompanied by the surge in house-building, signifies a quest for better financial prospects and improved living standards, emblematic of the broader societal changes associated with urbanisation.

*The Better Man* serves as a poignant canvas illustrating the tangible impacts of this unrestrained modernisation and urbanisation. Powerhouse Ramakrishnan, embodying the capitalistic ethos, decides to build a community hall on Bhasi's pastoral land. This decision reflects an anthropocentric perspective where human interests take precedence over environmental conservation. Bhasi, a painter and an ardent practitioner of natural healing, witnesses how his once tranquil and flourishing land undergoes irrevocable alteration. Nair skilfully portrays the shocking intrusion of machinery into pastoral scenes, seamlessly aligning with the narrative of Bhasi's disrupted environment. The transformation of vast natural landscapes into urban developments is vividly captured in Nair's words: "The land that had spread, lush and reckless green, had been dug up and turned over. Where flowers once bloomed, rectangular walls of bricks stood. A cement mixer and rods of iron. A rubble of dreams" (*TBM* 349). This stark imagery underscores the devastation wrought by development, as what was once a haven of native plant species now stands as a testament to the profound transformation. The novel highlights the theme of nature being mercilessly despoiled by such development, emphasising the loss of ecological harmony and the destruction of natural habitats.

The intensive construction activities will contribute to deforestation and altering the natural landscape, ultimately lead to the creation of brownfields. These brownfields represent the transformed, degraded areas that were once thriving ecosystems. The concept of brownfields encapsulates the environmental consequences of rapid urbanisation, where previously vibrant and biodiverse regions are replaced by barren, degraded lands. The exploitation of non-human entities like land and water, driven by materialistic inclinations, results in the commercialisation and pollution of once-sacred places, reflecting the broader environmental degradation prevalent in the environment. In the nuanced exploration of the evolving world, Lawrence Buell's concept of "brownfields" emerges as a pertinent transition, shedding light on the environmental consequences of modernisation. Buell defines brownfields as the "incorporation of urban and other severely altered, damaged landscapes" (*TFOEC* 88). Nair's narrative unravels the narrative of brownfields, where the pursuit of progress often takes a heavy toll on the environment, eroding the natural beauty that once defined landscapes and rewriting the stories embedded in the earth.

In *Ladies Coupe* (2001), Anita Nair expertly deals with the realm of developmental extremes, where progress frequently takes a toll on the fundamental fabric of conventional life. One such moving investigation is told through the persona of Shanmugam, father of Marikolunthu. He is a dedicated farmer with a strong bond with the land. His resistance to working for Chettiar, a symbol of industrial prosperity, underscores a resistance to the encroachment of industrialisation on traditional ways of life. Chettiar, a formidable presence in Kancheepuram's industrial landscape, becomes the focus of Shanmugam's disdain. This stems from Chettiar's fortune, which is built on a morally objectionable foundation—exploiting and killing silkworms—an act vehemently rejected by Shanmugam due to his deep reverence for all living beings. Nair narrates, "The Chettiar was a rich man; they are still the richest

family in the district. The Chettiar made his fortune from silkworms. He bred them, stuffing them with mulberry leaves till they grew so fat that they burst out of their skins. To hide their shames the poor naked worms spun silk and wrapped it around themselves. But the Chettiar wouldn't let them be even then. He boiled them and stripped their silk off them. Skeins of silk, ounces of silk" (*LC* 214). The stark imagery of Chettiar's silkworms, bred, exploited, and ultimately boiled for profit, serves as a metaphor for the ruthless extraction of resources in the pursuit of wealth.

By being part of the food web, silkworms contribute to the biodiversity of their ecosystem. The large-scale killing of silkworms for silk disrupts ecological balance, leading to negative consequences for biodiversity, soil health and the overall functioning of the ecosystem. Their presence and natural life cycle are integral to maintain ecological harmony. Sustainable silkworm farming practices can ensure that their role in the ecosystem is preserved while also providing economic value. Shanmugam believes that killing God's creatures daily and profiting from their deaths is not a good way for a true farmer to live. He adds, "the only creatures that die because of me are the ones that my plough cuts into and even those I kill unknowingly" (*LC* 213). Shanmugam is a firm believer in preserving and valuing the agricultural way of life, which not only provides for the villagers but also preserves a strong connection to their ancestral origins. He is concerned that fast industrialisation and a trend towards modernity may result in the extinction of traditional farming techniques and the degradation of their cultural identity.

The tale of silkworms, cocooned in a narrative of exploitation for the sake of silk, finds a poignant connection with the plight of farmers losing their jobs due to the allure of Chettiar's mills. This connection unravels a story where economic pursuits and the hunger for profit conspire to devastate not only the livelihoods of individuals but also the very landscapes of human lives. In the novel, Nair exposes that many farmers are forced to give up agriculture as the industrialisation wave surges, leaving behind growing factories and mills. The quest for silk, symbolising economic prosperity, draws people away from traditional occupations like farming. The once-vibrant fields, tended by hands connected to the earth, begin to wither as individuals shift allegiance to the promise of employment in Chettiar's mills. The silkworms, in their exploitation, mirror the fate of these farmers. Both are integral components of an ecosystem disrupted by the surge of economic interests.

Lawrence Buell's observation that "farmers were shrinking into a negligible percentage of the national workforce" is evident in both *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe*. The erosion of the rural way of life in the face of industrialisation symbolises a broader societal shift. The dwindling significance of farmers mirrors the larger trend of rural communities being marginalised as economic landscapes evolve. These characters and narratives prompt a reflection on the cost of progress, the clash between tradition and modernity. Characters like Bhasi and Powerhouse Ramakrishnan in *The Better Man* and Shanmugam and Chettiar in *Ladies Coupe* navigate the changing tides of their communities' economic landscapes. Through these characters and settings, Anita Nair exposes the complexities of human-nature interactions

and the consequences of industrialisation on traditional livelihoods and ecosystems. While symbolic of progress, the shift from conventional occupations to the clamour of construction sites and mills unfurls the complexities of placelessness and cultural commodification. As one witnesses the flourishing of non-agrarian occupations at the expense of traditional jobs, Nair invites the readers to reflect on the intricate interplay between economic progress, cultural resilience, and environmental sustainability.

Nair's storytelling exposes how traditional connections to place, and culture often undergo transformations or erode as the landscape expands. Buell's observation that "place attachment tends to thin out as the territory expands" (*TFOEC* 68) offers a lens through which one can interpret Anita Nair's fourth novel *Lessons in Forgetting* (2012). The novels explore the complexities of place attachment in the face of expansive, often disruptive, societal changes. The relationship between Jak and his wife Nina, in *Lessons in Forgetting,* provides another fascinating representation of the thinning of place attachment or the feeling of placelessness. Jak, who has genuine affection for his homeland, recalls his time at Minjikapuram, expressing his deep connection to the sea and the temple in Minjikapuram. Jak's reminiscences and affinity for his place are apparent when he adds, "I love the rains. I think I missed it more than anything else while I was away. The pure loamy earth scent after the first rain. It's funny how we miss these little things more than the really important ones" (*LF* 12). Jak's longing for the place is readily apparent.

In contrast, Nina's connection to India is rather superficial. Even though she proudly showcases her knowledge of India's history and culture at social gatherings, Jak wryly notes that her understanding is limited. This is evident in his observation: "Nina, at faculty parties and her publishing dos talked at length about Indian spices and miniatures and kathakali and the chola bronzes, all of which she only had a fleeting knowledge of" (*LF* 170). When Jak criticises her for her feigned emotions towards India, she retorts, "Well Kitcha, if you love India so much, why don't you go back? Look at yourself and the ridiculous lengths you go to. The leaky tap in the garden so you can hear it drip because it reminds you of the kitchen tap in the house you grew up in. the bird shit in the patio that you won't and will not let me hose away because it reminds you of the backyard in that house" (*LF* 170). While Nina highlights India's cultural richness to her foreign peers, she struggles with living there due to economic disparities compared to the USA. This contradiction symbolises the onset of environmental deterioration, rooted in a sense of place detachment. By highlighting Jak's peculiar habits, Nair poignantly depicts his struggle to maintain a connection to a place that is gradually disappearing.

The dynamics between Jak and Nina in Nair's novel align with Lawrence Buell's idea that place attachment weakens as one moves to new and unfamiliar territories. Jak's deep connection to Minjikapuram represents traditional place attachment while Nina's superficial engagement with Indian culture reflects a commodified relationship with place. Jak embodies the emotional tensions experienced by migrants, torn between their homeland and new urban environments. His yearning contrasts sharply with Nina's detachment or placelessness,

underscoring the cultural and emotional disconnect that can occur with urban migration. Through these characters, Nair explores the transformative impacts of modernisation on place attachment and belonging.

Nair's fiction is distinguished by its meticulous attention to detail, particularly in the depiction of settings, characters, and events. Her narratives invite readers to reflect on their own relationship with the environment, often highlighting the tension between modern society and the natural world. Through her stories, Nair explores the adverse effects of technological advancement and modernisation on the environment, urging a reconsideration of our ecological impact. In *The Better Man, Ladies Coupe* and *Lessons in Forgetting*, Nair delves into the theme of placelessness, illustrating how characters' detachment from their environments leads to a degradation of the places they inhabit. Her exploration goes beyond surface-level storytelling, offering a profound examination of the interconnectedness between individuals and their surroundings. This focus on place and environmental implications positions Nair as a crucial figure in the ecocritical discourse, providing a unique and culturally nuanced perspective on the urgent environmental challenges of our time. In connecting Buell's idea to Anita Nair's novels, one can observe how the characters' experiences mirror "the sense of vulnerability and flux" (*TFOEC* 88) in the context of changing landscapes and cultural identities.

In transversing these narratives, one witnesses the intersectionality of environmental and social issues, prompting a deeper understanding of the complexities embedded in the pursuit of progress. According to David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer in *Dwelling, Place and Environment Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*, "Today, our modern Western world faces a paradoxical situation. At the height of our technological mastery, we often find ourselves separated from both the earth and our own human being. After many centuries of building our world, we meet an unsettling nexus of domination and homelessness" (1). Ecocriticism seeks to address the growing disconnect between humans and the natural environment, a separation primarily brought about by the processes and impacts of industrialisation. By incorporating these brownfields into ecocriticism's analysis of placeness and place attachment, the article highlights the need to address the ecological and social implications of these damaged spaces to foster a more sustainable relationship between humans and their environment.

Through her richly detailed narratives, Nair emphasises that a strong sense of place is essential for fostering a deeper connection to the environment. Caring for one's place leads to a broader environmental consciousness and a commitment to sustainable practices. Sustainable development arises from responsible, environmentally friendly economic practices. Hence the environment " . . . cannot be treated without attention to violence, welfare, government corruption, and transnational greed" (Murphy 134). Indeed, by instilling a genuine love and appreciation for their places, individuals are naturally inclined to adopt environmentally conscious practices and advocate for the preservation of our planet. This organic shift towards responsible environmental conservation is not merely a personal endeavour but a collective commitment to safeguard the fragile balance of nature for future generations. Nair's writings

remind us that our sense of belonging to the places we call home is intricately intertwined with our responsibility to protect and cherish the environments that sustain us. The research article does not oppose development; rather, it seeks to raise awareness of the thoughtless destruction of nature and the apathy of human beings towards the suffering of those affected by environmental degradation. It advocates for a vision of change that is inclusive, recognising the inherent value of all life forms and their right to a dignified existence. Moreover, it calls upon humanity to dedicate themselves to the noble cause of preserving the integrity and sanctity of nature.

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# Things, Memories and Critical Geographies: Dialectics of Remembering/Forgetting in Neoliberal India

LAKSHMI SUKUMAR & SMITHA M.

**Abstract**

Memory has evolved into a critical concept in the vocabulary of social sciences over the past few decades. Social scientists have become more and more interested in exploring the politics of remembering. This paper intends to interrogate the dialectics of remembering and forgetting that has fashioned the political economy of memory of neoliberal India post-2010. The acts of the neoliberal state that lead towards different permutations and combinations of memory (in excesses as well as through shortages) will be investigated. Memories turn into tropes to conceptualise a new form of rationality in the neoliberal discourse. The different performances of scripting, de-scripting, and re-scripting of memories to bestow new forms of collective consciousness where memory becomes a social and a spatial practice will be under our purview. To deepen our understanding of the ways in which memories are (re)constituted, a continuum of human memory, materials, spaces, and practices will be imagined.

**Keywords:** Memory, Remembering/forgetting, Neoliberalism, Collective Consciousness, Statues

Memory is an important trope to negotiate with the past and recreate the present. It has become an oft-repeated concept in the vocabulary of humanities for the past few decades. Scholars of humanities have recently become more interested in exploring the dynamics of remembering in the social context. The concepts of social and collective memories have captured historical imagination. The postmodern shift in social and political theories regards memories as critical tropes in the constructions of reality and subjectivity. The profusion of new communication media, heritage movements and sites of remembrance has resulted in an interest in Memory Studies as early as the 1980s as part of cultural history. Memory Studies have evolved into a multidisciplinary frame for reading human experiences. It brings together a variety of issues which include the construction of meaning through memories in individual and social lives, the imagination of new possibilities of social understanding through the sites of memory, delineation of the complex interactions between remembering, forgetting, contesting, and erasing memories and the expression of memories in socio-cultural and literary texts and spaces. Assemblages of memories decide individual and collective negotiations with our presents and pasts, which in turn, determine our futures. Memories exist as discursive spaces which play a significant role in the larger dimensions of historical thoughts. Irrespective

of the magnitude of the historical narratives, approaches to the history of the professional historian as well as the layman, thrive on moments of remembering which is a highly political act. "...memory, whether individual or collective, is constructed and reconstructed by the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, shaped by semantic and interpretive frames, and subject to a panoply of distortions" (Climo and Cattell 1).

A dimension of memory that demands deeper introspection is memorialization. Memorialization directs our attention to the politics of making/erasing memories. It refers to the different patterns of making use of our pasts. The socio-political structures of any society create clusters of memory which could come in handy to propagate the dominant discourses. Irrespective of the alertness of an individual to personal and social memories, different types of memories lying embedded in the individual consciousness shape the particularities of the person's historical consciousness. The personhood of any individual would be the culmination of the networking of autobiographical and collective/social memories. One of the best elucidations of the working of memories is possible if we take into analysis the question of identity politics. For instance, many of the gendered ideas, rituals and practices are inherited by a group of people through direct or indirect experiences internalised through exposure to the memories of gendered modes of existence made accessible through different types of institutions a person interacts with especially during the formative years of one's life, like family, religion, and educational institutions.

The institutionalisation of memory brings home the idea that memories and memorializations should be regarded as active processes which result in the survival of any entity from the past. These could be ideas, concepts, philosophies, or even human beings. Memories are always about the afterlives of an individual's past. An individual without any configuration of memory loses meaning in life. Similarly, memories are indispensable for the imagining of the nation. Nations consolidate their existence by fashioning the collective sensibility of their pasts through a selection of memories/erasures. The ideological definitions of the nation attain existential validation through the selective use of memories. Termed as memory-nation nexus, it entails an obligation to particular moments/persons/things in history, locating them in the philosophical contiguities of remembering/forgetting, thereby constructing a past and reminiscing them to define the present and the future (Hass 6). Nations use several technologies to create a narrative of memory conducive to its political climate. The mapping of memories happens through three critical stages of encoding the information, storing or retaining the information (faithfully) and retrieving the stored information (Foster 25).

While the simplistic frames of understanding regard memory and forgetting as antonyms, the hermeneutics of memory introduce us to the contiguous ontology of the two terms. The postmodern discussions of human cognition contest the binary of memory/forgetting and unfold the fluidity of the semantic worlds they refer to. The apparent conceptual antagonism between the two terms is dismantled when we attempt a dialectical reconceptualization of the two terms (Jasinksi 167). Rather than imagining an excess or lack of memory, a phenomenological approach creates a dialectical continuum of memory and forgetting, enabling

a richer and deeper sense of historicity that is dynamic. Memory, especially when put into perspective through the imagining of the nation, as an active process gives life to a selection from the discourses of the past that remain dormant or in a condition of forgetfulness in the individual/social/cultural memories to suit the mandates of the present. Memory and forgetting exist in a complex relationship of mutual conditioning as memories are retrieval of moments on the verge of oblivion or already forgotten while forgetting is also about giving up patches or totality of certain memories. Jose F. Clomeiro, while discussing the impracticality of keeping memories and forgetting in separate compartments, has referred to the precarious balance of relationships that exist between remembering and forgetting which are forever (re)negotiating with each other (Gudmundsdottir 2). Gudmundsdottir further prefers to consider the genre of memory as the genre of memory and forgetting (2). It is the contiguous presence of forgetting that leads to the shifting relationship of an individual/society/nation with the past.

The national discourses take different shapes through the dialectics of memories and forgetting. As discussed, memories are accepted as sites of active processes. Likewise, forgetting also demands our focus on the different types of interferences that disrupt our existing traces of memory or make them obscure or overlay them with other memories (Foster 62). National memories also call for phenomenological approaches that try to address several questions directed at the very nature of these memories and the ideologies that have crafted different techniques to shape the public memory. Two of the most fundamental questions that demand critical attention are: Whose memory is it? and Why these memories?

Every text/space/thing that constitutes the nation's memory at any point is a sum total of the back-and-forth movement between the meaningful and the forgotten. These negotiations are marked by the hegemonic tensions between the no longer and the still relevant. Paul Ricoeur has theorised on the innate presence of forgetting in our texts of memory. Ricoeur's viewpoints further motivate us towards a challenging of the popular obsessions with the metaphysics of presence as we are forced to give up the positivist assumptions about the 'presence' of memories and the 'absence' of forgetting. Ricoeur problematises memory studies through his exploration of the phenomenology of memory, the philosophical analysis of ways in which memories are created and human consciousness experiences them; epistemology of history which looks into the ways in which the epistemes of history are constituted through memories; and the hermeneutics of the historical condition which is all about the detailed examination of human understanding. For Ricoeur, "Speaking about memory necessarily means speaking about forgetting because one cannot remember everything...Narrative structure, which memory and history have in common, confirms this law of the necessity of forgetting" (Rusen 16).

This paper intends to interrogate the dialectics of remembering and forgetting that have fashioned the political economy of memory of neoliberal India. The acts of the neoliberal state that lead towards different permutations and combinations of memory (in excesses as well as through shortages) will be looked into. Memories turn into tropes to conceptualise a

new form of rationality in the neoliberal discourse. The different performances of scripting, de-scripting and re-scripting of memories to bestow new forms of collective consciousness where memory becomes a social and a spatial practice will be under our purview. To deepen our understanding of the ways in which memories are (re)constituted, a continuum of human memory, materials, spaces and practices will be imagined. The manufacturing of memories happens through the intermingling of these sites of memory. The materials exist at specific spatio-temporal locations defining the mnemonic practices. Moreover, spaces and places are never neutral locales but carry political connotations. This could be considered a case of territorialisation of shared memories through the linking of a place to a social formation and its historical memory (Thomas 2003).

This paper will use the critical insights gained from Thing Theory and Actor-Network Theory to problematise the significance of memorials in the forms of statues and monuments in shaping the collective memory. Furthermore, the concept of prosthetic memory will be critical in comprehending how the technologies of memorialization help people indirectly experience past moments. The politics of naming will be looked at under Critical Toponymes. The study of the formation of new critical consciousness through a postmodern reading of geographies of human memories will be brought under the framework of Critical Geography. Erasure and downscaling of available memories to plant new ones through the dismantling of memorials will also be examined.

The historical memory of any nation is punctuated with toppled/vandalised/disfigured/ resurrected statues and monuments. If we regard statues and monuments as tropes of visual history, desecrating them under any ideology results in an ontological shift to a new politics of cultural memory. Statues signify the afterlives of human beings whose death assumes a new mode of temporality. The methodical dismantling of any statue constitutes iconoclasm. These iconoclastic acts negotiate with the materiality of the object and its relation to the power structures of the times. The metaphoric and metonymic referential are threatened and violated forever. In the words of McClanan, iconoclasm targets specific objects owing to the latter's referents or their connection to the power (Stapleton and Viselli 9). Erecting/Dismantling statues symbolise the transformation in the political order.

Twenty-first century India continues to witness the politics of remembrances/forgetfulness through the erasure/destruction/installation of statues. The destruction of statues in India post-2000 reflects the nation's complex socio-political landscape, marked by historical grievances, identity politics, and ideological conflicts. Statues in India serve as potent political symbols, commemorating historical figures and events. They are erected to honour leaders, celebrate cultural heritage, and assert ideological dominance. Consequently, they often become targets at times of political and social upheaval. In March 2018, two statues of Vladimir Lenin were toppled in Tripura. The incident was seen as a symbolic rejection of communist ideology and sparked a series of retaliatory statue destructions across India. The same year, a statue of E.V. Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar, was vandalised in Tamil Nadu. Periyar, a social reformer and founder of the Dravidian movement, is a polarising figure. His

statue's destruction highlighted the ongoing ideological clash between Dravidian and Hindu nationalist forces in the region.

The first government of independent India consisted of leaders like Sardar Vallabhai Patel who reprimanded the then-state government of Bombay for their unnecessary preoccupation with British iconography when there were more urgent issues to be addressed. Patel even prompted the New Delhi Municipal Committee to give up its plans to remove British statues from the nation's capital (Mcgarr 801). Sardar Patel continues to enjoy acceptance in contemporary India as is evident in the immortalising of Patel through the 'Statue of Unity' erected in Gujarat. Memorials are integral spaces to contest the past and script a narrative of spatio-temporal truth. These acts of erasure and validations disrupt and reconfigure the collective memories of the citizens. Seen through the principles of Critical Geography, these geographies will never be the same as they had been before the erasures/constructions. Their new visibilities create discourses of domination and forgetting. These modified spaces produce new epistemes of knowledge.

The demolition of statues of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramasamy, known as Periyar, exemplifies the ongoing ideological and socio-political conflicts within India. These acts of iconoclasm, targeting prominent figures of social reform and anti-caste movements, are indicative of deep-seated caste-based tensions and ideological clashes between progressive and conservative factions. Ambedkar's statues, symbolizing Dalit empowerment and social justice, and Periyar's statues, representing anti-Brahminical and rationalist ideologies, are often subjected to vandalism by groups opposing their philosophies. Such demolitions reflect the broader contestations over historical narratives and the struggle for dominance in public memory. The recurrent destruction of these statues highlights the persistent resistance to social reforms and the challenges in achieving inclusive representation and equality within the public sphere. Due to the ideologies of elitism and casteism nurtured by select segments of the society, they were always in conflict with the histories of Periyar and Ambedkar, both of whom were members of the non-elitist castes and stood for subaltern rights. E V Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar, was a strong advocate of anti-vedic atheism, Dravidian, anti-Aryan pride and unity of OBCs (Other Backward Communities) and non-brahmin castes. He was the leader of the Self-Respect Movement that was started to demolish the notions of 'superior' and 'inferior' deeply entrenched in the caste system.

A Facebook post on 06 March 2018, immediately after the dismantling of the statue of Lenin, described Periyar as a "caste fanatic" (NDTV) with a strong insinuation about the possible desecration of Periyar's statue in Tamil Nadu. Within no time the statue located at Tirupattur was vandalised on 07 March 2018. The head of another life-size statue of Periyar located in Aranthangi town in Tamil Nadu was cut off in April 2019 in the aftermath of a clash between Hindu Munnani and Dravidar Kazhagam (DK). Later in 2020, the Tamil film actor Rajnikanth's comments about the parading of the nude portraits of Ram and Sita by Periyar in 1971 to drive in the message of anti-superstition sparked another outrage against

the latter leading to a further instance of the vandalising of his statue in Kancheepuram district of Tamil Nadu (Rajan).

The regular attack by miscreants suffered by the statues of Periyar was also seen in the case of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar, celebrated as the Father of the Indian Constitution, made blistering attacks on the rigid caste system in India. "Annihilation of Caste", his undelivered speech written in 1936 should be situated within the vital historical conversations that Ambedkar was continuously engaged in to realise his vision of India without the caste system. It was his loss of faith in emancipating Hinduism from the cesspool of casteism that caused him to convert to Buddhism in 1956. The statues of Ambedkar have also met with frequent moments of desecration. Four of his statues in Uttar Pradesh were demolished in March 2018 followed by two instances in Madhya Pradesh in April 2018(wire.in). Tamil Nadu also confronted vandalism against the statue of Ambedkar in August 2019 following the ruckus between the members of a local dominant caste and the Dalit community. In the same year, following a scuffle between Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation and members of the Ambedkar Statue Protection Committee over the installation of a statue of Ambedkar, it later ended up in a broken condition in the dumping yard (Staff). Another act of vandalism was against the statue of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar who was the doyen of the Bengal Renaissance and an ardent supporter of widow remarriage (Ians).

A critical analysis of the mnemonic implications of statues is required for a better contextualization of these events. Placing the idea of statues within the conceptual framework of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) will help in using a common conceptual repertoire of concepts to understand the human-nonhuman interactions ( Farías and Bender 3). ANT is quite radical in its approach in which "Objects, tools, technologies, texts, formulae, institutions and humans are not understood as pertaining to the different and incommensurable (semiotic) realm, but as mutually constituting each other" (3). Seen from these perspectives and the magnitude of the historical relevance of the persons, these statues become more than mere stones or metals. Their materiality is a space of historical truth values through which they critically engage with the present. A genealogical analysis of their afterlives leads towards an understanding of these materials as discursive spaces of philosophies and world views. The pastness of lives continues to negotiate with the present through their statues. The statues assume a spatio-temporal agency. As in the Foucauldian conceptualization of the body, as imprinted by history, the statues are also surfaces of historical inscriptions. There is a pattern that could be delineated in the vandalising of the statues. The contemporary fate of the statues prompts us to think critically about their values. Both Periyar and Ambedkar, through their active interferences into social scapes were making all attempts to define subaltern agency and subjectivity anew. The movements, debates, and discussions they set in motion are still powerful enough to create a different social imaginary grounded on democratic values in letter and spirit.

While being razed to the ground the statues change the cartographic semiology once and forever, vandalising them is a non-verbal mode of intimidating the powerless in society never

to be inspired by the subaltern philosophies of these makers of history. Gramsci has theorised on the 'automatic' backlash emerging from the majoritarian community when they fear a subaltern uprising. Gramsci explains, "It almost always is the case that a 'spontaneous' movement of the subaltern classes is matched by a reactionary movement of the right wing of the dominant class..." (Zene 37). Yet another instance of using statues for political reimagination was the installation of an Ambedkar statue in saffron colour after the vandalism of the then existing statue by miscreants in Uttar Pradesh in 2018. This could be read as an instance of evolving a new semiotic discourse of a Dalit icon who stood against the concept of Hindu majoritarian ideology.

The statues of hindutva ideologues have also been sites of political rampage. The repercussions of the toppling down of the statue of Lenin in Tripura were witnessed in different parts of the country. The statue of the Sangh ideologue, Syama Prasad Mukerjee, was vandalised in Kolkata (India Today Web Desk). We also find that this 'culture of vandalism' is spread across the country. Gandhi's statue was desecrated in Kannur, Kerala and Ambedkar's statue was defiled with red paint in Tamil Nadu (ABPLive). The year 2019 witnessed the desecration of the statue of the Tamil poet, Thiruvalluvar in Tamil Nadu as a vengeance against the image of the poet clad in saffron robes posted on a twitter handle. In 2022, a statue of Mahatma Gandhi was demolished at Payyannur in Kerala (Reporter).

Contemporary India has also witnessed a significant number of constructions of new statues. Here, the building of new statues will be examined as technologies of prosthetic memory defined by Alison Landsberg as those memories that do not come from a person's lived experiences (Landsberg 175). These objects help in the building of a new experiential archive that can produce new forms of cultural memory. The colossal statue of Sardar Vallabhai Patel unveiled in October 2018 as the Statue of Unity on the banks of River Narmada is one of the very recent instances of statue politics in India. The historical validation of this statue happened one year later when the then Prime Minister told the nation in October 2019 that Patel was his inspiration to revoke Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. The political innuendoes were concerning Patel's involvement as home minister in the drafting of Article 370 (Sengupta). The choice of the historical figure whose statue was to be erected, naming it as the statue of unity, and subsequently revoking Article 370 has to be placed in a new discourse of nationalism under the pretext of 'correcting' a past decision, while debates continue whether Patel also desired it to be only a temporary provision.

The presence of a sprawling park and zoo around the Statue of Unity demands special critical attention. If the historical explanations for the choice of Patel were not convincing enough, the neoliberal government was effectively commodifying the space through the seemingly apolitical construction of a park. The presence of a park articulated a new narrative of cultural memory offered on a platter of pleasure and enjoyment. This was typical of the Victorian times when sculptures were considered integral to the contemporary investment in the park as a site of communal experience through leisure and recreation and these parks

were then used to represent Victorian ideologies (Eyres and Russell 99). The statue-park spatialities emerging in contemporary India reflect the victorian notions of spatialities as sites of collective meaning making.

The post-pandemic period has been witnessing a heightened interest by the Central government in India to design new sites of memory through the erection of statues. The discourse of the freedom movement is a significant political text that defines our collective past. The government's attempt at restructuring the narrative of this movement is evident in how select historical figures are now getting a new life through statues. A 28ft tall hologram statue of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose was erected at the India Gate in September 2022, supposedly to make amends for the lack of respect shown towards Netaji and his Indian National Army (INA) by generations of Indians despite his contributions to the freedom movement. In 2023, the Prime Minister virtually inaugurated the tallest Hanuman statue at the Sri Seetharamaswamy temple Ponkunnam in Kerala (The Hindu Bureau). The Colachel Victory Warrior Statue was unveiled by the then Governor of Kerala at Pangode Military Station in Kerala in 2023 (Express News Service). With the general election in 2024, there has also been strategic use of statues for gaining political mileage and appease voters belonging to different communities. Prime Minister Modi unveiled the 'Statue of Equality' in Hyderabad to commemorate Sri. Ramanujacharya, the 11$^{th}$ century Hindu saint, claimed to have stood for religious equality. The unveiling of the 'Statue of Prosperity' of Nadaprabhu Kempegowda, regarded as the founder of Bangalore, in Bangalore is alleged as a political move to reach out to the Vokkaliga community to which Kempegowada belonged. The 'Statue of Unity', 'Statue of Equality' and 'Statue of Prosperity' are attempts at creating discursive spaces to build a new narrative of national pride centred around the notions of peace, harmony and prosperity.

Renaming of cities and urbanscapes is also marked by a strong sense of the appropriate/ inappropriate names. Neoliberal India has umpteen examples to offer to this segment, of which a select few will be discussed here. Urbanscapes are regarded as spaces for the symbolic spillover of meanings to modify the cultural memory of the citizens. It exudes a desire to consolidate a particular historical narrative at the expense of invisibilising the earlier configurations. Critical Toponymies research guides us toward a better understanding of the politics of nomenclature. Each of the historical moments of naming are also instances through which the politics of knowledge production could be decoded. The naming of geographical spaces including urbanscapes brings together the names and the specific hegemonic ideologies that mediate between the power systems and the masses. Taking a cue from the theories of Foucault on the power/knowledge nexus, historiographers and geographers have mapped toponyms as instances of knowledge – production which were processes of scientific-geopolitical understanding of the world together with the controlling of those spaces (Vuolteenaho and Lawrence 14).

Despite the seemingly depoliticized guise of these toponyms, they are always ideologically conditioned. Most of the changes to names of the cities – Bombay to Mumbai, Bangalore to

Bengaluru, Trivandrum to Thiruvananthapuram, Madras to Chennai - demonstrate a strong shift to a vigorous politics of indigeneity at the cost of cosmopolitanism. The ideologues who encourage name-changing also imagine this as a practical moment of decolonising when they take possession of the urbanscape by giving them indigenous names. This is a visible representation of power which according to Emmerson are moments that are "rooted neither in reality or custom, but express instead the power of the name over the thing named" (Yeoh 42). Another instance of the cultural politics of toponymy in India was the renaming of the Victoria Terminus in Mumbai as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, Mumbai. This was another attempt to create colonial amnesia in the citizens as the railway station was built in 1887 to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria (Fe Online). Together with denying the colonial history of India its rightful memorializations, the choice of name also refers to a veneration of a particular cult. The government of Kerala renamed Victoria Jubilee Town Hall at Thiruvananthapuram as Mahatma Ayyankali Hall in 2019 to commemorate the historic speech delivered in this hall by Ayyankali, the first Pulaya member of the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha, demanding social justice for the oppressed community. The larger issue this renaming poses is the erasure of the historical and political resonances of the structure that were reflected through its earlier name and construction of a new form of memorialisation to suit a different type of political ideology.

Tropes of memories are integral spatiotemporal materials that help us engage with our past, difficult, or otherwise. Memory discourses in the poststructural era demand the nurturing of heterogeneity in the landscape of memory. They are essential to retain the discourse of contested histories in public memory. Statues, monuments and urbanscapes can prevent conditions of historical amnesia. These structures are investments in the building of national narratives which can never be homogenised. They are the living monuments of social histories. Renaming and acts of vandalism are deliberate attempts to "desecrate the memory of the person" (Hoock 55). Selective amnesia, which is regarded as the consequence of these acts, is always political.

The moments of erasure are immediately filled with alternative memories. Even the absence of a structure doesn't indicate an existential vacuum in the trajectory of thoughts. On the contrary, the erasure and the construction of memories go hand in hand. Moreover, it is only when the entire society is insensitive to the elimination of historical structures that even the attempts to erase select memories would survive, which is not usually the norm. An infinite number of cultural spaces offered through printed, visual and digital narratives are at our disposal to save these moments of vandalism from oblivion. These are the creative spaces through which new narrations of history happen, perpetuating the earlier stories and defeating the political attempts to take control of the cognitive skills of the citizens. Even when the neoliberal state uses different techniques to fashion the historical consciousness of the present, the act of forgetting doesn't happen in passivity. It is only refreshing memories through different forms that follow these moments of rewriting histories.

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# Mapping the Materiality of Food: Culinary Negotiations in Esther David's *The Walled City*

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**Abstract**

Over the last few decades, the concept of food has undergone a discursive metamorphosis from its status as a means of nourishment to a potentially powerful metaphor imbued with multiple significations. Food and eating habits are attributed cultural and religious connotations in many works of literature, particularly in the works of minority writers, who employ food as a compelling imagery to deliberate about gender, language, culture, ethnic behaviour and sexual politics. The Indian Jewish writer Esther David's acclaimed novel *The Walled City* (1997) examines how food acts as a dominant cultural artefact in enabling the characters to reconcile with their 'Jewishness' in the alien ethos of India, where they are often looked upon as foreigners. Theoretical inputs from the arena of material culture studies have been utilized to examine how culinary objects determine or undermine 'Jewishness' as represented in the novel. Food is a cultural object that underscores the culture, heritage, identity and history of communities. This paper analyses how dietary laws and food taboos play a pivotal role in the creation and consolidation of Jewish identity. Like in her other fictional works, David, in this novel, documents the shrouded culture and unique ethnicity of the minority Bene Israel Jewish community to which she belongs. This paper critically explores the role of food in determining and establishing the socio- cultural and religious identity of the Bene Israel Jews by scrutinizing their food habits and dietary practices as portrayed in *The Walled City*.

**Keywords:** *Kosher* Food, '*Kashruth*,' Object Studies, Memory, Identity

Jewish cultural identity has been intricately linked to their food habits and dietary practices as evidenced by the significance accorded to food related rituals and dietary restrictions in the Jewish *minhag* (religious customs of Jews). Originating from the dictums laid by ancient Jewish texts, dietary laws and taboos have played a vital role in the creation and consolidation of Jewish identity. As David M. Kaplan asserts in *Food Philosophy: An Introduction* (2019), religion plays an influential role in dictating food practices and dietary restrictions. The association between food and religion in the Jewish cultural context is nowhere more evident than in their tales of exile. This paper seeks to examine the religiously driven culinary negotiations and associations in Esther David's first published novel, *The Walled City* (1997), a fictional portrayal of the life and culture of the Bene Israel Jews of India. Reflecting on the materiality of food, this paper attempts to identify how food is instrumental in defining the socio-cultural and religious identity of this miniscule community. Moreover, it investigates

the significations and impact of specific Jewish dietary habits and food restrictions in the life of the Jewish community in India.

As a displaced community, Jews have had to accommodate and assimilate with multitudes of cultures in the innumerable places where they settled down. Their cultural identity is a contested territory in relation to other religions and communities who have continued exerting their control and influence over them. Hence, it becomes imperative for the community to assert their ethno-cultural identity in these terrains and identify in their food and dietary practices, a potent tool to assert their unique religious identity. This is particularly significant in India, where food taboos and restrictions are central in demarcating community and caste boundaries and hierarchies. India, due to its plurality in terms of religions and cultures, is often looked upon as an enigmatic land where the heterogenous population devoutly practices disparate customs and rituals, and endorses contrasting beliefs. Both the dominant religious communities and the minorities have had their own specific food habits and well-defined cooking practices. This religious diversity is one of the foremost reasons for India's diverse culinary heritage and substantiates the existence of an inherent link between food and faith.

"Food tropes, metaphors, and images serve as figures of speech which depict celebrations of families and communities, portray identity crises, create usable histories to establish ancestral connections, subvert ideology and practices of assimilation…" (Gardaphé and Wenying Xu 5). Food is no longer conceived of as a simple entity meant for satiating hunger; it is recognized as a compelling piece of material culture that defines one's ethnicity and socio-cultural identity. The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his seminal work, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), claims that cooking is a kind of communication that unravels the societal framework and defines the culture of a community. "Food is memory. Food is culture. Food bonds families and communities. It fades into childhood reminiscences and the nooks and corners of the past ... When a community decreases in number, its traditional food becomes a memory." (David, *Bene Appetit* 12) Food is a potential instrument that fosters the reconstruction of the past and evokes the collective memory of communities. The specific food habits and cooking practices of people provide us insights into their religion and in turn, religion exerts a profound influence upon the food one eats, cooks or rejects.

Every religion endorses its own ritualistically driven cooking practices and dietary restrictions which vary across religions. Such dietary laws often serve to preserve and promote values, traditions and beliefs that are integral to asserting the distinctiveness of the community. Consuming and cooking specific food items as part of religious festivals possess symbolic significance. For instance, Jews ritualistically consume eggs during the Passover festival that commemorates the Exodus, that is, the holy departure of the Israelites escaping slavery from Egypt because "eggs are symbolic of Jewish history, as well as of fertility and life and death" (Gil Marks 392). These atypical dietary habits, practices and restrictions are pivotal in defining the uniqueness of different religions and in preserving their cultural ethnicity, particularly in the case of minority communities such as the Jews.

The most significant among the ritualistic observances of the Jewish people is the following of specific dietary laws called *kashruth* according to which they cook and consume only *kosher* food. The laws of *kashruth* are derived primarily from *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*, the third and the last books of *Torah* respectively. *Kashruth* mandates that certain food items and food combinations be avoided; it permits Jews to consume only *kosher* meat which is the meat of animals ritualistically slaughtered by specially trained butchers called *shochet*. In the Jewish diaspora, *kosher* food is significant in narrating the tale "of an uprooted, migrating people and their vanished worlds" (Roden 3). The well-defined and staunch rules involved in the cooking and consumption of Jewish food make it a powerful object with multiple significations. An analysis of the materiality of Jewish food by scrutinizing different phases in the transformation and preservation of the dietary practices and cooking methods unravel the long journey of assimilation and integration of Jewish immigrants and their posterity in the Indian soil.

In India, the Jews are a microscopic foreign religious community, whose history can be traced back to two thousand years. About seven different Jewish groups exist in India and among them, the most prominent are the Cochin Jews, the Bene Israel Jews and the Baghdadi Jews. The largest Jewish community in India is the Bene Israel Jews who are widely believed to be the progeny of "seven couples shipwrecked at Navgaon on the northern Konkan coast some 2,200 years ago, a date that links their arrival to the persecution of Jews in Palestine under the Seleucids" (Robbins 15). The various Jewish communities in India, despite the disparities in their clothing, vocation, language, and attitudes, try to retain their cultural identity in the alien ethos of India by constructing synagogues, observing *Shabbat* every week and consuming only *kosher* food. The Bene Israel Jews have adopted the Indian culture and are highly Indianized. They have been influenced by the cultural and religious lifestyle of India, particularly the conventions and traditions of the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Konkan, where they arrived, settled, and flourished. The Indian Jews have an explicit hybrid identity; they speak mostly in the native Indian languages, wear traditional Indian costumes, and maintain harmonious relationships with native Indians, while simultaneously preserving their religious rituals and customs. Though they have adopted many Indian traditional ceremonies like Haldi and Mehandi and "many Bene Israel marriage customs were borrowed from Hindu culture" (Katz, 100), they are quite diligent in maintaining and practicing their religious festivals and cultural ceremonies. The cooking and consumption of *kosher* food is a major factor that distinguish Jews from other Indians, and help them maintain their identity. Indian cuisine influenced the Bene Israel Jews, who adopted, adapted and appropriated Indian cooking styles, ingredients and recipes and developed an Indo-Jewish cuisine without violating the laws of *kashruth*. Jews have replaced their traditional *challah* bread with Indian rotis, pooris or rice. They cook and enjoy traditional Indian curries, sweets and savouries and use Indian spices and condiments in their cooking. In their Indian inspired curries and sweets, they use coconut milk instead of ghee and butter or other dairy products, to maintain the Jewish dietary law of not mixing milk with meat (David, *Bene Appetit* 2,12,15).

Esther David is one of the pioneering Bene Israeli Jewish writers whose novels are realistic portrayals of her community, documenting the unheard voices of this ethnoreligious community. David's first novel, *The Walled City* (1997), narrated from the perspective of an unnamed protagonist, delineates the quest for identity and the existential crisis of the Bene Israel Jewish community. Set in the old city of Ahmedabad during the decades preceding and succeeding India's independence, the novel explores the religious life and cuisine of this minority community, who strive to preserve their culture and tradition while assimilating themselves to the Indian soil. The paper examines how the novel elucidates the influence of dietary practices and food taboos in the socio-cultural life of this diminishing microscopic community and their struggles to preserve and promote their identity in the multireligious Indian society. David, in this novel, depicts food as a poignant material object that sustains, nourishes, and sometimes controls or determines the social existence and cultural life of Indian Jews.

David portrays the sense of isolation and the cultural dilemma endured by the Indian Jewish community through the coming -of-age story of the unnamed protagonist of *The Walled City* who is often perplexed by the differences in the customs and eating habits of her Hindu friends and neighbours. Though born in a Jewish family and brought up among ardent followers of the Jewish faith, the plurality and cosmopolitan culture of India have had a gargantuan impact on many characters in the novel, especially the protagonist, her cousin Samuel and her maternal grandfather Daniel. Throughout the novel, the protagonist struggles to understand her Jewish religion and admires the Hindu cuisine, often preferring them to the practices in her own home. The interaction with Hindu friends – Subhadra, Pratibha and Vatsala – profoundly influences the protagonist who often yearns to be born as a Hindu girl. "I peer into Subhadra's face, asking for a dot of kumkum. She looks at me questioningly and her hand remains suspended in time." (David, *The Walled City* 2). Born as a Jew in a caste-ridden Hindu majority society, she believes herself to be religiously, and hence socially, inferior to her Hindu friends. Since childhood she understands that her religious faith and food habits, distinguish her from the mainstream society for which vegetarianism is inviolate, with meat-eating being considered a 'barbaric' practice. The protagonist's preference for "the hot Gujarati dal, basmati rice, sour potato curry and the sweet and sour mango pickle" (David, *The Walled City* 21) cooked by Subhadra's mother, to the chapatis and mutton curry cooked in her own house, can be identified as an attempt to identify with the dominant Hindu community. At school she assumes a sense of moral superiority when she consumes the "Gujarati snacks in exchange for Mother's biscuits and cakes" (David, *The Walled City* 91). These instances reveal that, for the protagonist, food is not just a means of nourishment and a source to appease her taste buds, but it is an index of social recognition and acceptance. Being a Bene Israel Jew, she knows that she belongs to the lower strata of the Indian society, and hence her craving for vegetarian food is not merely due to its physical taste but also due to its potentiality to create a semblance of upper social mobility. Hence, the protagonist's desire for the vegetarian food cooked at the houses of her Hindu friends is indicative of her

desire to dissociate from her identity as an 'impure' meat eater and to identify with the non-Jewish mainstream.

David exposes the religious insecurities endured by this minority community due to the overpowering notions of purity and pollution generated by the ritualistic dietary practices of the dominant communities in India. The protagonist has often experienced religious discrimination, especially, when Subhadra's "mother will not allow a meat-eater like me inside the kitchen where a lamp burns in front of the family deity" (David, *The Walled City* 21). Subhadra's mother, who believes that non vegetarian food is unholy and that God resides in her kitchen where only vegetarian food is cooked, is not willing to pollute the sanctity of her kitchen and dining area by allowing a non-vegetarian subject inside it. A representative of the upper caste Hindu Brahmins, Subhadra's mother considers non-vegetarians like the protagonist as impure, polluting entities, and denies them entrance to her inner domestic sphere. The protagonist imbibes and even passively accepts the religious discrimination she endures at her friend's house. She reflects on how differently Subhadra and she behave in each other's houses. While the protagonist cherishes every bit she eats from Subhadra's house, the latter deliberately avoids food and drinks, including water, from the former's Jewish house where meat is cooked. These instances reinforce how the notion of caste impurity shapes the protagonist's psyche.

The protagonist's inclination for vegetarian food can be seen as a kind of counter-cuisine to the Jewish one which uses meat extensively. When she enjoys the vegetarian food cooked at Subhadra's house, she attempts to overcome the trauma of the social ostracism she experiences due to her non-vegetarian dietary practices. However, this attempt is ruptured by existing taboos centred on food in the caste-ridden Indian social order. The protagonist is forced to hide her liking for the food at Subhadra's house because her profoundly religious Jewish family would consider it as an act of cultural resistance to their own religious faith. Often, her mother Naomi and their servant, Mani, blame Subhadra for corrupting the protagonist's Jewish faith. Naomi devoutly observes the Jewish *minhag* and cooks and consumes only *kosher* food, a habit she has imbibed from her religiously conservative mother, Leah. Like Subhadra's mother who disregards non-vegetarian food, Naomi disdains non-*kosher* food and never allows her daughter to consume food from places other than Jewish households due to the fear of violating the laws of *kashruth*. Mani, a Muslim woman who has been given refuge in the protagonist's house during the communal riots, continues to stay there as their cook and masters the laws of *kashruth* under the guidance of Granny. Being a refugee at the Jewish household, Mani proclaims her accommodation and integration to her place of asylum by whole-heartedly cooking *kosher* food, and often advices the protagonist to refrain from consuming non-*kosher* dishes. The gastronomical notions of Naomi, Mani, and Subhadra's mother assert that "observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship" (Douglas 58). In the same way Subhadra's mother is reluctant to allow a non-vegetarian within her kitchen, both

Naomi and Mani discourage the protagonist from mingling with Subhadra or eating from the latter's house.

The novel exposes the intrinsic inner conflicts and the struggles of Indian Jews to retain their identity and to protect their ethnicity while living amidst their Hindu neighbours and friends. The protagonist's cousin Samuel, after his acquaintance with the Jain girl Mandakini, suffers from a sense of insecurity and disequilibrium regarding his Jewish faith. Later when Samuel falls in love with the deeply religious Mandakini, she "convinces Samuel that it is a sin to kill animals for food. He becomes a vegetarian and Malka asks me if he also prays with Mandakini at the temple" (David, *The Walled City* 153). When Samuel adopts vegetarianism, his sister Malka perceives it as a symbolic religious conversion from Judaism to Hinduism. Both Malka and Mandakini believe that food is pivotal in determining one's religious identity. Mandakini's endorsement of vegetarianism as a sacred act of preserving the innocent lives of animals is a powerful indication of the power dynamics involved in notions centered on food habits. When she labels the consumption of meat as 'sinful,' she inadvertently points at her own caste 'purity'. The higher religious status enjoyed by the Jain girl Mandakini is a significant cultural statement because the Jains, like the Jews, are a minority community in India; nevertheless, the Jains are greatly revered and are considered to be a 'purer' community due to their dejection of non-vegetarian diet (Dalal 167). Samuel believes that through the rejection of non-vegetarian food, he has attained spiritual purity and cultural ennoblement which will enable him to be accepted by Mandakini.

David also portrays the impact of gender dynamics in food choices within the domestic sphere and how it shapes the materiality of religion. The novel underlines how women in both the Hindu and Jewish households are relatively more religious than the men. In *The Walled City*, the women – Aunt Hannah, Leah, Granny, Naomi, Mandakini, and Subhadra's mother, — are committed to the preservation of their religiousness and dietary practices. On the other hand, men like Daniel, Uncle Menachem and Samuel, despite their knowledge of Jewish dictums and rituals, often violate the rules of *kashruth*. The protagonist's grandfather Daniel is completely Indianized to the extent that he fails to observe Jewish rituals, including the consumption of *kosher* food. His wife Leah, on the other hand, preserves her Jewishness by cooking only *kosher* food and imparting the same dietary habits to her daughters. This contrasting lifestyle of Leah and her husband illustrates the paradoxical gender dynamics involved in religious faith.

The relationship between Mandakini and Samuel exemplifies the radical divergences in the way men and women perceive the observance of religious dietary practices and food taboos. Mandakini successfully convinces Samuel to denounce his Jewish food practices and to uphold vegetarian food culture. But her association with Samuel has neither affected her religious faith, nor 'polluted' her dietary habits. Another significant episode elucidating the religious negligence and dismissal of dietary laws by men is when the protagonist narrates that everyday Samuel eats milk peda along with meat samosa, and his father "Uncle Menachem cannot imagine lunch or dinner without gulab jamuns or pedas. He winks and says it is not

permissible to mix milk and meat, but he cannot help it" (David, *The Walled City* 13). Uncle Menachem is aware of the laws of *kashruth* but he and his son regularly violate one of the gravest Jewish food taboos. These instances clearly assert that while men often deviate from religious observances and ignore taboos, women strive hard within their domestic spaces and employ food as the primary tool to protect their faith and customs.

In the novel, men engaging in culinary digressions that are detrimental to their faith, are not actively involved in the process of cooking; hence, unlike the women, they do not physically perform or articulate the laws of *kashruth*. The women who usually stay away from the public domain, employ food as a weapon and kitchen as the locus for resisting the religious defiance of the men in their household. "I think the kitchen is the soul of the house, … Granny, Aunty Hannah and Amina spend endless hours around the huge oven" (David, *The Walled City* 12). In the protagonist's house, kitchen is depicted as an exclusively feminine space where her Granny, aunt, and mother, while cooking food for the family, assiduously preserve their Jewish culture and heritage. David, by depicting kitchen as a powerful domain, subverts the traditional discourse depicting it as a vulnerable space.

The novel illustrates the role played by food in the assimilation of the Bene Israel Jews in the Indian socio-cultural sphere. For them, food is not just a means to preserve their ethnicity; it is also a powerful tool to create amiable relationships with their 'gentile' neighbours. The Indo- Jewish cuisine they developed "allows them to create and negotiate a sense of continuity and normality, and to construct social relations" (Verdasco 193). Granny, who is well assimilated to the nation's lifestyle, yet passionately preserving her Jewishness, wears the nine-yard Marathi sari, speaks Marathi and makes Indian snacks like *modaks* and *laddus*. Whenever Naomi makes biscuits or cakes, the protagonist craves for her Granny's home-made Indian snacks like the Gujarati *chevado*. Granny cooking Indian snacks and the protagonist cherishing them substantiate the role of food in materializing cultural integration. The Indian food items made according to the rules of *kashruth* help them attain a sense of belonging and acceptance, even while enabling them to maintain their ethnicity. Despite her cultural assimilation to Marathi customs, Granny never consciously violates or compromises her heritage or religious values. She assures that every food item cooked within her household is prepared according to the rules of *kashruth.* Through the character of Granny, David reinforces the way women transform vulnerable domestic arenas, especially the kitchen, into powerful instruments for preserving their ethnicity and religious faith.

As the novel progresses, David explicates how "cooking has long been a cultural icon throughout Jewish history" (Abramson 259) and how the *kosher* food prepared at Jewish households acts as an immanent cultural object embodying their age-old heritage and ethnicity. A significant instance that outlines the potential role of food as a cultural artefact in affirming Jewish faith in the protagonist is when she remembers how functions like weddings have become the only link between her family and those relatives who have made their Aliyah (the immigration to the Promised Land) to Israel. Here, the authentic Jewish recipes cooked and

consumed during religious and cultural functions spatialize the collective memory of the community.

> All we remember are the weddings which made us cry, bhel puri at Chowpatty, pomfret fish and Aunty Shoshonah sitting on a low stool and slitting the necks of chicken in accordance with the kosher laws. Our relatives used to buy goat's meat only on Fridays from the synagogue and we used to feel like heathens as we continued to buy ours from the butcher at Dilhi Darwaza. We used to shock Aunty Shoshonah with confused questions about why we could not eat fish without scales and chapatis with ghee. (David, *The Walled City* 134)

She reminiscences about her family members buying ritually slaughtered meat for weddings and her aunt carefully preparing fish, meat or chicken, adhering to the laws of *kashruth.* According to *Deuteronomy*, the holy book of Judaism, Jews are permitted to consume only those fish with scale and fins and hence most of the time the only type of fish Bene Israel Jews consume is Pomfret because it has scales. The protagonist remembers not only the food items, but also the ritually relevant steps involved in the process of cooking. Such occasions are integral for a minority community to appreciate and celebrate their ethnicity and unique culture. Communal gatherings and the activity of cooking *kosher* food together are depicted as moments that regenerate the collective memory of the Bene Israel Jews. Such gatherings further underscore the socio-cultural marginalization and estrangement faced by the community. The sense of social ostracization they experience in India is clearly expounded when the protagonist recounts how she felt like a 'heathen' while buying ritually slaughtered meat from the synagogue. The act of jointly cooking and consuming *kosher* food enables them to overcome the sense of loneliness and apprehensions they experience in India where they are a religious minority often looked upon as outcastes. Such events "strengthen a sense of belonging … can become sources of emotional ambivalence … echoes the migrant's past and the awareness that the consumption of those same foods might mark them as outsiders in the host society" (Parasecoli 422). Food here acts as an influential material entity evocative of the cultural memory of the Jews, thus enabling them to negotiate with issues of identity.

In *The Walled City*, David highlights how food is instrumental in the creation of socio-cultural segregation and hierarchies in the Indian social order. She clearly portrays how the pluralistic religious ambience and the caste-driven food taboos inculcate a sense of ambivalence among minority communities such as the Jews. In India, where people are often discriminated in terms of their food habits and restrictions, the Indian Jews are in a constant struggle to defeat their inner fears of exclusion and discrimination. The deliberate abstinence from non-vegetarian food by various Jewish characters in the novel is the result of the deeply rooted caste-based notions of purity in India where food habits and dietary practices are crucial in determining the degree of one's piety. Though the Bene Israel Jewish cuisine is a conglomeration of Indian and traditional Jewish recipes, they strictly adhere to the dictums of *kashruth*. The ritualistic Jewish food habits and those adopted from other dominant communities for the sake of acceptance, assert that "food choice divides communities and

has the power to delineate the boundaries between them. Food taboos can serve to mark outsiders as unclean, unhealthy, unholy" (Steine 134). The novel asserts how food choices, cooking practices and culinary habits reflect one's religious identity, especially those of the minority communities in a caste-ridden country like India.

In *The Walled City*, food acts as a powerful cultural object that defines and redefines the socio-cultural status and identity of the Bene Israel Jews. It is suggestive of the rich culture, ethnic tradition and heritage of the community. The novel elucidates the existence of a complex interplay between food, culture, religion, and gender dynamics in the caste-ridden Indian society. The inextricable link between food and faith is explicated in the novel through the spiritual dilemma of various characters, who, with the help of their unique cuisine, reassert their faith and embrace their Jewishness. By reflecting upon the experiences of the marginalized Jewish community, David acknowledges how food shapes power dynamics and engenders cultural hybridity, thus shaping a uniquely Jewish identity in the Indian ethos. The observance of *kashruth* is pivotal in maintaining Jewish 'purity' according to *Halakha* (the religious principles governing Jewish life). The novel recounts the various *kosher* regulations a Jew is expected to follow, while simultaneously revealing how Indian Jews are forced to make conscious efforts, to 'purify' themselves through the violation of *kashruth* thereby enabling their acceptance and assimilation with the mainstream Indian society. David portrays how the concept of purity is entrenched in the religious life of India and how it affects the cultural life of minority communities like Indian Jews.

In the case of migrant communities like the Jews, the perception of homeland is quite complex because they are often looked upon as outsiders and foreigners in a nation where they are born and brought up. For them food acts as a powerful marker of identity and dietary practices accentuate the discourse of inclusion and exclusion. The novel underscores how the culinary culture of Indian Jews contradict with the dominant cultures of the nation by exposing the emotionally-driven culinary struggles endured by the community. In *The Walled City*, food emerges as a significant cultural object, instrumental in channelizing the problematic processes of assimilation and acculturation among Indian Jews. Food habits and dietary practices represent the identity crisis, cultural memory and issues of displacement encountered by ethnic minorities like Jews in a religiously heterogenous nation like India. Thus, *The Walled City* functions as a gastro-memoir of the microscopic Bene Israel Jewish community of India.

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# Why Identity Construction Matters: ESL Teachers of India in the Globalized Scenario of Higher Education



STANCILAUS S.

**Abstract**

The Higher Education scenario in India has and continues to change in an unprecedented manner. The Globalized world is witnessing knowledge explosion as well as a divide on the knowledge domain. Virtual universities and transnational institutions have made education borderless and porous. The contemporary heterogeneous realities have made identity a contested terrain. People enact, negotiate, mediate and transform their identities vis-à-vis others. Life will be tiresome if people fail to embrace sameness within differences. The teachers have a conspicuous role in building a better world. English, the lingua franca of the globe, can facilitate thinking beyond and across cultures and identities. Teaching a language always implies intercultural communication. English is taught as a second language in India (ESL/L2). The crucial aspect of the identity of a teacher in English is about the sense of affiliation between personal and professional identities. The identity of a teacher is like a palimpsest ever evolving and continually created. The pedagogical practices, classroom experiences and life incidents impact on the identity. The conditions in colleges across the state have made it increasingly difficult to become a teacher. Often, the identity of a teacher paves way for an alteritysignaling an alarm and portent danger. But a teacher has to construct and claim an identity to direct the future generation to make the world a better place to live, for which a transformative pedagogy is mandatory.

**Keywords:**Indian higher education scenario, cultural capital, intellectual capital, culture, identity, English as a Second Language (ESL), language teacher, transformative pedagogy

Globalization has fetched unparalleled changes in several walks of life, not to mention, higher education. It has facilitated an unprecedented growth in knowledge production, dissemination and absorption. The disruptions consequent to globalization have resulted in borderless and porous institutions. The educational institutions have begun to move from being within state boundaries and serving national purposes and to transnational entities with global aspirations and resolutions. Virtual Universities, Translational and Multinational Campuses, Knowledge Cities, Educational Hubs etc., have gained traction. There is a mutually dependent relationship between globalization and education. On the one hand, globalization creates a great divide on the knowledge domain "between the info-rich and info- poor", and on the other, globalized democracy advocates "inclusion, access and equity".

Globalization has had its impact on all aspects of life including the cultural, economic, social and political. As for the cultural aspect, the overriding tension is between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. The cultural capital presupposes profit driven and private interest market-oriented systems. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) sees "cultural capital' as the dominant conceptions of what constitutes knowledge, knowing and social values" (p.50). Baker Will (2015) comments that the educational establishments, "having modelled their goals and strategies on an entrepreneurial model, are compelled to embrace corporate ethos of efficiency, accountability and profit-driven managerial system" (xvi). Hence, the higher education system has resorted to "outcome based" and "standardized" systems.

The political reality of unequal divide has made globalized world a locus for conflicts and wars-economic, ethnic, environmental, religious, historical and ideological. Inequality is now a demographic condition, the result of uneven distribution of resources, labour and capitalist forces. The world now seems schizophrenic characterized by rootlessness, alienation and exile. Ethnic conflicts and religious fanaticism have transformed the world to a geopolitical agon. Sadiq. A. Abdullahi (2015) comments: "The global community has to confront the emergence of religious fundamentalism, corporate greed, human rights and environmental abuses" (24), and that "the global educators should deal with issues and problems caused by poverty, global terrorism and human and ecological abuses" (23). These global issues should form the content of education lest the world disrupt in the great abyss of disaster, and consequently extinction.

A change in the mindset is the need of the hour to address the challenges posed by contemporary scenario. It is against this background that teacher identity assumes great significance as also poses tremendous challenges. Hanvey Robert (1976) speaks of five interdisciplinary concepts, viz., "perspective consciousness"; "state-of-the-planet awareness"; "cross-cultural awareness"; "awareness of global dynamics"; and "awareness of human choices". "Perspective consciousness" implies that a teacher conveys multiple perspectives on issues, practices and norms predominant in the world. "The state-of-the-planet awareness demands the discussion of print and non-print reports on the several issues and their bearing on the different regions of the world. "The cross-cultural awareness" brings out a comparative analysis of the cultures, cultural borrowings and cultural diffusions with a view to creating tolerance and empathy, "The awareness of global dynamics" aims to create a cross-cultural understanding. In "the awareness of human choices", an attempt is made to compare different cultures and the bearing of technology on them with a view to understanding the choices that individuals and nations make.

Globalisation has made education both culturally-dependent, market controlled, progress-based and technology-oriented. Education has become more utilitarian than cultural. UNESCO recommends "fours pillars for the education for the 21st century, viz., learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be" (Delors Report, 1996). Of all the four, "learning to be" demands arduous task. It is against this context that J. Zadja (2009) considers "learning to be as the essential learning for the twenty-first century" with focus on

the on-going education reforms, "... with a view to generate a genuine culture of learning characterized by wisdom, compassion and intercultural understanding". This wisdom must be "achievable through personal transformation in order to save the individual-cultural-species identity of our earthly condition" (1-12).

What is taught matters, but what counts is the "how" of teaching rather than the "what".There are several controversial topics and issues to be taught, but they are to be taught in such a manner as to bind the world and not to divide the people. Thus, "... content and delivery become integral to global education". They should be schooled for embracing changes at the global level. Sadiq. A. Abdullahi (2015) observes that global education is "the study of the interface of political, ecological, cultural and economic systems in the world" (27). The new world requires a community which can lead more meaningful and happier life. This meaningful community implies imparting and imbibing values pertinent to such a society. However, the consumerist culture has been detrimental to community engagement and shared concerns.

TESOL, an acronym for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, embraces both English as a Second Language (L2) or (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). ESL implies the teaching of English in countries where English is predominant or used as Lingua Franca, as for eg..Australia, Canada, New Zealand and USA, Singapore and India. India is a multilingual society and the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution recognizes 22 languages. Though Hindi is the national language, only less than 44% speaks Hindi. Englishand Hindi are considered the official languages, and English also serves as a link language facilitating communication between diverse and heterogeneous linguistic groups. In EFL situations, English is taught as a foreign language, and it is neither a medium of instruction nor a means of mass communication.

English is taught as a second language in India. Teaching English is not merely a legacy of colonisation, though it had its inceptions in the colonial period. The associated discourses of globalisation have resulted in an unprecedented demand for English since it has been elevated to the status of a global language of knowledge, library, science, communication and technology. However, the cultural dimension does not find adequate space in language learning process. This is prominently visible in examining how English is taught in India with focus on linguistic competence. But China and Thailand give much thrust to culture as on communication, connections and communities. The Report of the Ministry of Education of China (2011) reads:

> "… this focus on the linguistic dimension of competence with its underlying structuralist view of language as code, at the expense of other aspects of communication, ignores many of the insights of intercultural communication and ELF studies, especially as regards the importance of culture, context, variety, adaptation and change in language and communication" (177).

The teachers in English language have difficult times in promoting a curriculum designed by faculty totally alien. The teacher and the learners are in a helpless situation to master the course. The belief that non-native speaker is linguistically deficit while the native speaker is competent invalidates both the teacher and the learner robbing them of confidence and proficiency. Often the content includes phonology, morphology and syntax. The teacher resorts to a conventional lecture method or at the most a participant-oriented method in the form of discussion or case studies. The assessment is all the more disgusting with focus on exams or assignments. The thrust on knowledge transmission gives little space for teacher-learner's beliefs and practices. What is at stake is the absence of cultural or communicative components. The demands for curriculum conformity and linguistic competence sideline socio-cultural factors.

There has been a plethora of descriptions on culture. A few pertinent ob observations on culture linked to language are annotated to validate the hypothesis. Claire Kramsch (1998) sees culture as... membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space andhistory, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting The discourse is community itself" (127). Culture and language are closed interrelated, and language can never be culturally neutral. The "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" postulates that "the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on language habits of the group". It reiterates that "the structures of different languages shape how their speakers perceive and conceptualize the world" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin Lee). Adrian Holliday (2011) posits a theory closely related to applied linguistics seeing "culture as a constructed social practice" (59).

What is needed is that L.2 learners should absorb interculturality in order to respond to communicative diversity. Communication involves negotiation and challenge, and the situations calls for understanding, if not assimilation of intercultural characteristics. The learning in a second language classroom should enable them think between, across and beyond cultures. Teaching a language involves intercultural communication and assimilation of diversity of perspectives and heterogeneity of cultures. Culture in ELT teaching operates on and across local, national and global dimensions. The teachers should make the learners possible to overcome irrational fears of another culture, liberate them from bias and prejudices, and perceive different identities and cultures. It is for the teacher to see that the culture embedded in the language should be comprehensible at various levels of learning. They should disrupt the silos of disciplines revealing multi-disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity outlook.

The pedagogy of a language teacher should be informed by the process of thinking and learning. It is the primary responsibility of a language teacher to train the learners for visible thinking. Such a pedagogy can improve the communicative competence. The teaching of language supplemented with focus on culture can nurture attitude pertinent to the development of skills. But this is not an easy task. The time constraints on an already busy teacher and the learners' motivation to master the four skills of LSRW make this intercultural dimension almost always a mirage. The fifth skill of culture is relegated to the margin and given the least

attention. The contention of Tony J. Young and Itesh Sachdev (2011) that "there has been little empirical research on the uptake and perceived applicability of intercultural approach" (83) holds true of Indian classrooms, both at school and higher education levels. But it is not enough that learners are linguistically equipped.

Bourdieu (1991) also speaks of "linguistic capital" and shows how "the use of language is always related to issues of identity" (5-6). Though "the choices of the habitus are determinedwithout constraint, they are products of social determinism" (51) Identity is always implicated in culture and language. Individuals are identified with particular cultural systems, though it is dangerous to always conflate culture and individual's identity. We can only speak of multiple, fragmented, fluid and floating identities in today's multilingual and multicultural societies. It is pertinent to draw the distinction between identity and subjectivity. While subjectivity involves the construction of the self, identity involves our situating in social groups. The "metaphors of flow, movement and spatial frames of "trans" theories" explain the contemporary realities. The liquidity of identity paralleling the fluidity of culture has informed the perception of identity in applied linguistics.

Identity is linked to language in that the "self" is always in relation to the other. An individual's identity is part of the world, and subjected to and constituted by linguistic process. Stuart Hall (1997) clarifies that "... identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become" (p. 4). Identity is conceived within discourses. An individual's identification with his/her beliefs and desires is neither feasible nor possible without language. Identity involves the recognition of the self; and it is always implicit in recognition by others. Discourse is one of factors through which one reveals one's identity. The fact that discourse enables the understanding of one's identities reveals that language has an important bearing on identity.

It is imperative that a second language teacher must evolve a steadfast identification with one's professional community. There are several discourses including political and cultural embedded practices affecting the formation of identity. The identity of a teacher in a classroom is formed and improvised in embodying knowledge and engaging the contexts. Identities are, Barker and Galasinski (2001) observe: "descriptions of ourselves with which we identify and in which we have emotionally invested" (p. 87). Charles Taylor (1994) in his essay, "The Politics of Recognition," posits that identities are products of interaction and communication with others. "Self-knowledge is mediated by others and therefore involves not just cognition but recognition" (66-67). Ronald Cater (2010) comments that the national varieties of English, as for example, Indian English with ideological and political baggage, impact the identity, be it personal or professional (p. 1-6).

Language awareness is sure to create an identity within the domain by facilitating different options and directions. Nick Peim (2000) makes a pertinent observation in this regard:

> After all, language and literacy are key elements that define how we see ourselves, and are significant aspects of social identity. English teachers are not automatically equipped to confront complex issues around language. Their awareness of subject identity is likely to be coloured by their degree of experience of literature based English courses and the embedded textual practices used to engage with this literature often tempered with an honest but vague sense of promoting instrumental language competence and rich language experience (170)

But it should be admitted that post-structuralism and socio-linguistics helps a long way in addressing issues of subjectivity and identity.

The postmodern theorists posit a world order of mixed and mingling experiences: Individuals can assume varied identities simultaneously. The teacher in English has the mandate to promote an understanding of hybridity. This involves a creation of awareness among "the teacher students the multiple elements constituting the identities". There are many common elements among the two the teacher and the student. The encouragement of seeing these common factors would entail a deconstruction of the binaries between self and the other. We can deconstruct and decentre the centre without the margin becoming the centre. Language is reduced to mere construct with endless signifiers. The text becomes context revealing the subtext. Semiotics can help a long way in developing intertextual readings. A teacher should see to the promotion of personal voice, creativity and discovery.

The crucial aspect with regard to identity as a teacher in English is about the integration of personal identity with professional identity. A teacher must negotiate conflicting positions and beliefs while forming a professional self The learners from diverse backgrounds and of various ages depict teachers almost similarly with stereotypical markers like chalk, blackboards, authoritative pauses etc., However, a modern-day experiment would reveal a difference of substituting chalk and blackboard with markers and white or green boards. What is striking is that while some succeed to assume this professional identity, some fail to do so. It must be admitted that a teachers' lives are inevitably linked to the students' personal lives; and there is no clear separation between the two.

A teacher has to assume several roles a learner, mentor, guide, facilitator, role model and motivator. He can assume these different identities at the same time. The identities are shaped through "chains of equivalence between teacher and student in the student-centered teaching. It is imperative to focus on both classroom pedagogy and experience. While curricula give an edge to the competence aspect, the class room experiences should help them change their thought-process as to accept the diversity of individuals and sand cultures. The students, on the other hand, should reciprocate and respond to the teacher. A teacher's life in the classroom makes life interesting and meaningful if she can effectively switch on from one role to the other. One "becomes" a teacher rather than "he" a teacher. This transposition is possible only by situating in learning to teach experiences.

The teacher identity is holistic incorporating the cognitive, emotional and physical. It is a teacher's task to enhance linguistic competence with communicative capability. Despite our

repeated attempts for intercultural education, learners cannot absorb, or even understand all cultural practices and contexts. It is indispensable to equip learners with the process of intercultural communication. This becomes all the more difficult with a "globally used lingua franca like English". However, rethinking the professional identity of a teacher demands the repudiation of the dictums that dictate mere linguistic competency and classroom efficacy. It is a proven fact that any communication will be largely conditioned and shaped by language and culture.

The centrality of teacher identity is constituted and constitutive of modernity characterised by alterity, unevenness, fragmentation, conflicts and violence. Erik Erikson (1968) believes that identity formation is a kind of "psychosocial relativity" (Erikson, 31). It is like a palimpsest conditioned by several factors and continually changing. A teacher's identity is partly the relationship between self and the other (student). The students are often the arbiters of a teacher's identity. The politics of identity construction is crucial in cultural diversity. It is roic of a teacher in English to erase the binaries for a harmonious co-existence. The teacher has to exercise his/her choice for recognition of the plurality of affiliations, it is for the teacher to address the concerns and scheme of things detrimental and destructive to the geopolitics of universal brotherhood and harmonious living. The identity of a teacher can serve as bastion against the rallying cries of the politics of separatist identity. A transformative pedagogy is mandatory to mould a generation that would willingly wish and work for a better and safer world.

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# Depiction of Trauma Through the Characters of Manjula Padmanabhan

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## Abstract

Indian playwright Manjula Padmanabhan is well known for her candid portrayals of social issues, often focussing on the poor, particularly women. Her plays often explore the intricacies of human suffering, with trauma serving as a central motif. This study examines how Padmanabhan presents trauma as a communal and individual experience influenced by political, social, and cultural factors using psychological trauma theory, gender studies, and postcolonial research. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Padmanabhan's portrayal of trauma.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Commodification, Gendered Trauma, Surveillance.

Manjula Padmanabhan's popular Indian-English play Harvest explores the complex portrayal of sorrow in all of its social, emotional, and physical expressions. The story, which received the 1997 Onassis Award for Theatre, explores the exploitation of human bodies in a dystopian setting. Harvest's protagonists experience varied degrees of emotional and systemic agony, reflecting the issues of gender, identity, and social injustice in Indian English literature. The paper will examine Harvest in conjunction with Padmanabhan's other works in order to understand the connection between the characters' experiences of trauma and the exploitation of human bodies in a future where the affluent treat the poor in developing countries like commodities. Harvest's portrayal of the physical commercialisation of the human body is a glaring example of trauma. In the post-apocalyptic future, impoverished Indian families sell their organs to affluent Western customers in order to preserve their financial security. Om, the protagonist, suffers the most from this commercialisation as his body is reduced to a resource and his physical autonomy is taken away. The technological instruments needed to monitor and control Om's body exacerbate his physical trauma. His house is changed into a sterile, closely monitored setting, turning him from a sentient human being into a target of medical observation. Being exposed to the commercialisation of one's own body causes severe physical and psychological anguish. Because of the constant monitoring and manipulation of his body, Om's life is marked by a recurring fear of violence. The commercialisation of the body might be seen as a metaphor for the Global North's larger exploitation of the Global South. The victims of this exploitation suffer severe physical and psychological trauma, and it serves as a reminder of the past and current exploitation of

colonised and marginalised peoples by powerful countries. Being turned into a commodity hurts people on a personal and social level.

The play Harvest explores the mental and emotional suffering of characters such as Om, who is reduced to bodily fragments as a result of his family's extreme poverty. The play emphasises the suffering caused by poverty, which robs people of their independence and dignity by making them make difficult decisions. Since Om is separated from his own body and identity, his pain manifests as a sense of dispossession. As a helpless observer of her husband's commercialisation, Jaya, Om's wife, experiences a certain kind of mental suffering. Given that she had little control over the choice to sell Om's organs and the outcome of the sale, her anguish is primarily gendered. Her exclusion from the decision-making process highlights how trauma and gender are intertwined in Harvest, where women are consistently left out in the face of male authority.

Jaya's emotional suffering is made worse by the dissolution of her family. As the play progresses, Jaya's feelings of loneliness intensify, mirroring the inward chaos that usually follows tragedy. Her efforts to exercise her agency are constantly thwarted by her family dynamics and the coercive forces of the organ trade. Every member of the family experiences the emotional pain of commodification on their own. Om's mother, Ma, first disregards the information and believes the foreign bidder would save her son. But as the play goes on, Ma is forced to face reality, and her emotional collapse represents the severe psychological effects that trauma can have on people and families.

Gender-based trauma is examined in the play Harvest, particularly in relation to Jaya's character. Jaya's experience is shaped by her patriarchal status, which restricts her autonomy and muffles her voice. The gendered power dynamics in her family and society also contribute to her trauma and organ trafficking. When Jaya is left out of the decision to sell Om's organs, her suffering begins. She feels obliged to support her husband's actions as a wife, even if they directly affect her. This reflects a broader issue of women's subordination in patriarchal society. Passively, Jaya's husband abuses her, and her body and sexuality just make it worse. Since Jaya is seen as a commodity and object of desire, she suffers more when Ginni, a foreign buyer, shows interest in her. Jaya's trauma serves as a source of strength as she fights against the powers who would oppress and control her. Her obstinacy, especially in the play's closing scenes, is an example of a specific kind of strength in the face of profound grief.

Manjula Padmanabhan's play "Harvest" is a compelling investigation of gendered pain, especially in patriarchal society. The drama addresses the silence, marginalization, and objectification of women, while demonstrating how patriarchal mechanisms compound their suffering. via the figure of Jaya, Padmanabhan depicts how gendered trauma is not only an individual illness but a systemic problem that functions via silence, exclusion, and the monetisation of women's bodies. Jaya, who is situated in a culture where males make choices and women are supposed to comply, is marginalised and lacks agency at the start of the play.

Om, Jaya's husband, sells his organs to a rich Western bidder without engaging Jaya in the decision-making process. This exclusion mirrors a greater gendered trauma, whereby women are regularly denied a say in key choices that impact their lives and bodies. In patriarchal systems, women's autonomy is typically discounted or neglected, leading to a devastating feeling of impotence and marginalization. Jaya's experience is marked by the commercialisation of her husband's body and extends to her own body and autonomy. She is confined to a passive spectator, observing as choices are made that drastically effect her family and her future. Her thoughts, wishes, and anxieties are routinely neglected, strengthening her subservient status within the family and society. This exclusion itself becomes a type of trauma, since Jaya's psychological and emotional well-being is strongly related to her incapacity to take control over her living circumstances. One of the key topics of "Harvest" is the commodity of women's bodies, which is portrayed as a possible venue for sexual commodification. The foreign buyer, Ginni, exhibits interest in Jaya, which brings a new layer of anguish for her. Unlike Om, whose body is commodified for medical reasons, Jaya's body is considered as a potential venue for sexual commodification. This attention on Jaya's body underscores the gendered aspect of trauma, where women's bodies are typically objectified and controlled.

"Harvest" is not an exception to Padmanabhan's recurrent theme of the pain of gendered silence. Jaya's story serves as an example of how patriarchal structures deny women their rights to their own bodies as well as their voices. Her early reticence is a reflection of the limitations society has put on her, not a sign of apathy. But as the play goes on, she becomes more conscious of and rejects these limitations, which marks a significant change in her character from victimisation to resistance. Jaya's socioeconomic background further exacerbates the way that gender and class overlap in trauma. The greater exploitation of impoverished women in patriarchal, capitalist society is reflected in Om's financial desperation, which leads him to sell his organs. One way to see Jaya's resistance is as a reaction to the agony of gendered silence. She opposes the patriarchal and commercial structures that strive to dominate her by rejecting the buyer's requests and taking back her voice. Jaya rejects the buyer's authority over her and her family in the play's closing scenes, demonstrating her independence. Padmanabhan highlights the potential for perseverance in the face of severe adversity via Jaya's character. Despite experiencing many types of socioeconomic and gendered abuse, Jaya eventually refuses to be silent. Her narrative offers a deep meditation on the ways in which gendered trauma functions in both individual and societal settings, serving as a larger criticism of the confluence of patriarchy, capitalism, and global exploitation.

In "Harvest," Manjula Padmanabhan explores the theme of resilience and survival through the character of Jaya. Jaya's journey is a symbol of the human capacity to withstand trauma and oppression, especially in the face of systemic violence and exploitation. The play highlights the possibility of survival in a world where individuals are stripped of agency, objectified, and commodified yet still find ways to reclaim their power and humanity.

Jaya's initial struggles include powerlessness and entrapment, as her husband, Om, sells his organs to a wealthy Western buyer without consulting her. Her entrapment is both literal and metaphorical, reflecting the broader societal control that limits her freedom. Jaya's experience is defined by helplessness, as she watches her husband's body become a commodity, realizing that her own body may also be subjected to exploitation. A key turning point in "Harvest" is Jaya's realization that silence and submission will not protect her or her family from further degradation. She begins to question the system that commodifies her husband's body and threatens to objectify her own. Her growing awareness is evident in her interactions with the foreign buyer, Ginni, who embodies the power and privilege that control Om's body and seeks to control Jaya as well. Jaya's resistance takes the form of defiance, refusing to comply with Ginni's demands and asserting her autonomy. This quiet defiance illustrates that resilience can take many forms, including the strength to reject dehumanization and the courage to confront one's oppressors. In "Harvest," Manjula Padmanabhan explores the concept of resilience and survival through the character of Jaya. Jaya's journey from powerlessness to defiance reflects the broader human capacity to resist and survive trauma, even in the face of overwhelming forces of exploitation and dehumanization. Her emotional resilience is central to her survival, as she refuses to let the trauma define or destroy her.

Jaya's ultimate survival is closely tied to her ability to reclaim agency in a world that constantly seeks to strip it away. The play's conclusion, where Jaya asserts control over her body and rejects Ginni's dominance, represents a powerful moment of empowerment. This act of resistance is not just a rejection of Ginni's control but a broader statement against the systems of exploitation—both patriarchal and capitalist—that have commodified her family and her body. By reclaiming her agency, Jaya transforms from a passive victim of trauma into an active agent of her own fate. Her survival is not merely physical but existential; she refuses to be defined by the trauma imposed upon her and instead chooses to define herself. This act of reclaiming agency is central to Padmanabhan's portrayal of resilience, as it suggests that even in the most oppressive circumstances, individuals can find ways to resist and survive. Padmanabhan's portrayal of Jaya's survival is significant in its representation of women's resilience. In a patriarchal society that often silences and marginalizes women, Jaya's journey to reclaim her voice and agency is emblematic of the broader struggles of women to resist oppression. Her survival becomes a symbol of empowerment, showing that even in the face of overwhelming trauma, women can find ways to assert their autonomy and reclaim their humanity.

Harvest critiques the damage that sociopolitical and economic systems do to the community while concentrating on the traumas experienced by the protagonists. The commercialisation of human flesh, the gap between the affluent and the poor, and the strong and the weak are all issues that are highlighted in the play. The pain of Om, Jaya, and their family serves as a metaphor for the misery that millions of people experience in the real world as a result of systematic exploitation, poverty, and violence. Harvest symbolizes the suffering of the postcolonial subject, whose body and labor are reduced to commodities for the Global North's

gain. The play criticizes worldwide exploitation systems that cause suffering in impoverished countries, where people often have to sell their bodies, labor, or dignity to make ends meet.

"Harvest" by Manjula Padmanabhan is a powerful story that examines the more profound connections between trauma and postcolonialism while criticising the commercialisation of human bodies. The drama emphasises the lasting consequences of colonialism, stressing that the individuals' pain is a symptom of broader historical, political, and economic systems that have their roots in colonialism rather than an isolated incident.

The play's central theme is the commercialisation of human bodies, which is a direct result of global inequality and economic despair. The exploitative interactions between the Global North and the Global South, which have their roots in colonial history, are exemplified by this commodification. Countries in the Global South, like India, are still economically marginalised in the postcolonial era and must sell their labour, resources, and, in the worst situations, their bodies in order to exist. This postcolonial economic reliance might be seen as a direct cause of the suffering that Jaya and her family had through. The play depicts how postcolonial countries are forced to give up their most fundamental resources—human labour and bodies—in order to survive, with Om, Jaya's husband, selling his organs to a rich Western bidder as part of a deal with an international firm. The exploitation and resource extraction that occurred during the colonial era, when colonised countries were compelled to give up their money, labour, and autonomy for the benefit of the colonisers, are echoed in the current global economic inequalities.

As the protagonists are torn between two worlds—the traditional beliefs and cultural standards of their culture and the demands of a global, capitalist system that sees them as commodities—the drama also examines postcolonial alienation and psychological trauma. Because the protagonists must traverse a world where their value is established by outside forces, this conflict fosters a feeling of dislocation and alienation.

Manjula Padmanabhan examines the relationship between trauma and postcolonialism in "Harvest," concentrating on the power struggles between the poor Indian family Jaya and the affluent Western customer Ginni. The play highlights how economic dominance still causes pain for people in previously colonised countries and criticises the Global North's continued exploitation of the Global South. Ginni, who is rich and technologically savvy, is a metaphor for the postcolonial oppressor who forces its way on the economically dependent and defenceless South. The agony of dependence and disempowerment is also highlighted in the play, as previously colonised countries are caught in cycles of political and economic reliance on their former colonisers or superpowers. In "Harvest," the family's decision to sell Om's organs—a decision imposed on him by the economic realities of his postcolonial situation rather than one that was the result of his own free will—reflects their dependence on the foreign corporation for existence. Because they have little influence over their own life, the characters experience a deep feeling of disempowerment as a result of this reliance.

The way the foreign firm controls the family's bodies is a very clear example of the anguish of disempowerment. After Om's body is turned into a commodity, Jaya's body is subsequently in danger of experiencing the same outcome. This authority over their bodies is a reflection of the larger postcolonial reality in which the Global North exploits the bodies and labour of the Global South. Padmanabhan's "Harvest" deftly examines the relationship between trauma and postcolonialism, emphasising how the characters' postcolonial status shapes their feelings of commercialisation, alienation, and disempowerment. The play criticises the continued exploitation of the Global South by the Global North, highlighting the fact that Jaya and her family's pain is a mirror of wider colonial-era global processes rather than a singular incidence.

Harvest by Manjula Padmanabhan explores trauma in all of its forms, including gendered, emotional, psychological, and physical. The drama uses the monetisation of human bodies as a metaphor for larger sociopolitical structures that sustain misery globally. Through the experiences of Om, Jaya, and their family, Padmanabhan questions the structural factors that contribute to and sustain trauma. She also shows how resilient her characters are by implying that resistance and survival are possible even in the face of severe agony.

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# A Philosophical Posthuman Reading of the *Bloodchild* by Octavia E. Butler

THANUJA RAHMAN AND J.S. JAHANGIR


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**Abstract**

Thinking along the lines of Francesca Ferrando's views on new humanities, *Bloodchild* by Octavia E. Butler can be viewed as a classic example of philosophical posthumanism postulated by Ferrando in 2019. The paper delves into the details of Francesca Ferrando's groundbreaking academic contributions and situates *Bloodchild* within the framework of philosophical posthumanism in order to examine how each element of the story intertwines with posthuman principles, much like creeping vines embracing an ancient tree.

**Keywords:** Philosophical Posthumanism, *Bloodchild*, Octavia E. Butler, interconnectedness, multiverse.

Over the last few decades, European humanism got questioned by feminists, postcolonial thinkers, anti-racists, environmentalists, queer and disability rights activists. Contemporary Western thinking has disapproved of the scope, achievements and the founding principles of European humanism and its ideal of man as "the measure of all things". This was a central idea to the European colonial expansionist ideology. The new critiques of humanism are fundamentally inspired by works like Foucault's *Death of Man* (1966). The critique of humanism also intersects with the critique of the violent rule of humans over earth- the species supremacy- which involves seeing humans as a greedy and rapacious species creating a hierarchical rule with the aid of scientific advancements and a control over the globe.

It is against these ideas of humanism that Francesca Ferrando's philosophical posthumanism stands as a bulwark of post-anthropocentrism and post-dualism. This paper analyses in detail how the tenets of philosophical posthumanism, as articulated by Ferrando, align with the science fiction short story *Bloodchild* by Octavia E. Butler. It attempts to prove that Butler's work is a striking example that subtly yet powerfully exhibits the principles of philosophical posthumanism.

Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) is an American writer of science fiction noted for her futuristic fiction novels exploring the themes of feminism and Afrofuturism, making race, gender and identity her key concerns. Her speculative fictions on futuristic scenarios address societal issues and delve into a deep examination of human experiences. *Bloodchild*, first published in 1984, has won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, validating Butler's voice in speculative fiction. Francesca Ferrando, an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Philosophy at

New York University, is a leading voice in the contemporary field of Posthuman Studies. She has authored seminal books in the field like *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2019) and *How We Became Posthuman* (2023). Though not a proclaimed posthumanist, Octavia E. Butler's inclinations share common grounds with Ferrando in the discussion of non-anthropocentric, non-dualistic themes blended in feminism. *Bloodchild* illustrates various dimensions related to philosophical posthumanism that become apparent with careful analysis, resonating deeply with Ferrando's posthuman principles.

The story is set far in the future when humans found another inhabited planet where they have to share their life. The protagonist Gan lives in the distant planet where humans coexist with an alien species called Tlic. The aliens are hosting humans so as to build a symbiotic association as human bodies are required to carry Tlic eggs until birth, thereby establishing an essential bond that will sustain both the species. Having grown up in this environment, Gan has developed a close relationship with a Tlic female named Gatoi and is now a potential host of her eggs. However, Tlic's reproductive practices are fraught with danger and pain-making them potentially life-threatening for the human hosts. Gan's mother, who knows the inherent risk, is concerned about his impending role. In time, witnessing the birth of a Tlic larva- a gruesome and bloody process- has profoundly shaken Gan, as he now became acutely aware of the sacrifices and dangers involved in the process. When the reproductive symbiosis becomes a duty rather than a biological obligation, though terrified, Gan must confront the situation with courage and resolve. In the end, he musters the courage, takes his life's decision to be the host of Gatoi's eggs and this fastens the emotional and physical ties that build up a beautifully symbiotic relationship.

**Philosophical Posthumanism – Principles**

Philosophical posthumanism, critical posthumanism, speculative posthumanism and transhumanism differ from each other in their perspectives on human relationship with nature and technology while discoursing around what it means to be human in the changing world. While critical posthumanism emphasizes ethical considerations and speculative humanism imagines alternate futures, transhumanism believes in augmenting human abilities with the help of technology. Francesca Ferrando is the first proponent of philosophical posthumanism in which, distinct from other strands of posthumanism, the interconnectedness of all beings and the fluidity of identity and gender are given importance. It also stands tall against essentialist notions. Philosophical Posthumanism focuses on decentering the human from the nucleus of all thoughts and relations. Rephrasing Italian posthumanist philosopher Roberto Marchesini's words, Ferrando says: "The human is no longer the expression of man, because "man", as a universal concept, has been deconstructed. It is only through such a deconstruction that the human can be accessed as a "process of hybridization with the nonhuman" (58).

Humans cannot claim the principal position in the exercise of thinking. For Ferrando, posthumanism is the philosophy of the contemporary world and here, "the power of thinking is distributed across many species and often executed by technologically mediated knowledge

production systems, run by networks and computational processes" (Braidotti). The exclusivity of human life is challenged with biogenetic and computational advances. The lives of humans, animals and nonhuman entities cannot be separated and what emerges thus is a human-nonhuman continuum which is solidified by permeative technological intervention.

Ferrando has imagined a variety of possible sexes and relations, in which multiple human and nonhuman generative confrontations and cross-fertilizations of hybrid nature define sexuality as a trans-species and non-essentialist concept. According to Rosi Braidotti, Ferrando's concept of posthumanism is transversal and relational because it aims for an interspecies, intercultural and mediated society. The interconnectedness of all beings is a concept both Ferrando and Braidotti agree on and see as a posthuman view of existence. It calls for a more holistic approach to existence as it believes that human and nonhuman lives are entangled in complex ways. Rosi Braidotti, one of the strongest contemporary voices on feminist theories and posthuman convergence, has written prolifically on the urgency of reevaluating humanism and, more generally, the humanities.

Proposing the non-dualistic nature of posthumanism, Ferrando says that human/nonhuman dichotomy is reassessed here and the clear divisions between life and death, organic and synthetic, natural and artificial are deconstructed. Just like quantum science, which reveals how everything in this universe or multiple universes is connected to everything else, posthumanism blurs the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate by challenging biocentrism, vitalism, sentiocentrism and the concept of life itself.

The question of life and death has been one of the most important arguments in favour of dualism. The separation of life and death and its seemingly strict dichotomy undergo a deconstruction through the posthuman lens. These concepts are seen as 'intra-acting processes'. The co-existence of life and death is exemplified with the notion of posthuman compost. Ferrando explains that the "idea of being compost, or better, com-post underlines the never-ending nuanced passage between life and death, which are inevitably coexisting" (108). The idea of one organism's death nourishing many others is astonishingly vivid in the case of a Blue Whale. Once it senses the imminence of its death, a Blue Whale travels far from its pod and finds a spot in the upper layer of water to die. It sinks after death, provides food for sharks and other fishes dwelling near the top and continues to feed organisms throughout the depth of the ocean until it touches the ocean floor. There, worms and symbiotic bacteria break down the acids, fats and proteins in the sunken whale's bones- a process which goes on for decades, enriching the soil and the underwater plants thereby. When a whale's life ends, about 43 species directly benefit and countless more, in the years to come. Thus, one death transforms into a life-giving force to many others, or the dead live on through the living.

The concept of Animism, practised in many indigenous societies and religions across various parts of the world like Africa, Philippines, China and Korea, to name a few, acknowledges the concept of soul or spirit present in every body or substance. This idea of

the immaterial soul argues for no strict separation between the living and the non-living. Animistic worldviews attribute a life even in abstract concepts. Unlike the concept of pantheism, animism does not see the spiritual essence of everything as a united whole. Animism maintains that every individual soul is unique. In all these concepts, the non-living is considered animated and it is stated that humans have a commonality with all other entities and this is where they come in tune with the posthuman reflection of life.

Multiverse theory encompasses all abstract ideas like time, matter and energy on a cosmic level. In all these multiple observable universes, everything is connected. This hypothetical concept is inherently posthuman as it goes beyond the universe-centric attitudes, as it materialises against exclusivist approaches and dualistic modes. Here, the separation between mind and matter, subject and object, is questioned. In posthumanist thought, subject and object are not separate from each other. Similarly in multiverse, multiple universes exist in which multiple realities exist in relation to everything else, influencing one another. Binary thinking cannot adequately explain the understanding of the cosmos as it envisages a more holistic approach. We may be experiencing only one of the many possible realities in the complex multiverse- which is what "perspectivism" envisages (there are no facts, only perspectives; that is to say, everything we see, imagine or acquire as knowledge may just be a scattered piece of the larger picture that we can never fully comprehend, yet we are inevitably connected as a part of it). Strict binaries dissolve; dualistic approaches become inconsequential, and exclusivism loses significance. Ferrando's words describe how ideas of the multiverse and their plurality are inherent to posthuman principles:

> More than parallel dimensions, ontically separated from each other, the posthuman understanding of the multiverse would be envisioned as generative nets of material possibilities simultaneously happening and coexisting, corresponding to specific vibrations of the strings, in a material understanding of the dissolution of the strict dualism (one/many). The identity of one dimension would be maintained under the conditions of a specific vibrational range, and by the material relations to other dimensions, in a multiplication of situated affinities and convergences. (178)

Thus, pluralism, in all its essence- defined as the acceptance and the respectful acknowledgement of existing things, systems, ideas, beings and perspectives- is at the heart of philosophical posthumanism. It acknowledges that all humans are different, yet revels in the relationships each human shares with the others. It does not stand for a generalized or absolute universalism but, rather more precisely, for a celebration of pluralism and diversity, where a multitude of perspectives matter and are valued. When diverse perspectives are accepted, the view broadens to encompass both the known and the unknown, making concepts multidimensional and more complete. This understanding, along with a peaceful and respectful coexistence, lies at the core of posthumanism. The concept of 'the human' itself becomes plural, thereby embracing diversity.

No other school of thought promotes open thinking as widely as philosophical posthumanism. It invites us, theoretically, to think openly by dealing with "a genealogical

relocation of humanity within multiversality and alterity within the self" (Ferrando, 190). The philosophical posthuman vision of a planet is regenerative as it is critical and urgent. It regenerates into different ideas with varying levels of comprehension and can thus bring a radical shift in our outlook of the world around us. Different modes of existence come together in posthuman vision, such as the human, ahuman and the nonhuman. It does not follow linear assumptions; denies hierarchical attitudes, and assimilates techniques. It values recognition and relationality.

It fosters an awareness of the human that is existential and transcends the one-dimensional becoming. It is even beyond any specific space-time continuum. Thus, the human is situated within a lattice of relations involving matter, energies and perspectives and is also connected to various forms of existence "allied through different material outcomes and, possibly, in different quantum dimensions in a radical onto-existential re-signification of being" (Ferrando, 181).

**The *Bloodchild* – A Philosophical Posthumanist Reading**

The story begins on the last day of Gan's childhood. That night, he was ready to receive the Tlic eggs and become the N'Tlic- the carrier and the preserver, the one who makes possible the interweaving of the two species. The humans have migrated to the planet Preserve in search of a safe haven from their own kind, seeking protection and potential for sustenance and growth. They were provided more than an asylum, the safest place from their own destruction. At the same time, the Tlics, who were in need of another species to implant their eggs on, found a way to rear healthy children when they discovered the best hosts in humans. Before the arrival of humans, whom they call Terrans, they used to lose many of their eggs or develop unhealthy individuals because their animal hosts were incapable of providing for the larvae to be healthy. But now the Tlics were "relearning what it means to be healthy" (*Bloodchild*, 25). The Terrans survived because of the Tlics- the comfort food provided for the Terrans were sterile eggs of the Tlics, pretentiously as mood lifters or a kind of drug that would make them almost like Tennyson's Lotos Eaters, which would not only provide them comfort but youth and vigour as well.

During the transformation of Gan from a child who feels honoured to have a T'Gatoi in the family to being an active spectator of the horror of the birthing process to doubting his and his fellow Terrans' true roles in Preserve to rebelling against the fate of being chosen as a host to rejecting to escape by pushing his sister instead of himself to the abyssal horror to convincing Gatoi to 'share the risk' of dealing with a partner to accepting the commitment of carrying the eggs with a full awareness of the consequences (only because of the love he has for the alien), Gan was, literally, truly growing. He grows into the realization that the Tlics were not entirely antagonists and that whatever associations they share are not done because of compulsion or restraint but rather out of necessity for both the species to have a normal, healthy and safe life. The association was the inevitable future they shared together.

What is of posthuman interest here is the 'interweaving' of the two species. The story goes beyond sexism and species otherness and the traditional notions of identity and humanity. The complex, deep emotional and social entanglements exhibited by the Tlics and their inseparable relation with their 'host animals' redefine what it means to be human. The discussion of reproduction from a nonhuman context is used as a tool for critiquing social norms and reflecting on autonomy, consent and technological intervention in reproduction. All of them together dismantles boundaries and encourage the readers to develop novel perspectives on belonging and being.

Essentialism, which upholds specific fixed behaviours as definitions of particular species, is not supported in *Bloodchild*. The aliens are portrayed as capable of love and care and vulnerable to emotional breakdowns, challenging the essentialist ideas of the alien other. The relationship and understanding between the species do not cater to preconceived notions but exist in a state of constant negotiation and change, dialogue and interaction- the post-dualistic values which foster co-existence- as well as an increased understanding from engagement with the 'other'.

Affection in human relationships is parallelled in Gatoi's nurturing of Gan. She adores him, protects him, acknowledges the sacrifices he makes for her and lives an emotionally rich life with him. This picture is very much in contrast to the monstrous depictions of the alien other and, at the same time, very much resembles the human capacity of empathy and emotions. Thus, the separation between the species gets blurred again as the Tlics appear to the reader as sentient beings. Placing them in the same emotional and existential footing as the humans critiques anthropocentrism and essentialism.

The Tlic emotions are meticulously portrayed with a nuanced detailing that explains their complex and interesting lifestyles and demolishes the notion of 'otherness', encouraging us to embrace a more inclusive view of diversity in life. Here, the work turns on its post-dualistic modes of thought. The Tlic is not wholly "alien", a threat to the human race, and the commonality of emotions transcend species boundaries. Instead of a 'distancing of the other', Gatoi and Gan's intimacy emphasizes the post-dualistic identity which is multifaceted and hybrid and influenced by shared experiences. Interaction between diverse elements or beings brings in the post-dualistic agency, promoting mutual learning and cultural exchange.

Thus, the relationship Gan and Gatoi shares highlights the complexity of emotions and the love and loyalty across species. This is a prospect to the posthuman future where relationships transcend planetary, biological and hierarchical borders and exemplifies the new definitions of kinship and the posthuman connections of existence. Dismantling species boundaries, Butler tries to establish that human experience is not singular but pluralistic as it is interconnected with those of other living beings and rather than placing the human species isolated, she portrays the fates which shape their experiences as interconnected.

What does it mean to belong? The question of belonging can be answered easily by anthropocentric means but in Butler's work, shared experiences outshine dominance. The

seemingly exploitative Tlic-human relationship and the complicated notions of individualism, autonomy and identity transcend traditional worldviews because in *Bloodchild*, the symbiotic nature of the relationship is highlighted; hierarchy is thwarted; anthropocentrism is challenged, and mutual dependence is emphasized in order for co-existence. The host's apprehensions about physical transformations and bodily autonomy are eclipsed by his kinship which dissolves all biological fetters. The strict distinction between the human and the nonhuman is softened. Boundaries are proved to be not inherent but constructed and permeable.

The traditional power dynamics also gets subverted in the scenario. The Tlics undoubtedly have physical supremacy over the humans, yet the humans have a chance to take a choice in becoming hosts. In the end, Gan, soaring above all fears, asserts his choice to become a host and, expressing his matured emotional strength, reclaims some control, at least, over his destiny. The power dynamics, therefore, is not presented in the conventional modes of compliance and defiance but as liquid and context-dependent. Even when the relationship superficially appears as entirely beneficial or harmful, the emotional landscapes are intricately woven and as a stimulation for reconsidering our understanding of it by framing the same as an act of mutual love and care. The reproductive politics here challenges the societal expectations of who bears the distress of procreation. Similarly, gender and parenthood also see a shift from the norms as it is the male human who takes up the role of the birthing mother. This also challenges the perceptions of masculinity and femininity and marks the fluidity of gender roles. In the writer's words, this is her much sought-after "pregnant man story".

The relationships portrayed in the story also urge the readers to look beyond the single species dependence and single planetary notions and speculate a posthuman world which is ecologically interdependent in the multiverse, glorifying interconnectedness as our means of survival and sustenance. Butler herself believes that sooner or later, the human beings will have to make amendments with some extrasolar species, be a human colony and find ourselves in an unusual accommodation setup, to live in a world which is not entirely our own.

In the author's own opinion, this is a love story between two different species and, at the same time, the coming-of-age-story of Gan. Butler is a thorough and honest pessimist, yet hopes to be challenged. Her work shares a strain of pain and abuse but, read positively, the story has a number of possibilities to convey which are not wholly malign but may prove unavoidable and adjustable.

Traditional references in literature, history, philosophy and the study of religion are human-centric and self-centered, often exclusionary. Ferrando advocates for multiple literacies and planetary perspectives in each field anchored in ecocentric (as against anthropocentric) and mediated frames of reference. Thus, Octavia E. Butler's *Bloodchild*, when read along non-anthropocentric and non-dualistic lines, shows how the humankind can be reformulated innovatively for the twenty-first century. The posthuman turn may seem disloyal to our species but, as Braidotti rightly noted, it is enriched by compassion.

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# Ecoprecarity, Vulnerability and Violence in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

C.G. SHYAMALA



**Abstract**

The repercussions of human interventions within environmental, social, political and cultural spheres of influence from the late twentieth century onwards are sinistral and traumatic, and have resulted in precarity of all forms of life. This paper argues that *Oil on Water* does not promise prosperity and development of the ethnic communities around the Niger Delta in Nigeria in the wake of the discovery of oil but exposes vulnerability of these tribes, slow violence due to pollution, petrocapitalist interests and the corrupt government's callous attitude towards its citizens. Eventually, the region bears witness to ecoprecarity, which refers to concomitant ecological and human devastation. Forced migration, illusory dreams and a poverty-ridden existence is the future into which ethnic groups are coerced into. This leads to human rights violation and environmental degradation that calls for justice for both human and non-human life entities.

**Keywords:** vulnerability, ecoprecarity, slow violence, petrocapitalism, Niger Delta

The emerging field of humanities has brought out the inevitable relationship among human beings, fossil fuels, and the environment. This connection is so entrenched that it has fostered the development of Energy Humanities as an interdisciplinary academic discipline that has engrossed itself in aspects of modernity that are apparently inconspicuous or ulterior. This area of study exposes the covert political, cultural and institutional ideologies in unanticipated directions. Moreover, the energy humanities not only contemplates or theorises on the facets of energy but also provides novel and instigative dimensions related to oppositions that arise in the course of study (Szeman and Boyer 9). Therefore, it is observed that energy plays a decisive role in moulding societies and culture.

This paper scrutinises how oil plays a peremptory role in the lives of the characters in the novel *Oil on Water*. Moreover, oil directs, dictates and organises lives, and makes its physical presence felt in specific geographic zones in the novel. The repercussions of the influence of oil in a state range from petro-monocracy, and ecological and human devastation to conflicts between vulnerable natives and petroleum companies that eventually culminate in violence and destruction. In addition, the miry enigma of oil exposes the vulnerability of indigenous tribes of the Niger Delta and the precarity of the Niger region.

Derived from the Latin word *vulnerare*, which means 'to wound', and *vulnus* that means 'wound', vulnerability is characterised as being open to injury, to being injured or to be injurable. Vulnerability is integral to human beings because it is part of biological processes such as aging, deteriorating mental and physical faculties, being affected by diseases, and contracting infections; natural calamities; and man-made catastrophes such as pollution and industrial disasters. Judith Butler et al argue that "vulnerability and invulnerability have to be understood as politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power" (5). Class, race, gender, economic status, health care, well- being, relationships and to a certain degree the role and function of the state impact vulnerabilities.

Judith Butler notes that vulnerability of the body cannot be comprehended without considering "social and material relations" (16). It is hence determined that the body is not an autonomous entity, but one that exists in relation to the environment and the infrastructure. Human beings and the environment are susceptible to several kinds of vulnerability in varying degrees that influence their sustenance in diverse ways. This necessitates an ethical answer to those rendered dependent and helpless. In this connection, Estelle Ferrarese mentions that the need to recognise vulnerability would be "accompanied by the disapproval of those who take advantage of fragility thus formed" (3).

Precarity is a social, economic and political circumstance that inducts negative emotions such as anxiety and fear among working classes or marginalised groups, ethnic groups or tribes and nomads. It is the result of policies in the neoliberal era, where the responsibility of finding prospects, remaining healthy and averting risks is entirely the onus of an individual. Pramod Nayar defines ecoprecarity as "discourses of fragility, vulnerability, power relations across species and imminent extinction (6). He adds that "'ecoprecarity' is at once about the precarious lives humans lead in the event of ecological disaster…and also about the environment itself which is rendered precarious due to human intervention in the anthropocene" (7).

Petrofiction, a subgenre of literature is more productive under the category of "world literature" than it is under any national literary corpus (MacDonald 9). This implies that petrofiction occupies a discrete space in literature. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of literary texts where oil and its relation to culture and society are represented or reflected upon. Despite the ominous role of oil across international borders and within boundaries, the world's relentless dependence on oil, clashes among oil companies, oil spills and disasters, and the commotion about the price of oil in the world market, the under representation of oil in literature is an apparent paradox. As Ghosh notes:

> As one of the few people who have tried to write about the floating world of oil, I can bear witness to its slipperiness, to the ways in which it tends to trip fiction into incoherence. In the end, perhaps, it is the craft of writing itself - or rather writing as we know it today-that is responsible for the muteness of the Oil Encounter. (p.30)

This observation testifies that though literature contemplates on diverse aspects of culture and society, oil has not been perceived prominently by critics and writers.

Ghosh adds that for various reasons, "the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic"(30). This statement probably exhorted cultural critics to conceive of and question petroculture and petromodernity in cultural, literary and artistic expressions that ushered the rise of the particular literary genre of petrofiction, which is the titular review of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* published in *The New Republic* in 1992. Petrofiction refers to the entire gamut of literature where oil forms the main theme of the novel.

The petrocritic Stephanie LeMenager employs the term 'petrofiction' to characterise works such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) because they project and delineate a particular culture that is unthinkable without fossil fuels. However, the petrocritc Amy Riddle finds such a definition problematic because " 'petrofiction' is a combination of a material thing (petrol) and a social object (fiction), and the 'petro' part of the word does not define or specify 'fiction'"(59). Therefore there are several parameters that differentiate petrofiction as a literary theme and a literary genre.

Consequently, a fiction is regarded to be 'petrofiction' only if the narrative is determined and controlled by oil, and oil becomes integral to the plot of the novel. Accordingly, on the one hand petrofiction can be categorised as the literature that deals with the manufacture, consumption or consequence of petroleum-based energy as seen in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927), Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984), Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992), and Mei Mei Evans' *Oil and Water* (2013). On the other hand, it is a speculative literature that conceives of a post- petro future that witnesses the destruction of an oil-based civilisation as depicted in Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming* (2008).

Oil fiction has meandered through several terrains to expose the range of issues discussed by writers. Any discussion on oil and its effects globally would begin with Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1926) that sets up the stage for in-depth analyses of the social, political, and economic consequences of excavation and the silence maintained by oil companies. To cite a few more examples, Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* (1990), which takes place in the 1920s, in the Osage territory of Oklahoma during the oil boom in America, traces how ethnic minorities that are deprived of land and ownership by oil companies face homelessness and poverty. Jennifer Haigh's *Heat and Light*(2016), located in the fictional city of Bakerton, a fading coal town in Pennsylvania elaborates technological advancements and corporate power that wreck habitation.

Moving forward, the discovery of oil in the Gulf countries namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar becomes a determining factor in the growth of arid landscapes into plush countrysides due to the continuous inflow of petrodollars. However, *Cities of Salt* (1984) by Abdelrahman Munif, which is based in the Middle East, in the

fictional kingdom of Mooran, mentions the creation of 'sacrifice zones' that destroys valleys and the author criticises the callous attitude of the oligarchic state to the devastation caused.

The ugly turn of events reach the zenith with accounts from Africa, which is a crucial territory on the global oil map because the destruction due to excavation reaches toxic proportions with violence, exploitation of women and the environment, masculine excesses, military intervention and health hazards that concomitantly reduce the Niger Delta to a death bed. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) provide a unique transom into oil curse and the battle between environmental and economic existences in a world ruled by oil.

Helon Habila is a Nigerian writer known for narratives and poems that delve into myriad problems such as corruption, poverty, and the irresponsible military regime in Nigeria. *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) portrays the gruesome effects of brutal military dictatorship in the country. *Travellers* (2019) narrates the lives of African refugees who face wars, conflicts, loss of habitat and the interference of multinational companies that destabilise governments and instigate violence to exploit the local resources of the Niger Delta. *Oil on Water* portrays the harsh realities of gas emission, oil spillage and oil theft in the wetlands of the Delta.

Situated on the Niger river, the Delta is one of the most extensive and flourishing wetland areas that stretches around 70,000 kilometers. Divided into "sandy, coastal ridge barrier, brackish or saline mangroves, freshwater, permanent and seasonal swamps, and forest and lowland rain forest" ecological zones, the Delta is unfortunately subjected to the worst kind of resource exploitation (Ifedi and Anyu75). Writers of Nigeria resent the exploitation of this region and designedly depict the oilscape in literature.

Instigated by innumerable stories of the vegetation and the rich landscape of Nigeria, oil literature is entrenched in writings that expose dimensions of seriousness of the climatic effects and hazardous situations that writers assert is in sharp contrast to Ghosh's claim of "slipperiness and muteness of oil in literature" (30). Writing is thus an act of resistance against profit-minded petrocapitalists and corrupt governance. As Habila reiterates: "My aim is to show the reader, through the eyes of Zaq, and especially Rufus, the devastation wreaked upon these communities by the activities of the extractive industries-the polluted rivers, the gas flares, but especially the violence and insecurity and the sheer injustice of it all"(Woodbury).

Oil was discovered at Oloibiri in Nigeria in the Eastern part of the Niger Delta in 1956 by Shell D'Archy oil company. After 1960, when Nigeria attained independence it granted excavation licenses to several oil corporations that joined hands to excavate oil. When the state-owned Petroleum Company, Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) was established in 1977, the state gained complete authority of the oil producing areas and it eventually turned corrupt and unreliable. Though the government depended and thrived on shares on oil, tax and royalty gained from companies, the ordinary people did not reap any benefits. The unstable economic and political systems and the presence of multiple ethnic groups aggravated the situation.

Ethic groups such as the Ijaw, the Urhrobo, the Itsekiri, the Isoko, the Ogoni, and the Ilaje relentlessly fought against each other because of unequal distribution of resources. The region faced acute economic deficit, social neglect and environmental degradation. In this manner, justice was denied to both the residents and the environment of the Delta. Habila mentions: "The problems of environmental pollution and extraction are pretty much the same everywhere in the world….It is the same in America, Russia, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia" (Woodbury). The promise of development, affluence and recognition of the ethnic communities becomes a farce because of the covetousness of petrocapitalists.

The novel opens up an unparalleled window into the struggle between environmental and economic existences in Nigeria that is ruled by oil companies and a manipulative government. The Niger Delta becomes the conflict zone between foreign oil corporations and the minority ethnic groups of the Delta that are rendered vulnerable to the violent entry of oil into their social life and economic situation. Ecoprecarity in the Delta is the outcome of competition for oil, attainment of wealth and violence among ethnic groups that result in materialistic excesses, military and police intervention and the deterioration of an entire geographical territory.

Rufus, a young minor-league journalist and senior reporter Zaq,who Rufus considers his mentor, reach the Niger Delta in search of the kidnapped woman Isabelle Flood, the wife of a British oil engineer. Dr. Mark, the medical practitioner who Rufus meets at the Major's camp briefs them about the excitement and hope of a better future among the twenty ethnic family groups around the Delta as excavation for oil around the region would provide a permanent solace from discontent and poverty that had prevailed throughout their lives. He recounts what an elderly person tells him: "I am not ill. I am just poor. Can you give me medicine for that? We want the fire that burns day and night. He told me that plainly, pugnaciously" (Habila 91). The villagers are optimistic about a future that would transform their lives forever and they would be able to live "a completely changed life, life without work, life for free" (37). True to their beliefs, crude oil is found in abundance at the edge of the village on the banks of the river.

The "kiss of fortune" (Habila 37) is so exhilarating that the villagers feast sumptuously, burn lamps using oil, throw away the candles, move about carelessly in the village square in absolute bliss "dance, their faces raised to that undying glow, singing their thanks and joy, their voices carrying for miles over the water... it made them very happy. They said it was a sign, the fulfillment of some covenant with God" (92). However, their ecstasy is short-lived when they realise that their share of petromodernity was meagre and their miserable existence around the night oil fires is restricted to receiving wares from neighbouring villages. The impact of oil excavation and distribution has a cataclysmal effect on human beings and the physical environment around the Delta.

Petroleum extraction pours toxins over soil and into water destroying feral plants, livestock and people. Oil spills cause deaths under conditions that are unfathomable. As Rufus continues

his journey through the Delta, he witnesses uninhabitable villages near the oil wells "as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it" (Habila 8). The ecologically sensitive mangrove swamp has "turned foul and sulphurous", and their dangling roots grow out of the water like "proboscis gasping for air." (9). Drenched in deadly oil, the entire ecosystem is affected drastically. There are "dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots…and grass is "suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands"(9). Ekpali Saint reports:

> Pollution from repeated oil spills continues to endanger the lives of the 30 million residents of the region which spans nine states and has a coastline of approximately 450 kilometres (280 miles)….Between 2011 and 2021, there were 9,870 spill incidents, which released a combined 466,214 barrels of oil into the environment, according to data from the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), which is responsible for monitoring and responding to oil spills in Nigeria"("Niger Delta").

These facts testify to the gravity of the situation that is comprehensible to all, but the precarity of living conditions is yet to be amended.

In the novel, Chief Ibiram mentions that their rivers are polluted to such an extent that it is impossible to fish and the land has turned infertile with gas flares and pipelines. Common species, including fish, their staple food, begin to disappear. The young girl in the village tells Rufus about the disappearance of crabs that used to be sold because the water cannot be consumed since it is poisoned. In yet another context, nurse Gloria informs Rufus about the departure of bats and other flying creatures from the island of Irikefe due to gas flares. This conversation depicts how animals are displaced from their familiar ecosystem and are forced to migrate to other favourable living locales. Echendu et al remark that volatile organic compounds and oxides are released in large quantities into the atmosphere by petroleum industries in the Delta. The results of such activities are not limited to debilitation of the ecosystem that affects soil, water bodies, animals and plants (525).

In the novel, Dr. Mark's laboratory reports testify that human beings too suffer the onslaught of oil emissions. He notes: "A man suddenly comes down with a mild headache, becomes feverish, then develops rashes, and suddenly a vital organ shuts down. And those whom the disease doesn't kill, the violence does" (Habila 93). Drinking water samples tested in his laboratory detect escalating levels of toxins. He identifies the presence of toxins in the soil and water due to oil drilling in the village. Researchers Okoye and Okwute report of high concentrations of lead in cassava tubers and plantain fruits from the Olomo community above the acceptable limits for food prescribed by the World Health Organisation. Symptoms including abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, body pain, headache, dizziness and depression are also reportedly prevalent among the local population (16). In this context, it is inferred that people are being subjected to "slow violence" in the wake of oil production.

Rob Nixon mentions that slow violence "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The effects of devastation of any one element of the ecosystem leads to perturbation within interconnecting elements or ecosystems for a long time. Apparently, this harm is slow, inconspicuous, and often discernible only while looking back, when its culprits have left long back, or if they were ever present in person in the least. Dr. Mark elaborates how the oil company, the drilling agent, and the government bodies neglect the health and the right to life of ordinary citizens and disregard the need to protect the environment thereby jeopardising the fragile ecosystem. Manisalidis et al notice that erratic weather patterns accelerate the concentration of allergy inducing pollutants and the humid conditions caused by the disturbing weather changes either create drought or floods around the Delta and these generate disorders that gravely impact human and environmental functional systems ("Environmental and Health").

A crucial aspect of the novel is that Habila has not described the plight of the oil workers in the region, which it can be inferred should be the worst because of hostile living conditions. Most oil companies in Nigeria employed expatriates to work for them because the oil installations and the purification procedures were carried out secretively in the Niger Delta for specified social and political reasons. In addition, since the natives persistently rebelled against the oil companies, they were not hired.

Dr. Mark elaborates how the oil company and the government bodies create havoc in the Delta and as a consequence, perpetuate inharmonious relationships. In a similar manner, Rufus describes the state of his country to Isabelle: "These people endure the worst conditions of any oil producing community on the earth, the government knows it but doesn't have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn't care, they also don't care" (Habila 138).The exuberance of the villagers turns into a nightmare, and the words of the old man Tamuno regarding the future of his son Michael resonate throughout the village: "He no get good future here…Nothing. No fish for river, nothing" ( 36). He suggests that the journalists take the boy to the metropolitan town Port Harcourt where prospects are higher. With no means of livelihood, and their soil poisoned they are displaced, which is termed "displacement without moving", thereby they become a "community of refugees in place" (Nixon 19).

Port Harcourt is the capital of the oil-rich Niger Delta River States, where two of Nigeria's major refineries are situated, and the place can be considered an urban oilscape where ebullience is noticeable. The villagers boast that their kids would turn into engineers under the oil companies and hold lucrative positions as oil executives in Port Harcourt. The villagers find it hard to believe that though Port Harcourt personifies exuberance, plenitude, prospects and optimism, the place is unsafe. An old man on the road reveals to Rufus: "Everybody wan go Port Harcourt" (Agary146). Similarly, Chief Ibiram hopes that his people could get some kind of work at Port Harcourt. Rufus too is sent to Port Harcourt by his family so that he can earn a decent living. Nevertheless, the hopes of all the families are illusive and end in

desperation. The youth that land at Port Harcourt are disillusioned because their chances of permanent employment are unrealised and their temporary employment does not provide a sustainable income. Therefore, the city symbolises an "urban dystopia" (Olaoluwa 256).

Oil, in the novel is not projected as the 'black gold' that would change the living conditions of the natives for the better, but it becomes a rather sinister force of nature, and as Riddle mentions,oil is considered "an exaggerated, caricatured form of natural or material wealth," (57) that portrays the obliteration of the Delta as part of a natural cycle. Habila employs images that merge together to bring out the inevitable relationship between the inorganic and the organic to heighten the effect of the destruction caused by oil. The smell of the human corpse is juxtaposed with the apparent smell of oil and grass covered by the film of oil is compared to the "liver spots on a smoker's hand" (9). Therefore, oil appears indiscernible even when it inhabits everything in fiction and it succinctly remains "strangely invisible in its merging with everything else" (Riddle 57).

Another significant aspect of the novel is the grave rifts between the natives and the foreign oil corporation, the state and the citizens, and the state and the rebels in the oil-based economy. Ownership in oil capitalism rests on the perpetual shift from regions in search of fresh oil reserves and the depleted ones (Aborisade 38). Natives are forced out of their ancestral homeland for the sake of the nation. Moreover, villagers are displaced from their homeland in the attempt to prevent sabotage and theft.

The militant evacuation of the villagers in Chief Malabo's village where oil wells are dug out and the villagers' notion of homelessness is described affectingly: "We left, we headed northwards, we've lived in five different places now, but always we've had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard…how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home?" (Habila 41). The villagers are neither given sufficient compensation or allotted spaces for their rehabilitation. They move out as nomads living in different places without being able to settle in one place for a long time. Home, for them is a dream and their search for a suitable piece of land to settle down with their families becomes arduous. This accounts to violation of their rights; albeit, the local government ignores their plight intentionally.

Some villagers are forced out of their land due to violence and brutal force and destroys their peace and sustenance. The Major informs Rufus and Zaq that the Delta used to teem with life, but now the place is deserted because many have left the place due to violence by militant groups. Petro-violence, struggle for power by capitalist forces and the militants leave the natives with little means of sustenance. Some villagers that are forced to stay back find the land 'sterile' and uninhabitable and the place is transformed into an oil-engineered decedent space. Permeated with gas flares, the leftovers of pipes from exhausted wells with their heads capped and "left jutting out of the oil-scorched earth, and the ever-present pipelines, criss-crossing the landscape…the carcasses of the fish and crabs and water birds that floated on the deserted beaches"(Habila 175), the Delta exists like a living corpse.

The 'wound' that is inflicted on the ancestral land by the government and oil capitalists makes it "a place for dying" due to persistent leakages and occasional gas effusions (Habila 90). Chief Ibiram recalls how the government and the administration of Nigeria operated as intermediaries of the international capitalist force and oil companies that often visited places near the Yellow Island to secure excavation rights. The government often resorts to unfair strategies to instill fear in the minds of the natives and squash any uprising by the natives against decisions made in favour of oil companies. The petrocritic Beckman observes that Nigeria functions as "a neo-colonial, comprador state" that negotiates and acts as an agent for foreign capitalists who engage in commercial investment and trade, and exploits and manipulates the natives (40). Such illegal liaisons are often to the accompaniment of oil executives or political leaders from Port Harcourt who resort to unscrupulous methods to obtain whatever they desire.

One instance of employing unfair means to control or influence the natives is the death of Chief Malabo who declines to sacrifice his ancestral land to the insensitive petrocapitalists that tempt him with enough money that he can ever estimate. When the chief disagrees to comply with the interests of the government, he is initially falsely implicated for assisting the militants and contriving against the autocratic regime. To disrupt the resolve of the villagers into giving up their land, Chief Malabo was later put to death in prison and even before the obsequies of the chief are conducted, the oil companies, escorted by the state military, arrive with guns to claim the land. Another example is the hefty amount paid to Dr.Mark to remain secretive of his investigation.When Dr. Mark continues his investigation as more people start dying, he collects their blood samples, documents the toxins in them and sends his findings to the government. In response, the officials thank him profusely and dump the results in the filing cabinet.

Mass protests by the natives are controlled by stringent and brute military force. Oil companies deploy secret police service at their installations and they are handsomely rewarded for discharging their duties. An instance is the case of the Major who was court-martialled because he was declared unfit when he underwent psychological problems at the rape of his daughter. Now, he has to supervise the perilous Delta region. When he drenches his prisoners in petrol, the soldiers are excited because they await the day "when the Major will strike a match and throw it at the bowed, petrol-soaked heads" (Habila 55). Thus the armed forces are arrogant and power-corrupt and reject being kind. As a consequence, the Major says that the military can understand "only one language: force….There are no human rights for people like them.…The best thing is to line them up and shoot them" ( 97). Human rights, kindness and justice are merely fancy romantic notions because they can only understand the language of bestial force.

The role of the militants in the novel cannot be overlooked because they are groups of young ambitious men who are disenchanted by promises of a bright future. They realise that Nigeria is so corrupt that only a privileged few have access to wealth being accumulated. They resist the government and oil companies by kidnapping deported workers, threatening

and destroying the oil equipment. This is the reason why Zaq titles his editorial "Gangsters or Freedom Fighters?" (Habila 28). The militants are considered rebels who wage ceaseless wars against the federal system by destroying oil pipelines and threatening to blow up the oil rigs. Rufus too supports the militants because they fight against institutions that have made people suffer, leak toxicants into water bodies, kill animals and poison the fertile soil. The expatriate oil engineer James Flood cannot envisage the trauma of the dispossessed in the oil sacrifice zone because he reaps big benefits at the cost of the lives of others. He claims that Nigeria could quickly become "the Japan of Africa, the USA of Africa, but the corruption is incredible" (107).

Since most of the militants either belong to villages where oil is extracted or employed as oil workers, they feel the anguish of being homeless and trapped in the quagmire of toxicity. The Professor, who is the leader of the militants, leaves his profession as an oil worker because he realises the extent to which the environment around him faces degradation. Though he decides to adopt militancy to address the issues, he labels his fellow militants as "rebels, terrorists, kidnappers" rather than "freedom fighters"(Habila 96) because of their complicit attitude to oil excavation and destruction of the Delta.

However, one of the militants who Rufus meets in prison declares that he represents the distraught people of the Delta: "We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand" (Habila 149). Ironically, the militants depend on oil wealth for a steady source of income by engaging in acts of threat and kidnapping. In the sick hurry to become millionaires they fail to identify themselves with their suffering countrymen and become responsible for ecological devastation. As Habila notes: "Communities like this had borne the brunt of the oil wars, caught between the militants and the military, and the only way they could avoid being crushed out of existence was to pretend to be deaf and dumb and blind" (33). Therefore, the militants are as destructive and dangerous as oil companies are.

Habila has poignantly showed the drastic effects of degradation and death of all life forms, which is often taken for granted. The Niger Delta is in a precarious condition because it suffers the worst form of environmental disaster, and the country as a whole becomes a graveyard for ordinary citizens, while it is a haven for oil companies. Slow violence spreads its threatening tentacles slowly but menacingly with disastrous results. Additionally, the victims of slow violence are neglected as the nation remains non-committed to its citizens in order to sustain a steady flow of income. It would be wise to interrogate the efficacy of oil policies when land, water and livelihood are threatened and they become vulnerable. The state requires fertile regions like the Delta for its sustenance; however, exploitation of natural resources means that "some lives matter more than others" (Wilson 11). This is the inevitable political recurrence that Nigeria is part of.

Agyeman et al claim: "Wherever in the world environmental despoliation and degradation is happening, they are almost always linked to questions of social justice, equity, rights and people's quality of life in its widest sense" (77). This is definitely true in the case of the Delta

that is subjected to injustice of the environment and mankind. Environmental justice issues include the security to life, access to needs of survival, healthy and clean surroundings for humans and other living things. The cardinal principles of environmental justice is that all living things have the right to equal protection of environmental and public health governance. However, the Delta bears the brunt of air, land, and water pollution. Neither the environment nor the indigenes benefit from the fruits of national good that the government incurs and the Delta remains an underdeveloped and deprived region.

In a recent development, Olanrewaju Suraju, the chairman of the Human and Environmental Development Agenda (HEDA) mentions that

> Shell's operations in the Niger Delta over many decades have come at the cost of grievous human rights abuses of the people living there. Frequent oil leaks from its infrastructure and inadequate maintenance and clean-up practices have left groundwater and drinking water sources contaminated, poisoned agricultural land and fisheries, and severely damaged the health and livelihoods of inhabitants. ("Nigeria: Government")

This move is probably the much-awaited decision that guarantees environmental justice and the right to live for the inhabitants of the delta.

Habila has probed the precarious lives around the Niger Delta that are seriously threatened and gravely impacted due to the obnoxious cycle of restructure, exploration and excavation for oil. The impact of the cycle is so volatile that it leads to extreme violence and bloodshed. In the endeavour to reap huge benefits and become a rich country,Nigeria harvests its oil reserves and in turn is reduced to an excavation zone where living becomes an inferno. The country suffers a backlash as it causes irreversible destruction to all life forms in and around the Delta. This work has drawn attention to pollution, violence and precariousness of life forms that requires the intervention of all stakeholders for a more sustainable development programme for the preservation of the Delta. Policies at the local, national and international levels should work in tandem to curb further deterioration of the life sustaining Delta.

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# Interspecies Kinship for Resistance, Rescue and Recuperation: Ecological Intertopias in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

NAIR ANUP CHANDRASEKHARAN & PARVATHY R.

**Abstract**

The twenty first century has witnessed the corroboration of devastating impacts of anthropogenic climate change on the nonhuman world in the evolvement of sheer transmutation and extermination and on the human world in the disembarkation of societal and civic turbulence. Endeavours to address the hovering planetary degradation necessitate novel sociocultural criteria that disclose and engage with ecological and epistemological conflicts raised by contemporary crisis. In recent years, scholars and writers have incrementally adopted non-anthropocentric contrivances and narratives that emphasize the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman spheres to attend to the complex realities of environmental degeneration and climate change.

**Keywords:** Anthropogenic Climate Change, Ecology, Interspecies Kinship, Intertopia

*The Swan Book* authored by the Aboriginal Australian writer Alexis Wright challenges human centered perspectives and expounds a profound navigation of alternative 'ways of being that embody interconnectedness of human and nonhuman entities in a milieu ravaged by climate calamities. This study attempts to read *The Swan Book* through the lens of Donna J. Haraway's idea of interspecies kinship to unravel the spaces or conditions that exist beyond the polarized visions of inordinate hope or absolute despair and that are characterized by modes of survival based on reciprocity and symbiosis of different life forms, which we term as 'ecological intertopias.'

The composition of indigenous Australian literature has seen a sharp hike in recent years. Contemporary Australian Aboriginal writers have made way to speculative fiction to cogently critique Western accounts of 'progress' and its unscrupulous handling of natural resources. The literary works of Alexis Wright, Australian writer belonging to the indigenous Waanyi community, is extensively deliberated for the ways in which they foreground Aboriginal cultural experiences and sovereignty. *The Swan Book* reveals the catastrophic environmental devastation and Aboriginal disenfranchisement , deracination and deprivation induced by Western anthropocentric imagination of resource control.

The novel vigorously pitches into the callousness of military domination of debilitated indigenous life and imagines the dreadful consequences of anthropogenic climate change on

human and non-human realms. It exemplifies the potential of Aboriginal fiction to make effective interventions into the human-centeredness of cultural approaches towards nature and resuscitate conceptualization of human existence by upholding complex interrelations that stretch across human and non- human world. American scholar Donna J Haraway's concept of 'making kin' which focuses on undermining human exceptionalism and fostering multispecies alliances provides an ample framework to investigate *The Swan Book* with a view to unfolding alternative modes of existence in the literary text.

Haraway explains kinship as a proposition that renders to the problematic present , the possibilities for establishing divergent sorts of expansive interrelations. This approach permits the understanding of the ontological relationality of beings of various living and non-living segments. Haraway contends that the current environmental dilemma should be controverted by 'staying with the trouble ' of the present, invigorating 'response-ability' in encounters with non-human beings and broadening kinship beyond the human species. She insists that no species functions solitarily since "assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too" (Haraway 100) .

Relying on social, biological, philosophical, literary stories, theories and case studies, Haraway rejects bounded individualism remade by autopoiesis or self-producing autonomy and introduces notions of tentacularity which "is about life lived along lines" (Haraway 32) as well as sympoiesis which is about "worlding –with, in company" (Haraway 58) .

The unfolding multispecies performances of becoming with biotic and abiotic others and forming alliances in the process constitute the Chthulucene, which she articulates, is the kind of earthly worlding in which human beings are not the prominent participants. 'Making kin' thus, pinpoints cooperative multispecies relationality that urges response-ability and care and that permits demands for less pernicious ,less repressive ,symbiotic forms of living and dying well on a spoiled planet.

*The Swan Book* depicts a climate-wrecked world in which anthropocentric activities have resulted in the displacement of human and nonhuman beings and the destruction of indigenous life and environment. Oblivia, a muted Australian Aboriginal girl is forced to live with Bella Donna, a European climate refugee in an Aboriginal detention camp in the northern part of Australia under military control, after a traumatic incident of rape by a group of petrol-sniffing youths .

Bella Donna infuses Oblivia's mind with narratives of swans which at a later stage opens the way for her communion with the black swans. Subsequent to the death of Bella Donna, she is forcibly married to Warren Finch, the first Aboriginal President of Australia who relinquishes her and confines her to a building located in the Southern region of Australia. Finch's assassination furnishes her with an opportune time to flee confinement. Towards the end of the fiction, Oblivia along with her black swans return to the swamp which she deems to be her abode.

Alexis Wright intricately weaves the ecological imperative of interconnections between human and natural worlds throughout the narrative of *The Swan Book* in ways that denounce anthropocentric perspectives. The novel upholds Donna Haraway's proposition for a reconsideration of kinship structures that surpass human familial ties to enfold non-human others. Oblivia's connections with the eucalyptus tree and the swans meticulously substantiate this extended notion of kinship.

Oblivia retreats into the underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree after her terrifying assault. Sealed in a muffled world of sleep, the girl attempts to establish relation with the tree by writing stanzas in ancient symbols all over the dust-covered surfaces of the root. The tree which braves systemic brutality and environmental degradation offers her a safe haven and instills the spirit of resilience in the little girl.

Bella Donna frequently differentiates Oblivia's survival with stories of girls who succumbed to the violence inflicted on marginalized communities in environments infested by colonialism and environmental collapse. These stories of vulnerable girls signify the potentiality of the eucalyptus tree as a reliable space for subsistence and recuperation even in conditions of severe adversity. Oblivia's kinship with the tree accords her a counter-narrative of fortitude .

Oblivia's urge to revert to the tree as a retreat from Warren Finch's oppressive world highlights her yearning for identity and connection with the tree amidst the dispossessing dominions embodied by Warren Finch and his people. The tree acts as a site of defiance where Oblivia can redeem her self and as a grounding force which makes her reminisce her roots and kinship that sustain her. The destruction of the tree intensifies her sense of displacement and seclusion, emphasizing her emotional and psychological connection to it. "She scratched the ground with her fingers, searching for some evidence that would prove the tree had once existed. She needed to confirm what was in her head, of having lived inside the darkened hollow. She was digging holes like a mad dog" (Wright 68) . Even in it's physical absence, the intimate companion tree continues to shape her identity and resilience. Oblivia's endeavour of making kin with the tree enables her to continue the relays of mortal being by "inheriting and inventing practices of recuperation, survival and flourishing" (Haraway 140) .

Oblivia's interactions with the black swans also resonate with Haraway's notion of forging relations that transcend species boundaries to create a world entrenched in mutual survival. Initially distant from Oblivia's world, the black swans first appeared in the swamp at lunchtime on a dusty day. While Oblivia realized the sense of exile that the black swans shared with her, it descended on the swamp to have a closer glimpse of the girl. Their shared condition of displacement due to violence and environmental destruction generates an immediate reciprocal bound . "She knew as a fact that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her" (Wright 13) .

The girl's attempt to reinforce her kinship with the black swans becomes conspicuous at a later juncture when she begins to provide food to the swans and decides to learn with a

view to supporting them to subsist in the polluted swamp and aspires to discern from their ability to wing their way, techniques to break free from her physical and emotional constrainment. This dynamic reciprocal companionship in which "nurturing the animal symbiont also means being nurtured in turn " (Haraway140 ) embodies the potential "to live and die well throughout the dangerous centuries of irreversible climate change and continuing high rates of extinction and other troubles" (Haraway 140) .

Oblivia embraces swans as a communicative, relational constituent of her existence when she envisions them to be fortune-teller in whose "blackish-gray-tipped curled tail feathers" (Wright 62) lie the mystery of the reason and routes of migration . Oblivia channels her grief due to Bella Donna's death into acts of caring for the swans who themselves were immobilized on the old woman's loss and became victims of attack by dogs.

The little girl aligns herself with the swans in their grief and affirms their virtue by providing dead swans a courteous burial , reconstructing space for Oblivia's healing and mourning. Here "grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying" (Haraway39) . The vulnerability of this multispecies solidarity to invasive power structures is revealed in their joint exasperation in the presence of Warren Finch, an Aboriginal figure representing assimilationist, predatory politics. The nonhuman world that Oblivia has made kin with validate their part in mobilizing resistance against oppressive domination when they persuade her "to leap from the hull and fly with them " (Wright 143 ) .

The swans' call to pacification by Oblivia in the face of her forceful departure with Finch and her concern for the swans' plight on the occasion of destruction of swamp on Finch's orders signify the depth and reciprocal nature of their alliance. Shaping Oblivia's 'response-ability', the swans enter her imaginative domain even in their palpable non-existence in Finch's world, empower her to overcome sense of alienation and instruct " her in endurance and perseverance" (Wright 217 ) .

Nonhuman beings' capacity for care is demonstrated in the black swans' act of venturing out to unfamiliar terrains in pursuit of their human kin. Oblivia recovers her kinship with swans in ensuing travail to rescue swans, fallen and injured due to games of power by street kids. Responsibility is fabricated together in interspecies collaborations that evoke mutual care and consideration. Towards the end of the novel, Oblivia acknowledges the wisdom of swans to navigate strange terrains by comprehending the rhythms of natural world and makes out to the swamp and reclaims it under their guidance. Oblivia's kinship with the swans is thus an undertaking of becoming with which enhances mutual capacities to respond to the imperativeness of their interlaced worldings.

The polluted and despised swamp in *The Swan Book* epitomizes the harsh environmental disintegration engendered by anthropocentric enterprises. In her fiction, Alexis Wright affirms novel methods of imagination, repair, resistance, grief, rescue and survival based on unconceited human-nonhuman coalition that enrich capacities to respond to the urgencies of destructive, climate-changed world. *The Swan Book* examines the tragic consequences of

climate change and Western colonization and simultaneously proclaims mutually nurturing interspecies kinship as the means to vanquish despondency in the face of havoc. It vilifies oppressive realities and suggests inventive modes of existence that surpass the dichotomies of despondence and elation, optimism and pessimism, serenity and turmoil. The novel propounds that neither hope nor despair is a prudent demeanor in the precarious present and endorses positions thwarting such conventional binaries, located on the continuum between these attitudes.

Intertopia is an apt word for a space or condition placed on the continuum between distress or bliss, hope or despair, ideal or wretched. Intertopias in *The Swan Book* emerge through or are made possible by ongoing imterspecies manoeuvres of becoming with in which relationality is laced with the larger more than human and hence these intertopias are ecological. Oblivia's ecological existence within more than human kinships uncovers the ecological intertopias in the literary text. The swamp in the novel is at once a site of ruin and refuge. Though the destructive forces of colonialism and climate change has resulted in it's decay and degradation, Oblivia's reciprocal relations with the swans transforms it into a site of survival and recuperation.

The swamp fails to generate hopes of perfect bliss but offers possibilities for living on a damaged earth rather than driving Oblivia to dejection. The hollow of the eucalyptus tree which shelters Oblivia display these qualities of being an ecological space between the two polarities. Both the swamp and the tree are ecological intertopias that serve as an antidote to Oblivia's alienation where she senses her course through the environment with tentacular practices and ascertains to stay with the trouble without being "a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures" (Haraway 1) . The in-betweenness of these spaces arises from their potentialities to put forward improved ways of living in perturbed times and also from Oblivia's proclivity for unconventional relationality in which alliances are forged out of care and response ability.

Oblivia's life is imbued with frightful experiences and alienation. Inspite of being burdened by trauma, her inner world refuses to be stricken with utter distress or to foreclose possibilities of survival. Oblivia's interiority is part of an extensive, more-than human world. Rather than an indicator of passivity, her silence is an outright denial of human centered modes of connections. Brimmed with narratives of nonhuman world, her inner domain reflects her capacity to form relationships beyond human confines and survive in hostile external conditions, though such survival does not lead to sublime delight or contentment. Seen in this light, Oblivia's interiority is an ecological intertopia which incorporates a dynamic interplay of human-nonhuman entanglement.

To conclude, *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright thoroughly evinces Donna Haraway's vision of interspecies relationality that foster a response-ability to stay with the strife in present times of environmental collapse brought about by anthropocentric norms. The novel proposes that alliances beyond human boundaries contrived out of mutual care and respect

can empower participants with modes of resistance, rescue and recuperation in a world ravaged by devastating consequences of climate change , colonialism and human centred notions of development. The fiction fiercely refutes 'game-over' and 'man-can-fix-it-all' attitudes and foregrounds alternative forms of existence enabled through 'tentacular' practices in which human beings are inseparably linked with the non human realm. Interpreting the novel by employing Haraway's perspectives on kinship reveals ecological intertopias that resist the dichotomies of hope and despair.

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# Convention, Modernity, and Muslim Women's Writing from the Hyderabad State: A Study of Soghra Humayun Mirza's Poetry

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## Abstract

Soghra Humayun Mirza, one of the prominent Urdu poetesses, also known as Haya, emerges as a pivotal figure in the cultural and social landscape of Hyderabad during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a poet, novelist, editor, philanthropist, and one of the earliest Indian women social reformers, Haya's contributions span a wide spectrum, marking her as a trendsetter of her era. This paper aims to delve into the multifaceted persona of Haya, offering a nuanced appreciation of her works and their impact on society through her notable collection of poems *Anwar-e Parishan* (1949). Sogra's adopted pen name 'Haya' reflects her conscious effort to carve out a distinctive identity in the literary and social spheres. Her poetic prowess, evident in verses that blend traditional themes with progressive ideas, showcases her ability to navigate complex societal issues through art. For instance, her poem "*Aurat*" stands as a testament to her feminist ideology, challenging the objectification of women and advocating for their emancipation. Beyond her literary achievements, Haya's role as a social reformer is equally noteworthy. She staunchly opposed *purdah* and advocated for women's education and empowerment, a stance that brought her into conflict with traditional norms. Her establishment of educational institutions like the Safdaria school and her efforts in promoting widow remarriage and discouraging social evils like dowry and polygamy reflect her commitment to tangible societal change. Haya's impact extended beyond Hyderabad, as she engaged in philanthropic activities and raised awareness about global issues. Her contributions to humanitarian causes, such as aiding victims of natural disasters and supporting educational initiatives, underscore her broader vision of social justice and equality. The paper also highlights, despite facing criticism and opposition, how Haya remained steadfast in her convictions, embodying a blend of conservatism 'vernacular modernity' and at the same time advocating (colonial) modernity. Her courage to confront societal norms, her advocacy for women's rights, and her literary legacy continue to inspire critical appraisal and scholarly examination.


**Keywords**: Muslim Women, Urdu Poetry, Soghra Humayun Mirza, Haya, Hyderabad, Women's Rights, Colonialism, Social Reform, Literary Contributions, Feminist Ideology.

## Introduction

*Deccan ki aurtain kamzor aur thein jahel-o nadaan*
*Shah-e Osman ne di taleem naqsha beguman badla*
*Hua Roshan qayal aisa Deccan ka tabqa-e niswan*

*Ravish badly, chalan badla, zabaan badl, bayan badla*

- Soghra Humayun Mirza "Haya"

Muslim women's literature in Urdu, from the South/from the Deccan/erstwhile Hyderabad State, is a remarkable but often overlooked treasure. Debabratee Dhar (2022) rightly points out, "The only women Urdu writers that were read widely were from North India, such as Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chugtai, and Qurratulain Hyder. Very little is known and is available to the general public about the Hyderabadi women writers who were writing in Urdu because their oeuvre of literature had never been translated into English" (n.p.). This paper attempts to bring one such rare gem, Soghra Humayun Mirza, into literary discussions.

Soghra Humayun Mirza (1884-1958) was a poet of Hyderabad who adopted the sobriquet 'Haya' as her *nom de poesy*. She was also a novelist, editor, and social reformer who can be delineated as a trendsetter of her time. She represents an era in history when very few women in general and Muslim women, in particular, were visible in public life. Her efforts to establish herself as a writer and reformer of society through creative engagements and philanthropic activities have earned her a respectable place in the canons of history. Haya was a multifaceted personality as she established her credentials in the fields of poetry, prose, fiction, editorship, social activism, reform movements, and academics. She dedicated her life to motivating and inspiring women who were incapable of asserting themselves and fighting for their rights by awakening their consciousness and encouraging them to acquire an education, live a life of dignity, and earn a reputable position in society.

Born in 1886, a time when colonialism and modernity partially accepted and interfered in Indian society, when education of women was still in its nascent stage in the West, and India under British rule was advocating reforms in the educational and social sphere, Haya took it upon herself to create a society which was a blend of Western modernism and Eastern tradition. Haya had to face severe opposition from society for advocating a *purdah*-free life for women and for directing them toward progress and prosperity. Blessed with a liberal temperament, Haya worked relentlessly for the cause of promoting the social and educational condition of women in general and Muslim women in particular. Kalpana Kannabiran et al. write that Soghra/Haya was a "reformer who set up one of the first schools for girls in the city" (57) of Hyderabad. Her poem titled "*Aurat*" gained immense popularity and is considered a major contribution to the emancipation of women by highlighting their objectification.

*Tu kya hai ahad-e mazi ka koie rangeen fasana hai*
*Ke Sannaþe me shab ke mauj-e dariya ka tarana hai*
*Tu bulbul ki chahek hai ya kisi koel ki ku ku hai*
*Chaman me aiye kaliyon ki ye bhini bhini khusboo hai*
*Chatak ghunchon ki hai ya taaza phoolon ki tu nikhat hai*
*Kisi dard aashna ka ya ke unvan-e masarrat hai*
*Tu Shabnam ki jhalak hai ya lachak hai shaaq-e sunmbul ki*
*Ke Raanai hai sahen-e baagh me taaza khule gul ki*
*Haqeer qasta dil ka zan ke baare me maqola hai*

*Banaya apne haaton se khuda ne woh heola hai (22)*
**(**What are you? Some colorful story of yore;
Or in the stilly night, music of waves cast ashore.
Are you the chirp of the Bulbul, or the Koel's melodic coo?
Or wafting from buds in the garden, a fragrance faint but true.
Are you coquetry of the bloom or aroma of flowers fresh?
Or the apparently cheerful demeanor of a soul tormented afresh.
Are you the glitter of dew or the graceful sway of a Sumbul branch too?
Or the splendor of a blossoming rose, giving life to the garden anew.
In the words of this insignificant and embattled heart , women are merely
An edifice created with his own hands by the Almighty surely).

This poem underlines how women are perceived in society merely as docile and beautiful creatures. She wanted to break these stereotypes, by questioning "Who are you?".

Haya used her writings and speeches as a vehicle to disseminate feminist ideology. Derisive of outdated conventional practices, Haya very vociferously proclaimed that education was the only solution to redeem women from their helplessness and dependency. Not one to just pay lip service to support her belief through her writings, she published newspapers and magazines, organized programs for women, and established educational institutions like the Safdaria school at Humayun Nagar, Hyderabad.

E. Sudha Rani writes, "Education in Hyderabad state lagged far behind the other state in India. Till the beginning of the second half of the 19th century, education was very low" (521). It was the "Noble Nizam VII" who "invited many prominent educationists for the promotion of women's education in Hyderabad State" (Rani: 528). Sudha Rani continues, that the

> conditions during the early nineteenth century were not favorable for the education of women in Hyderabad. They could not move forward because of many restrictions on them and they were confined to their household affairs. They received little education and lagged behind men. However, things improved during the second half of the nineteenth century. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, a number of girls' schools had opened and efforts was made to educate more and more girls. The Government, private enterprise, and indigenous efforts resulted in the awakening of a class which was neglected in the past. Compared to the Hindus of Hyderabad, the Muslims took greater advantage of education opportunities, Hindus had not shown any enthusiasm to educate their girls till the end of the nineteenth century" (521).

The Hyderabad State was going through the waves of western/colonial modernity in the late 19th Century due to the arrival of the colonizers and the Christian missionaries. "The impact of European culture on the people of Hyderabad was very immense during the later part of the nineteenth century. Meetings and general exchanges with Europeans made them realize the importance of learning English" (Rani: 228). Sudha Rani writes,

> Sughra Humayun Mirza, who was associated with *Anjuman-e-Khavatin Deccan*, started two schools for girls. She also started a vocational and educational center called Safdaria

> Girls School at Masab Tank[40]. Begum Mirza served as the editor of many journals related to women one of them is *Annisa* (The Woman). It appeared between 1919 and 1927. Annisa Magazine's audience was not limited to the Deccan region. It spread throughout the mainland of British India, which includes Lahore, Delhi, Lucknow, and Aligarh. (Rani 528).

It is also important to note that Soghra/Haya also started a Telugu medium school for girls as she strongly believed that education should be imparted in the mother tongue. She was instrumental in establishing Associations for women at the national and regional levels. For instance, *Anjuman-e qhawateen-e Islam* and *Anjuman Qawateen-e Deccan* were established to educate women, awaken their dormant consciousness, impart vocational training, hone domestic skills, provide financial support to needy women, and thus ensure social reform. A monthly magazine Annisa/*Al-Nisa* was published to inculcate literary taste, creativity, and the reading habit among women. Sudha Rani writes about this magazine:

> Annisa (Al Nisa) had the subtitle Women's and Girl's monthly Urdu Journals. The main agenda of the magazine was - women's education. At least one issue in each issue of Annisa, catering to the Muslim community, emphasized the importance of education for Muslim women. The Safdariya School, the Urdu medium girl's school started by Sughra Humayun Mirza in 1934, still exists in Humayun Nagar (the area named after Sughra's father) in Hyderabad. Tyeba Begum Sahiba Bilgrami, who was the first Muslim graduate in India (1910) wrote many books on education and Indian Islamic studies. Due to her efforts many social and educational institutions were established in Hyderabad[41]. (Rani: 528)

In the Indian societies, widow remarriages were not allowed and polygamy was common. Thom Brooks notes, "Polygamy is a hotly contested practice and open to widespread misunderstandings. This practice is defined as a relationship between either one husband and multiple wives or one wife and multiple husbands. Today, 'polygamy' almost exclusively takes the form of polygyny: one husband with multiple wives." Moreover, it is only associated with the Muslim community. "Polygamy is neither exclusively Western nor non-Western: it has been practiced by some Hindus, Mormons, Muslims, and other cultural and religious groups" (109). Haya promoted widow remarriage and was against dowry, child marriage, and polygamy. She used her writings as a medium to express the drastic consequences of polygamy.

> E*k miyan ek biwi, kya maze ki baat hai*
> *Ek miyan do biwi, jhagda saath saath hai*
> *Ek miyan teen biwi, joota mukhi laat hai*
> *Ek miya char biwi, murda haaton haaton haath hai* (21)
> (A husband and a wife, a life full of cheer
> A husband and two wives, squabbles harbor near
> A husband and three wives, blows, punches, and kicks rear
> A husband and four wives, enough shoulders for the bier!)

A truly secular person, it was the plight of women in general irrespective of religion, class, and creed, that spurred her on in her cause as she felt a common thread of despondency

bound them together. In a manner, she brought women under a single umbrella and united them for a cause regardless of their other identities.

*Matlab hai zindagi se na araam se garaz*
*Mujh ko faqat hai fayda-e aam se garaz*
*Mashrab mera hai qaum ki qidmat bas ae Haya*
*Kuch kufr se garz hai na Islam se garaz (64)*
(Indifferent to life or to thoughts of leisure and rest,
Emancipation of the masses is indeed my sole zest;
Content am I in serving the community O' Haya,
Being neither apostate nor a believer in Islam is best.)

Similarly, she extended her charitable philanthropic and welfare activities beyond the Deccan and collected aid for diverse causes ranging from victims of the Iranian earthquake, and the oppressed of Balkan, to funding for the establishment and promotion of the Aligarh Muslim University. Her leadership, boldness, and call for peace and justice were not just limited to the Hyderabad State or the Indian Subcontinent but she was also aware of what was happening in the world and responded Boldy to global concerns. It's unbelievable to imagine a Muslim woman from 19th-century Hyderabad State sending a telegram to Hitler urging him to stop the war. Her courage, fearlessness, and outspoken nature are evident in the message she sends during World War II, directly demanding an end to the conflict.

The themes of her poetic compositions also range from religious verses in praise of God *(Hamd*), the Holy Prophet (*Naat*), and Hazrat Ali (*Manqabat*), to patriotic and laudatory poems written on the Nizam of Hyderabad and other eminent personalities.

**Hamd:**

*Gul me shajr me tu hai, Shams o qamr me tu hai*
*Har ja chamak raha hai, bas tu hi chaar su hai* (8)
(Manifest in the rose and tree, in the Sun and Moon are thee;
Glittering and truly omnipresent, none other than thee.)

**Naat:**

*Wahdat ka noor zaat se phaila jo aap ki*
*Kufr aur shrik saare jahan se nihan hain aaj (10)*
(The light of Unity of God which You spread
Drove away denial and plurality from the world.)

**Manqabat:**

*La fatah jis ke liye aya, mili jis ko saif*
*Shaan me Nad-e Ali jis ki hai is ki tareef (11)*
(For whom the title of La fatah (invincible) was coined and the sword bestowed;
The one in whose praise the *Nad-e Ali* was composed.)

A blend of conservatism and modernity, Haya also composed several dirges (*Nohas*) mourning the sacrifices made by the martyrs of the prophet's family. Thus, her religiosity, attachment,

and familiarity with her beliefs come through her writings and therefore it is difficult to believe the labels and accusations that have been levied against her.

The nationalist feeling and loyalty of Haya can also be seen in her poetry, which also resonates with Allama Iqbal's "Hindi hain ham watan hai Hindostan hamara". Haya penned:

*Mulki hain hum watan hai mulk-e Deccan hamara*
*Yeh hai zameen hamari, ye hai watan hamara (19)*
(We are *Mulki*[1] and our nation is the Deccan;
This is our land and this our own nation.)
*Aish hai, aman hai, masarat hai*
*Khoob abaad hai dayar Deccan 26)*
(There is prosperity, there is peace, and there is felicity
The Deccan in truly a land of prosperity.)

For Haya, the cause of national/Mulk was supreme. A loyal subject of the Nizam, she penned an adulatory ode to Mir Osman Ali Khan on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee celebrations of his coronation. However, her main focus remains on the contributions of the Nizam towards the emancipation of women.

*Deccan ki aurtain kamzor aur thein jahel-o nadaan*
*Shah-e Osman ne di taleem naqsha beguman badla*
*Hua Roshan qayal aisa Deccan ka tabqa-e niswan*
*Ravish badly, chalan badla, zabaan badl, bayan badla (24)*
(Women of the Deccan were weak, illiterate and naïve, when
Shah Osman provided educational avenues of such force;
Ensuring enlightenment for women of the Deccan,
Changing attitudes, lifestyles, conversations and discourse.)

Similarly, we find her vociferously appreciating the British for their enactment of the landmark the Sarada Act (1929), also known as the Child Marriage Restraint Act, abolishing child marriage, in a laudatory poem presented to Lady Irwin when she visited Hyderabad.

*Hyderabad bana aaj hai chowuthi ki dulhan*
*Kya nikhar iska hai, kya husn hai, kaisa joban*
*Sarda Bill ka banaya jo gaya hai qanoon*
*Khurram-o shaad huii dekh kar har ek khatun*
*Kyun na sab shaaad hon, qanoon hi aisa hai bana*
*Door ho jaie gi hoti thi jo aurat pe jafa*
*Auraton ki jo hifazat ka hai samaan muzammar*
*Dekh kar is ko muqalif hue kya kya maftr (38)*
(Today Hyderabad glows like a bride
An epitome of grace beauty and pride
Sarda bill now a law
Women enthused with happiness and awe
Delighted everyone is, for the law is such
Ensuring oppression does not women touch

A mechanism of autonomy for women in place
Shock and opposition on many a face)

There are certain colonial reforms too. In writing poems in honour of both the Nizam and the British, she may have been criticized and termed a sycophant or hypocrite. But on close scrutiny, it becomes obvious that Haya was unfettered by political equations at the national level when it came to espousing the causes that she believed in and prime among these was that of empowerment of women. She believed in giving credit where it was due as long as it promoted and encouraged the cause which she supported. A noticeable difference in these poems is the fact that while writing about the Nizam she refers to her country as the Deccan, hinting at the sobriquet *Shah-e Deccan* used extensively for the Nizam in his dominions, while in her tribute to Lady Irwin, she chooses to use Hyderabad as the state was known universally.

*Hyderabad khusha waqt-o khusha bakht tera*
*Tere itrane ka mauqa hai abhi hath aya* (38)
(Hyderabad, happy times and good fortune lie in store
An opportunity to preen with pride is yours evermore.)

Haya has penned several poems against alcoholism. In one such composition, she denounces tipplers and their despicable habit in an impassioned outburst. It is most certainly the vocalisation of innumerable women suffering not only due to the alcoholism of men but also other social evils that were plaguing the society of the times.

*Sharam aati nahin din raat piye jaata hain*
*Apne bachon se na ama hi se sharmate hain*
*Asal me zaher ka peena hai yeh peena kya hai*
*Hai bura nashay ka marna ye jeena kya hai*
*Nasha bazon ki na auqat hai na izzat koie*
*In se nafrat koie karta hai malamat koie* (54)
(Night and day, shamelessly they binge on drink after drink;
The presence of their mother or children, irrelevant do they think.
In fact it is poison, the drink that they consume;
Intoxication is evil, the drunk as dead presume.
Alcoholics shorn of status and respect, by one and all;
Hated by some and despised by others, for their self-inflicted fall.)

It is clear that no part of society was to be ignored and was to be embraced and treated equally since good deeds are to be performed equivocally irrespective of all bias. She felt for the poor, the needy, and the physically challenged and urged children to treat them with equanimity.

*Langde ko dekho to tum haath me lakdi de do*
*Andhe ko dekho to tum rah ise batlao*
*Sardi ke maare akarte hue muflis jo mile*
*Oudhne ke liye la kar inhe kambhal de do* (49)

(Provide a stick for support when you see a lame person
Provide guidance on the path when you see a blind person
For the destitute that you come across who in the cold shiver
A blanket to cover themselves you deliver.)

Haya was one of the very few women of her time to discard purdah and address public gatherings. Her progressive lifestyle and her poem imploring women to abandon purdah subjected her to a lot of criticism from society. In fact, her exhortations do not aim at radicalizing women, as is evident from a reading of her poem *Purdah Choºo.*

*Dil ka purda ankh ka purda, jaan se badh kar is ko rakhna*
*Hai jo riwayati woh nahin rakhna, purda chodo purda chodo*
*Purde se gar baher niklo, cinema theatre me mat jao;*
*Lecture college me tum jana, purdah chodo purdah chodo!*
*Kapde pehno satrposh, muh per na ho balaposh*
*Yeh hai purda seedha sadha, purda chodo purda chodo*
*Shara ne jis ko jayaez rakha be shak itna purda karna*
*Hai Haya ka bas ye kehna purda Chodo purda chodo* (59-61)
(Veil your heart, veil your eyes; protect them more than life itself;
Do not espouse the traditional sort; abandon the veil, abandon the veil!
In case you discard the veil, do not go to the cinema theatre,
Attend the lecture at college; abandon the veil, abandon the veil!
Wear clothes that do not reveal, but do not cover the face;
This is the simple and the proper purdah; abandon the veil, abandon the veil!
Limit yourself to the form of purdah ordained by *Shara*[2];
Haya just has one thing to say; abandon the veil, abandon the veil!)

Soghra Humayun Mirza "Haya" was one of the earliest Muslim feminists who re-interpreted the *purdah/veiling* system. Her non-hijabi or unveiling feminist stance was different from the later feminists like Taslima Nasrin, Irshad Manji, Mona Eltahawy, Asra Nomani, and Fatemeh Hosseini. Her idea of veiling was different from those traditional understandings. It can also be interpreted that she was inspired by the colonial modernity and interpretation of the idea of *purdah* among the Muslim colonial societies including MENA countries and South Asia. What is important here is to understand how Haya also led the foundation of vernacular modernity directing the young minds of her time to focus on education and at the same time admonishing them not to do evil things after abandoning the purdah. She maintains certain cultural traits while being influenced by colonial modernity.

A critical evaluation of her poem's appeal and addressing women to discard the purdah makes it clear that purdah is to be followed as ordained and it is more important to internalize it. She though cautions women against misinterpreting her appeal and urges them not to misuse or exploit the cause but rather use it to promote and advance their aspirations. The fact that she adopts *Haya* as a pseudonym to write poetry gives credence to her convictions and beliefs. Her focus was more on *haya* than the *purdah*. Society failed to assess and

understand her in the light of the clarifications she made and was quick to rebuke and chastise her.

Haya rues the fact that she was not able to transform society promote education among women and liberate them. Her sentiments echo the feelings of several women of her time who felt helpless at not being able to reform and rehabilitate the lesser privileged section of their clan and also of women who were unable to express their predicament and suffered helplessly. Haya herself suffered from no illusions and was very much aware of the sorry state of affairs and societal treatment of precursors of a new movement.

*Koii bhi aiyega turbat par bhala mere baad*
*Qhaakh aa aa ke udayegi saba mere baad*
*Qaum ne qadr na ki reh gayi hasrat dil me*
*Meri turbat se ye ayegi sada mere baad (30)*
(Who will care to visit my grave when I am gone?
Only the wind will raise dust around it when I am gone.
Craving in my heart for appreciation of my nation I depart,
A voice will rise in protest from my grave when I am gone.)

Haya was without a doubt, a determined, and fiercely spirited lady. Her resolute nature and dogged determination can be surmised from the fact that she pledges to continue to fight for her cause even after death. Deeply religious by nature, she pleads with the Almighty that at least after her death, her efforts be appreciated.

*Zindagi me to sila mai ne na paya har giz*
*Kaam sab mere hon maqbool Khuda mere baad (30)*
(During my life I found no return, no reward;
Lord! May my work find acceptance when I am gone.)

Despite this fact, in one of her ghazals, she proclaims her fearlessness and courage to confront any situation.

*Khauf dil me to kisi ka bhi nahi apne Haya*
*Hum faqat apne Khuda hi se dara karte hain* (71)
(Free in my heart of all dread O' Haya;
I fear none other than my God.)

Haya displayed extreme patience and courage while confronting issues and conflicts in life of which she experienced plenty. She was unquestionably a trendsetter as very few women ventured out into the public domain during her time and thus invited severe censure for encouraging fellow women to give up purdah. She tackled problems with strength and determination and it is her bold outlook that provided her this conviction. This conviction comes out clearly in the following lines of her ghazal;

*Musibat ko na samjho tum musibat, ain rahat hai*
*Musibat ko jo samjhe ain rahat wo karamat hai*
*Na ho magmoom jo gham se, na ho masroor rahat se*

*Haqeeqi hai khushi usko, masarat hi masarat hai*. (62)
(Not considering difficulties a problem, ensures immense relief
And considering problems a relief, is truly a miracle I believe
One neither saddened by sorrow, nor by relief overjoyed;
Genuine is his delight, a never-ending pleasure enjoyed.)

Haya was actively involved in reforming society and liberating it of its maladies. She fought for the cause of women and advocated their active involvement in societal issues. This she believed was possible by promoting their education, encouraging widow remarriage, and discouraging purdah and polygamy. She confidently achieved success by following her version of feminism without being overtly radical or rabidly assertive. In one of her ghazals, she writes,

*Meethi baaton se nikalta hai jo maqsad apna*
*Wo na duniya me kabhi laal wo gauher se nikla (*71)
(Goals achieved with a sugary tongue and persuasive speeches;
Cannot ever be bought in this world with the greatest riches.)

Commenting on the contributions of Sogra Humayun Mirza *Haya*, Dr Zeenat Sajida, mother-in-law of Prof. Shugufta Shaheen says in her informal interaction,

> Even if we concede that in contemporary times the topics appear insignificant and the narrative style seems jaded [the writings of Haya] are immensely informative of the challenges and tribulations encountered by movements espousing feminist awakening, educational problems, linguistic emancipation, cultural refinement, and social reforms. They will always remain a valuable source of information regarding the then prevailing conditions of people and societies of India, Iran, and particularly the Deccan.

Haya's aim in life was very simple and concrete. She dedicated her life to reforming society and freeing it of its malaise. She considered education to be the saviour and redeemer of the maladies that plagued society. Illiteracy among women and their lack of involvement in political and social development, either voluntarily or involuntarily, unnerved her. She dreamt of their emancipation and struggled to realize this dream. Her selfless nature and dedication can best be surmised from her *Rubaiyat*.

*Qaum ki qatir mujhe karna hai kaam*
*Ya safar ho ya ke ho apna muqaam*
*Qidmat-e Qaum kii qatir mai Haya*
*Mushtaid hun raat din aur subh-o shaam.* (64)
(For the sake of the community I have to strive
Places close to home or which at a distance thrive
Haya, in service of the community

Struggle morning, day and night relentlessly

*Qidmat-e Qaum kii qatir mai Haya*
*Mushtaid hun raat din aur subh-o shaam. (64)*
(For the sake of the community I have to strive

Places close to home or which at a distance thrive
Haya, in service of the community
Struggle morning, day and night relentlessly)

## Conclusion

In summary, Soghra Humayun Mirza's literary work under the pseudonym "Haya" significantly enriches the literary, cultural, and social landscape of late 19th and early 20th century Hyderabad. This underscores the multifaceted nature of Haya, whose influence resonates across temporal and geographical boundaries. Through her poetry, activism, and social reform efforts, Haya emerged as a trailblazer who navigated the complexities of convention and modernity, particularly in the context of Muslim women's writing of her time. Haya's adoption of the pen name 'Haya' symbolizes her conscious effort to carve out a unique identity in both literary and social spheres. Her poetic prowess, evident in verses that blend traditional themes with progressive ideas, showcases her ability to address intricate societal issues through art. For instance, her poem "*Aurat*" stands as a powerful testament to her feminist ideology, challenging societal norms and advocating for the emancipation of women. Haya's role as a social reformer cannot be undermined. Her staunch opposition to conventions like purdah and advocacy for women's education and empowerment among Indian society in general and Muslim society, in particular, brought her into direct conflict with the entrenched traditions of her time. Despite facing criticism and opposition, Haya remained unwavering in her convictions, embodying a blend of conservatism and modernity that resonated with many. Her establishment of educational institutions like the Safdaria school and her efforts in promoting widow remarriage and discouraging social evils like dowry and polygamy reflect her commitment to tangible societal change. Moreover, Haya's engagement in philanthropic activities and advocacy for global causes underscored her broader vision of social justice and equality. The enduring relevance of Haya's legacy lies in her ability to inspire critical appraisal and scholarly examination even today. Her courage to confront societal norms, her advocacy for women's rights, and her literary legacy continue to captivate researchers and enthusiasts alike. In a nutshell, Haya stands as a towering figure whose contributions extend beyond her time. Her poetry, activism, and progressive ideals serve as a beacon for future generations, reminding us of the transformative power of art and advocacy in shaping a more just and equitable society.

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## Footnotes

[1] *Mulki* was a term used to define the residents of the Nizam's State, Hyderabad Deccan, in relation to first-generation settlers from other parts of India who were identified as non-*Mulki*. The Mulki movement at Hyderabad peaked during the rule of the last Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan. Soghra Humayun Mirza is here lending support to the *Mulki* movement. 'During this period Deccan was universally used as a synonym for the Nizam's state of Hyderabad.

[2] Sharia, Sharia law, or Islamic law is the religious law forming part of the Islamic tradition.

# Dramatizing the Self: Seventeenth Century England and the Construction of a Colonial Identity

HARSHITA SINGH, JAYATEE BHATTACHARYA & SUSHILA VIJAYKUMAR


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## Abstract

Jacobean playwrights have successfully captured the turmoil of their Age on the English stage but, in a period when England had only just begun to pose itself as a colonial power, their feats on the global scale were quite aggrandized when depicted in the theatres. Several plays during the English Renaissance address the matter of colonial expansion and particularly highlight the impact of newly-formed ties between England and the Northern African and Middle Eastern countries. In the plays, England (or the Christian world) is a religious, moral, colonial super-power. The illusion of prosperity and wealth has been propagated along with a sense of cultural and religious superiority, primarily over the Northern African and Middle Eastern countries. Such was the colonial discourse at the beginning of 17th century. In this paper, we aim to explore the reasons behind this self-representation by English playwrights, which was quite contradictory to the historical reality, employing some of the plays from the Era.

**Keywords:** Colonial Discourse, Identity Politics, Oriental Plays, English Renaissance, Self-Representation.

What is it that comes to the mind when we think about the early 17th Century England or peruse through the Renaissance or particularly Jacobean plays? The images are usually of a country engrossed in religious and political turmoil, a country adapting to the idea of a new king after years of stability under Queen Elizabeth I. It is also hailed as the Golden Age of English Drama when the likes of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Johnson, etc. graced the English stage. Going deeper into the Jacobean drama, there appears to be nostalgia for the bygone Elizabethan era and the uncertainty of the times culminated in dark and violent tragedies on the stage. On further exploration, we also find images of conflict with their near neighbours, occasionally in the race for territorial expansion of their empires.

In terms of expansion or colonisation, England was much further behind its European neighbours. The Spanish and the Portuguese had more presence in international waters and more colonies around the globe than the other European nations. They had already acquired considerable land, wealth, strength and military bases in Asia and the Americas. During the Renaissance, there are instances of English emissaries reaching different ports and locations around the globe in order to facilitate trade between their nations, and these efforts did bear

fruits by the end of the 17th century. However, at the beginning of the 17th century, England had only succeeded in establishing a few settlements in North America and had signed some trade treaties with non-European countries like Morocco and Turkey.

Regardless of England's political and military position overseas, the discourse at home was strongly inclined in favour of colonial expansion and conquest. The colonial race, the spirit of adventure, the mystery of the unfound lands and cultures, and the promise of national prosperity were all matters of debate and speculation on the English stage, particularly during the Jacobean period (1603-1625). As mentioned earlier, this was also the time when England became closely associated with its non-European neighbours, i.e. the countries of Northern Africa and Middle East. In the Elizabethan and the Jacobean plays, we see a strong presence of these new(er) ties on the stage. Writing about these places and characters from these regions became a trend. It evolved into a sort of sub-genre, which came to be known as the "Turk plays" or the "Oriental plays." The most popular example of such a play is William Shakespeare's *Othello*, written in 1603. Even though no Turks actually appear in this play, they remain a formidable presence that is always a looming threat. However, *Othello* is far from the best example of this sub-genre.

Before delving further on this newly-evolved genre, it is crucial to understand conceptually what comprises a Turk play. Any play with a setting in the Northern African or Middle Eastern countries or showcasing characters hailing from these backdrops is defined as a Turk play. Some of them are named directly after Ottoman rulers and tell a rather misinformed tale of their lives. However, the definition of "Turk" here becomes rather homogenised. It imposes a Turkish and a Muslim identity as well as culture on all who belong to these regions, without enquiring into the ethnic diversity of these spaces.

Since it became a recurring genre, several Turk plays were written during the English Renaissance, forty-seven if we are to believe the scholar Louis Wann. In his 1915 essay "The Oriental in Elizabethan Drama", Wann lists all the Turk or Oriental plays written by English playwrights from 1579 CE to 1642 CE. Here are a few of these plays – Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine I & II* (1587-88) and *Jew of Malta* (1589), George Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* (1588), Robert Greene's *Selimus* (1594), Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion* (1600), Thomas Goffe's *The Courageous Turk* (1618) and *The Raging Turk* (1618), Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (1620), Philip Massinger's *The Renegado* (1624) and *The Emperor of the East* (1632) et cetera.

These plays are strategically important from a historical point of view. Shakespeare, in *The Tempest* (1611), had imagined his Prospero ruling over the entire island unopposed and unchallenged. With his magical abilities, Prospero had enslaved Caliban and taken control of the island. He even dominated the native spirits of the island, who now served his interest faithfully. Prospero portrays the ideal of a coloniser.

> Prospero's actions throughout the play appear, in this light, essentially to involve an attempt to legitimate and naturalize his authority upon the island, to secure and maintain discursive dominion through 'his capacity to forge the island in his own image'. (Wylie 48)

But, this goal was hardly more than aspirational for England at this point of time. While they had succeeded to some extent in America, it had proved much more difficult closer to home in the Mediterranean region, where the Ottomans commanded a sheer force. They were seen as a formidable enemy, one that could not be vanquished. The Ottoman rule, which began in the 14th century, was at its height in the 15th and the 16th centuries. Launching any political or military conquest against them was unthinkable for the English, even for the other European powers. This threat was also on the religious level as the Ottomans strongly professed the Islamic religion, of which the English had mostly ignorant but also highly prejudiced views.

At this juncture, a narrative of moral and religious superiority, sometimes interwoven with tales of military and political might, was often propagated to maintain an image of prosperity and progress at home. Drama became a powerful tool to disseminate these ideas in the popular imagination. These narratives were shared with the masses through the medium of Drama, and the power of the theatre was employed to shift the narrative in the favour of the English empire at sea.

> Invariably, in these plays, the characterization of Turks and other Islamic characters, with few exceptions, was very unfavorable. Common Turkish attributes that surface in most of these plays are cruelty, immorality, heresy, and lewdness. Reinforced through different media, the image of the Turks as a threat, a deviation, and an emblem of immorality and heresy remained intact in England throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (Barin 39)

For instance, in *Othello*, as the Venetians prepare to battle the Turkish forces on the island of Cyprus, a fateful storm overtakes the Turkish navy and it is destroyed even before they could land on shore and the battle could commence. After their destruction, the islanders and the Venetian army celebrate together. This is shown on the Jacobean stage as victory delivered by God in favour of the virtuous and faithful Christians. Here is an excerpt from Act II, Scene I of *Othello* –

> A segregation of the Turkish fleet:
> For do but stand upon the banning shore,
> The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds;
> The wind-shaked surge…
> News, lads! Our wars are done:
> The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks
> That their designment halts. A noble ship of Venice
> Hath seen a grievous wrack and sufferance
> On most part of their fleet. (Shakespeare 2.1.10-24)

In Philip Massinger's *The Renegado* (1624), the protagonist Vitelli is in Tunisia to bring the renegade figure Antonio to justice. Antonio has forsaken Christianity and is an outlaw in the eyes of his country, i.e. Italy, and must be tried according to their laws which forbid conversion. On the other hand, the character of Vitelli also acts as a mouthpiece character that persuades Donusa, a Turkish princess, to convert to Christianity with his conviction that it is the only "true" faith. He proclaims moral and religious superiority in his culture and faith, while dismissing hers' as the very opposite. His hypocritical stance becomes a rhetoric affirming Christian faith and its principles in front of the public. After her conversion to Christianity, Donusa professes herself to have been transformed,

> *Donusa*: I am another woman, till this minute
> I never lived, nor durst think how to die.
> How long have I been blind? Yet on the sudden,
> By this blest means I feel the films of error
> Ta'en from my soul's eyes…
> Let me kiss the hand
> That did this miracle, and seal my thanks
> Upon those Lips from whence these sweet words vanished
> That freed me from the cruelest of prisons,
> Blind ignorance, and misbelief: false Prophet,
> Impostor *Mahomet*. (Massinger 5.3.121-133)

In Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk* (1612), the pirate John Ward, who converted to Islam, commits suicide at the end after acknowledging his mistake in deserting his Christian beliefs and delivering a rant blaming the "Turks" for his actions. In the play, his crime as a convert outweighs his status as a pirate and an outlaw. In the play, it is for this action that he is denounced and repudiated. On his deathbed, this is the crime for which Ward seeks forgiveness and mercy.

This play was inspired by the real event of conversion of an English pirate named John Ward. This event was covered in multiple pamphlets; several ballads and literary pieces were also devoted to it. Yet, according to them, the most shocking act that a pirate could have undertaken was conversion to Islam. This play goes on to express how threatened the English must have been at the mere possibility of this happening. The play also depicts how oblivious they were of the Islamic practices and customs. The editor of this edition of the play, Christopher Hapka, writes –

> The ignorance of Islamic beliefs and doctrine is shown, for example, in *A Christian Turn'd Turk*'s conversion scene, which includes a bust of Mohammed, forbidden by most Muslim denominations, on which Ward swears. Another part of the ceremony is the offer of a cup of wine by a Christian, which Ward must refuse. To Daborne, Islam is defined solely by its relationship to, and its supposed opposition to, Christianity. (Hapka Introduction)

All these plays highlight the misinformation and ignorance surrounding Muslims (and even Jews) in English society, while also showcasing the biasness and hypocrisy that existed at that time. The term "Turk" became synonymous with any non-Christians, since it defined

all of them with similar attributes in opposition to Christians; and the term "turn'ng turk" began to be applied to anyone who behaved in a seemingly non-Christian fashion. In fact, the latter was used as a joke on the stage. Iago uses it for Othello and even himself merely due to the fact that it had become a term of common usage.

> Accordingly, for a European, the word Turk began to evoke the following unfavorable characteristics: licentiousness and immorality; lying and dishonesty; and, finally, cruelty and barbarity. These are all conveyed in the characterization of Othello. Throughout Othello, Shakespeare uses the expression "turning Turk" often with various negative connotations; Othello reflects the anxieties caused by religious conversion in European consciousness. (Barin 48)

The term "Turk" referred to a unanimous lot. It refused to acknowledge the fact that not all Muslims were Turks and vice-versa. It gradually eradicated any conception of plurality that could be added to the identity of people and races of Northern Africa and Middle East.

> A few people among the educated classes of Shakespeare's England might have known that not all of the Barbary Moors were unenlightened pagans or even benighted "Mahometans," but most English were unaware of the Muslim rulers' policy of religious tolerance, which allowed Jews, Christians, and Muslims to live together peacefully within the same community. This policy differed radically from that of England, where the norm was religious persecution and where very few Jews or Muslims were permitted to maintain residence. (Vitkus 91)

But these images and stereotypes, which were frequently repeated on the stage, were purposefully employed to supersede the historical accounts and create a discourse vilifying the "Turks" as Other.

There could be multiple reasons why historians like Richard Knolles chose to shape the historiography with works like *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603). This was a seminal work which formulated a general understanding about the Ottomans, their history, politics; and most Jacobean playwrights depended on it for depiction of their characters. Even though not all the characters they created were Turkish in descent, but this historical text became a reference point for them, especially in writing a play about Ottoman monarchs.

One of the reasons why writers, historians and playwrights alike, subscribed to these notions and further propagated them could be wishfulness. It is possible that these plays portray an image different from the reality in order to create a colonial discourse which could be realised in future. The historians and the playwrights were simply weaving an account more suited to the colonial aspirations of their country. While the English were far from dominant overseas in comparison to Spain and Portugal, this narrative could be a way to fuel their colonial ambitions and boost the morale.

Secondly, it can be done with a purpose to reassure the public at home as well as to lead astray their European neighbours. By representing themselves as a powerful nation, they could maintain an appearance of supremacy and competitiveness. It was probably essential

to retain a balance of power and restore people's faith in their national institutions. Also, these altered accounts of reality projecting a triumphant England could largely impact the future historiography, while also covering the fact that the colonial enterprise had not proved to be as rewarding and as successful at the beginning of the 17th century.

Thirdly, it can be done out of acrimony. Being threatened and intimidated by the influence of the Ottomans in the Mediterranean, this was possibly the only way to gain higher ground over them. The plays, filled with aggrandised representations of their faith and power while simultaneously depicting the Other subject in derogatory light, would eventually wipe out the resentment of One's own powerlessness in comparison to them. Possibly, a narrative endorsing the "true" faith and adhering to Christian beliefs, while reproaching the Other for their false and misguided faith, reaffirmed confidence in the colonial agenda.

In conclusion, I would like to say that these plays served a political motive, no matter what the incentive. They created a false self-representation of England and its power at the beginning of the 17th century, particularly in terms of the colonial identity. Either of the reasons stated above could be true or it can be all the above simultaneously. Not only did they recite an alternate account of the actual scenario, they also blatantly erased the identity of these regions and their populace in their literature. As Nabil Matar points out in his book, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (1999),

> "Precisely because the Muslims were beyond colonial reach, Britons began to demonize, polarize, and alterize them. In a frenzy of racism and bigotry that dominated the late Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline periods, dramatists and travelers, theologians, and polemicists created the representations that would define early modern Britain's image of the Muslims. They established in their popular and widely read works the stereotype of the Muslim—a stereotype that was presented and re-presented in numerous plays and pageants, and that gained wider appeal and permanence than the stereotype of the Jew or the American Indian." (Matar 12-13)

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# The Mainstream Obsession with Oralism: Estrangement and Dissociation of Childhood in Chris Overton's *The Silent Child*

MIBY MIRIAM JACOB, BASIL THOMAS & ANEJ SOMARAJ

**Abstract**

Deafness has been viewed through a medical lens historically, mainly focusing on pathology and the idea of 'fixing' one's hearing loss. Dominant narratives created by media and public policies reinforce misconceptions regarding deafness. The role of sign language has never been given the importance it deserves, neither in communication, nor in education. Technological advancements and assistive devices, as much as they provide improved access to communication, may not always be able to bring all of the deaf individuals under its humanising impact, owing to the variation in adoption and effectiveness. The Oscar-winning short film *The Silent Child* (2017) directed by Chris Overton tells the story of Libby, a four-year-old profoundly-deaf child, who lives a lonely and emotionally-detached life from the rest of her family due to communication barriers. The hearing parents' obsession with normalcy and oral education and the aversion to sign language make the child feel alienated and isolated. The societal and familial expectations imposed on disabled children to fit into the acceptable majority – particularly regarding communication styles – often lead to neglect of their emotional well-being and identity. *The Silent Child* serves as a critique of the hearing world's assumptions and inadequacies in supporting Deaf children, advocating for better communication methods and understanding. The paper attempts to critique the societal structures that marginalise Deaf individuals and analyse the reasons for her disconnection and disengagements – including the indifferent approach of the narcissistic parents toward the child – by employing tools from Critical Deaf Studies.

**Keywords:** Communication, normalcy, Deaf identity, disability, sign language.

People with disabilities have diverse development needs and the failure to address them properly may result in emotional distress, social isolation and increased stigma. Lack of timely intervention and support may lead to long-term effects like identity crisis and withdrawal. The mainstream obsession with normalcy due to societal ideals that prioritise the conventional standards of abilities and disabilities can have implications on the lives and behaviours of the disabled person and the people associated with them. Most often, it is those individuals who do not conform to the traditional roles and appearances that become victimised by stigma, stereotypes and exclusion. Peer pressure compels people to conceal their true identities in order to fit these moulds of what is acceptable and what is not. Norms around physique, lifestyle etc. can contribute to feelings of inefficiency and inferiority in minority communities,

if appropriate resources and acceptance are not provided. Thus, societal and familial expectations imposed on disabled children to fit into the acceptable majority often bring about neglect of their emotional well-being as well as identity.

The film that won Oscar Academy Award for the Best Live Action Short Film in 2017, *The Silent Child* directed by Chris Overton, tells the story of Libby, a four-year-old deaf child, who lives a lonely and emotionally-detached life from the rest of her family due to communication barriers. Born to middle-class hearing parents from rural England, Libby is profoundly deaf and is socially withdrawn, barely responding to anyone around. Her parents and siblings are not ready to learn sign language, rather expect her to rely on the movement of their lips. Libby's mother brings in Joanne, a specialist teacher, to help out in enhancing her social interactive skills. Libby easily connects to her and shows signs of transformation and social outgoing over a short period of time. With the specialist's support, she learns to communicate and comprehend ideas in sign language, which her parents find difficult to approve. They want the child to read lips and grow as a 'speaking' and 'hearing' person in the world of sounds. She is thus torn away from Joanne by her parents, as they insist that she attends a mainstream school where she is forced to fit in. Eventually, there occurs a reverse transformation in Libby's behaviour, where she goes back to her previous state, cutting herself off from the outside world.

Centring the experiences of Deaf individuals, Deaf Studies examines the social, political, and cultural dimensions of deafness, challenging traditional narratives that frame deaf individuals solely as lacking in some ways. This approach critiques the societal structures and systems that marginalise deaf individuals, advocating for their rights and recognition as a distinct cultural group with its own language, values, and experiences. As an endeavour to encourage society to reflect on the implications of hearing-centric perspectives – particularly how these viewpoints can shape the lives of deaf children, deaf activists dismantle stereotypes and promote a more inclusive understanding of deafness as a rich cultural experience rather than merely a deficit. Libby's struggles for communication and understanding within a hearing family, emphasise the gaps in support and acknowledgment of her identity. In a world that is shaped by voices, dialogues around the importance of sign language, accessibility, representation, empowerment, community, and the need for societal changes to better accommodate and celebrate Deaf identities are necessary.

The (mis)conception that deaf children cannot evolve cognitively and emotionally beyond the barriers of spoken language undermines their potential for communication, education and personal development. Deafness has always been viewed through a medical lens historically, mainly focusing on pathology and the idea of 'fixing' one's hearing loss. The societal notions regarding communication styles disregard those who use the manual modality of conveying meanings, i.e., sign language. The role of sign language has never been given the importance it deserves, neither in communication, nor in education. The system is reluctant to recognise sign language in schools, and children are expected to put effort into having a smooth communication process through lip-reading. As a silent and invisible disability, deafness needs

to be addressed from the point-of-view of those who experience it, rather than looking at it from positions of hearing privilege. Technological advancements and assistive devices, as much as they provide improved access to communication, may not always be able to bring all of the deaf individuals under its humanising impact, owing to the variation in adoption and effectiveness.

Libby's pain of social rejection is evident in her mannerism and interactions, revealing her underlying insecurities and struggles for acceptance. When denial and disowning begin with the family, it extends to crowded environments and the public. As Joanne visits Libby's family for the first time, the father says, "...we have quite low expectations" (*The Silent Child* 01:32). The parents do not seem to care if the child is listening to or understanding the concepts they are talking about. The mother is also found to be repeating things from behind to Libby multiple times assuming that Libby picks up her speech well. It is said that Libby has not been taken to the nearby park since she was tiny, implying how she was neglected as a child. Her isolation at the dinner table is evident throughout, where the parents and children, except for her, engage in humorous conversations from which Libby is excluded. The indifferent approach of the narcissistic parents and the resulting disconnection and disengagements are clearly visible. Her grandmother tells Joanne that Libby is not a part of their family, but rather an illegitimate child, as they cannot accept a deaf child into their midst. She even thinks Libby will never have a career or a bright future.

Joanne's character is referred to as "help" (01:10) by Libby's family, which clearly manifests how society fails to understand that special educators are not just a 'help' but a vital partner in promoting individual growth, learning and inclusion. A social worker or a special teacher or a sign language interpreter is a vocation just like any other dedicated profession, each contributing to the well-being of individuals with disabilities and communities. They play key roles in empowering children with diverse needs, advocating for their rights and creating educational experiences in fostering their strengths. The unnecessary glorification of particular professions can sometimes overshadow the everyday challenges and complexities these roles entail. Idealising it excessively leads to unrealistic expectations and undervaluing the importance of support and resources needed for the underprivileged, who are not allowed to enjoy the same standard of living or rights as the majority.

The hearing parents' obsession with normalcy and oral education and the aversion to sign language make the child feel alienated and isolated. As Libby grows into a smart, happy, and confident child who expresses herself freely, her mother becomes insecure about Libby's increasing closeness to her teacher rather than to her. Instead of learning sign language or doing anything to make it easier for the child, the family tries to stop her from learning signs, making her say, "My ears are broken" (14:35). Oralism often discourages the use of sign language, which can cut off ties to the rich Deaf culture and community. This loss can be seen in Libby's case where it apparently leads to feelings of isolation and disconnection from the supportive network, as the mother starts interfering and insisting that she knows it all better. "She is learning this language that I don't know and no one in her school will know.

When you have a child, you want them to be normal, you want them to be perfect" (14:48-14:56). The family's intense focus on conforming to a standard idea of what is considered 'normal' is reflected in many such instances. This fixation with normality often marginalises those who do not fit into conventional moulds, leading to exclusion and stigmatisation of individuals with diverse identities, experiences and abilities. It can create constant pressure to suppress the uniqueness and individuality in favour of fitting in, which can seriously be harmful to one's mental health and social inclusivity. Although Joanne tries to explain, "She is normal. She is just deaf" (14:57), the mother is seemingly not convinced. "...I am Libby's mother and I know what is best for her" (13:01-13:05). As a result, Libby is admitted to a mainstream school where she feels desolate and estranged. In a statement in the film's official website, Rachel Shenton, the writer and the producer, reflects on how deaf children are treated when it comes to education:

> 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents with no experience of deafness often resulting in limited communication between the parent and child, meaning a child can start school with little to no communication skills. Since the closure of almost all deaf schools, deaf children now have to attend mainstream school and shockingly over 78% of deaf children attend mainstream school with no specialised support in place. This is heavily reflected in their grades as well as their mental health and well being. (*The Silent Child Movie*)

The trauma experienced by deaf children who are rejected by family can be intense and long-lasting. It can gradually lead to emotional distress, lower self-esteem, feelings of isolation and a diminished sense of identity. They may struggle with issues of communication barrier, due to the family's inability or unwillingness to embrace and celebrate the child's identity and diverse needs. The emotional upheaval of deaf children who are forced to follow oralism is often overlooked in the process of prioritising spoken language at the expense of sign language and cultural connection. In a society designed for people who hear, humankind continues to leave diverse modes of communication and understanding unnoticed. *The Silent Child* serves as a critique of the hearing world's cultural assumptions and inadequacies in supporting Deaf children, advocating for better communication methods and understanding. Once admitted to the mainstream school, the pressure to conform to oral communication creates a sense of inadequacy in the child and hinders her ability to fully express herself and form meaningful relationships. This lack of acceptance can seriously affect deaf children's emotional development, social skills, and overall well-being, making it crucial for families to provide support, understanding, and love to help them thrive. The interpretation that frames the mind to believe that deafness is a learning disability still modifies the general opinion of the public in an adverse manner and reflects a perspective that detracts from progress.

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# Cognitive Dissonance and Marital Disharmony: A critique on the mental conflict in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

P. SAROJINI

**Abstract**

Earthly marriages are a celebration of unions formed in paradise. It is the spiritual union of two souls that comprises the mental and physical planes. It accomplishes human relationships by providing friendship, security, and a strong sense of faith. The institution of marriage benefits society as a whole because it is the cornerstone of the family, which is the essential unit that forms the society. Lack of love, understanding, mutual respect, trust, commitment and togetherness causes a huge tremor in the foundation of modern marriages. This leads to degeneration of the marital spirit. One's life can terminate as a result of marital discord, which is extremely harmful. The couple in a loveless marriages experience disharmony, and the people around them also have to undergo severe mental sufferings. The paper emphasizes the theme on marital disharmony and the root cause of dissonance in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. It delineates the marital life of Clara, the Clairvoyant and her volatile husband Esteban with the aid of cognitive dissonance theory.

**Keywords:** Marital Dissonance, Disharmony, Human relationship, Mutual respect, Cognitive dissonance.

Isabel Allende is one of the most distinguished voices of prominent Latin American literature. Events in her novel serve as a symbolic depiction of both Allende's life experiences and the historical background of her country. Karen Castelluci Cox in her book on Isabel Allende states, "Isabel Allende's literature resonates with her contemporary readership because she addresses universal themes while inventing unique and memorable characters" (26). She narrates the story using her imaginative emotions. Her novels have dealt with subjects like marriage, sex, social conventions, moral values and everything else that could provoke strong feelings of resentment and fury towards the patriarchy. The male and female hemispheres make up the two halves of the globe. The idea that women should live up to the standards that men are not held to is something that Allende finds offensive. This statement is evident in the following lines: "'What I felt was rebellious anger towards everything, against machismo, against the fact that my husband had advantages and rights that I simply did not have,' she later recalled" (Axelrod- Contrada 18). The equality among two sexes serves as the central theme of her writings.

*The House of the Spirits* is a multigenerational family saga which emphasises on three generations of Trueba women. The main themes of the paper are significance of marriage and the underlying causes of disharmony in marital life. Understanding between one another is a crucial component in a husband and wife relationship. A couple experiencing disharmony is known as marital dissonance. The researcher has used the Cognitive dissonance theory to give an insight to the readers on the marital life of Esteban Trueba and his wife Clara. Cognitive Dissonance Theory was proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957. In social psychology, it has been one of the most important theories. "It has generated hundreds and hundreds of studies, from which much has been learned about the determinants of attitudes and beliefs, the internalization of values, the consequences of decisions, the effects of disagreement among persons, and other important psychological process" (Harmon-Jones and Mills 3).

Cognitive dissonance means the discomfort experienced by the mind when two opposing views, values, or attitudes are held. There is a contradiction because people want consistency in their views and attitudes, which make them, feel uncomfortable or uneasy. In this modern world, the classic theory is still applicable to many relationships. This is evident through the following words: "Rather than being relevant to a single topic, the theory is relevant to many different topics" (Harmon-Jones and Mills 5). In marital relationships, this psychological condition appears frequently.

For instance, a person may feel that their wife or husband is caring and loving, but they may also feel that they aren't receiving enough attention or are not happy in their relationship. It is crucial to remember that cognitive dissonance is not inherently bad. People may be inspired to reconcile their opposing views or attitudes, which can result in personal growth and development. A more contented and peaceful existence may arise from this, causing a habit or a change in perspective. Couples can prevent the discomfort in their relationship and strengthen their bond by disclosing opposing ideas and cooperating to find common ground. An open and honest communication among each other serves as a strategy to avoid cognitive dissonance in marital life.

In *The House of the Spirits,* the marriage life of Esteban and Clara is a miserable one. Severo del Valle and Nivea's youngest daughter, Clara, is gifted with extraordinary psychic and prophecy skills. Rosa, Clara's gorgeous eldest sister, is betrothed to Esteban Trueba, a young man from an old upper class family. His quest for riches has led him to travel north to the mines. After Clara prophesies that Severo would run for Congress, Rosa is killed by a bottle of poisoned brandy intended for him. Throughout the following nine years, Clara stays mute and roams aimlessly. When Clara speaks again, she announces her upcoming marriage to his sister's former fiancé Esteban. She actually realises that her marriage will be devoid of love before she ever accepts the proposal. This is obvious through the following words "The character of Clara is closely linked to the idea of determinism, which holds that all occurrences are determined by preceding events or natural laws rather than by free will. She enters into an unhappy marriage because she sees it as her destiny" (Axelrod- Contrada 18). In the novel Clara can be associated with the Cognitive dissonance theory. It is not her inability that

makes her mute, but rather a willingness on her part. Her elder sister, Rosa's death has caused her considerable discomfort so; she remains silent for the past nine years. In the case of her marriage also she makes herself comfortable with an uncomfortable life.

After a span of two months, Esteban travels from Tres Marias to request Clara's hand in marriage from her father. After they are married, he loves her almost to the point of insanity, while she feels that human connection is superfluous and distracting. Esteban's greatest desire is to have her completely, but she is a woman from another world who eludes him throughout his life. Clara gets pregnant when they live in a spacious home in the Capital. While Clara gives birth to a girl named Blanca, Esteban was expecting a male. Esteban's sister Ferula gives the mother and kid her envious and compulsive attention. Following the marriage, Esteban underwent significant transformation and now appears revitalised. "Everyone could appreciate that Esteban has stopped going to the Red Lantern. His nights on the town, his cock fights, his gambling, his violent tantrums, and above all his bad habit of tumbling girls in the wheat fields were a thing of the past" (Allende 127). Clara has also undergone a change, appearing to have overcome her tendency to communicate with ghosts and use paranormal methods to move furniture.

Ferula is in charge of Blanca, the city employees, and household chores. Before the men return from the fields at dusk, Ferula collects all the women and children of the peasantry to recite the rosary. When she is completed, Clara stands in front of the assembly and yells the same catchphrases that her mother had used to chain herself to the Capital gates. This attitude of Clara infuriates Esteban. This is the first conflict between the couple and it initiates discomfort and disharmony in their marital life. This is obvious from the following lines:

> Esteban soon found out about the second half of their prayer meetings and enraged. It was the first time he had ever been angry with Clara and the first time she saw him have one of his famous tantrums. He shouted like a madman, pacing up and down the living room and slamming his fist against the furniture, arguing that if Clara intended to follow in her mother's footsteps she was going to come face to face with a real man, who would pull her pants down and give her a good spanking so she'd get it out of her damned head to go around haranguing people, and that he categorically forbade her to go to prayer meetings or any other kind and that he wasn't some ninny whose wife could go around making a fool of him. (Allende 129)

Clara lets him beat on the furniture and scream until he is completely worn out. Then, still not paying attention, she asks him whether he can make his ears wiggle. Here Esteban and Clara lose peace and harmony due to lack of communication and mutual understanding. If they would have the skills of communication and understanding, their relationship might have been strengthened.

Clara experiences another period of silence after becoming pregnant for the second time. This time Esteban believes that his wife's silence is not a sign of mental illness but rather her final resort. With a Buddhist-like apathy to everything around her, Clara moves through the house like a silent, overweight shadow. She acts as though her spouse is a piece of furniture

and does not even look at him. She acts as though she is on the moon and has not heard him when he speaks to her. Esteban is tense because of the crazy attitude of his wife and the lazy, empty days he has spent in the city. Despite being able to keep himself occupied, he frequently loses his temper, which leaves him feeling uneasy and bored. Despite the fact that the house greatly needs him, he wishes to return to the country.

Clara has unexpectedly emerged from her Brahmanic sanctuary the day before her birth and has resumed her speech. She orders a cup of chocolate and then asks to go for a walk with her husband. Everything in the house is happy, and Esteban leaves the house to purchase her a diamond brooch from the Jewish jewellers on the street. Despite her overwhelming gratitude and admiration for it, Clara never wears it. It is possible that, similar to nearly all the other diamonds, she locks it away in an unexpected location and forgets about it afterwards. In order to examine Clara, Dr. Cuevas comes to the residence. After escorting her to her room, he tells Ferula and Esteban that although she appears to have overcome her mental health crisis, they should prepare for a challenging delivery due to the size of the child. Clara enters the sitting room at that precise moment. She must have heard the last words he said. "'Everything will turn out fine,' she said. 'There is no need for you to worry'" (Allende 138). Esteban makes a joke, speculating that the child might be a male and might take his name.

The couple's disagreement over naming their children is the subject of their subsequent argument. This time, Clara says, she will give birth to twins, whom she names Jaime and Nicolas, respectively. Esteban becomes enraged and demands that at least one of them—like his father and himself—be given the name Esteban, but Clara explains that using the same name twice will lead to confusion in her life-documentary diaries. He becomes quite irritated by Clara's explanation. He therefore breaks a porcelain jar, the last heritage from his great-grandfather's illustrious past, but Clara seems unmoved. He closes the door behind him and walks out. With a deep sense of revenge, he visits the most well-known brothel in the city. He loses his temper and is Tempted to visit a whore a whore because of his frustration with Clara. Clara, who is put under the care of Ferula and the servant Nana, gives birth to twins, Jaime and Nicolas.

Esteban starts to feel uneasy in his own house. His wife has become more odd, aloof, and unapproachable. Even with gifts, there is no way for him to get to her. He has developed an obsession out of his growing love for her over time. Clara should only think about him, and he could not stand for her to have a life apart from him. He wants her to tell him everything and to possess everything that he has not physically given to her. Clara appears uninterested in him, despite his need for her total dependence. Clara is not interested in domestic affairs. She moves from room to room, never even slightly astonished to discover everything in its proper place. She is unconcerned with what occurs in the house. Even though she cannot remember the names of her own children or the servants, she always manages to be there in the same joyful and kind way.

Even on the longest and most intense evenings, Esteban can never fully sate the dreadful need he has for Clara. He knows that the woman who is supposed to be sleeping by his side is not actually there, even in his fantasies. He could never approach her because she is in some unknown, other dimension. Sometimes he would become angry, shake her violently, and yell the worst charges he could come up with. Afterward, he would end up crying in her lap and pleading with her forgiving him for his brutality. Beyond his anger and pride, Esteban's overblown love for Clara is unquestionably the strongest feeling in his life. He would still be talking about it with the same trembling and urgency fifty years later. He will call her name in his old man's bed until the day he dies.

Another crucial discord which deteriorates the couple's marital life is their daughter Blanca's love relationship with Pedro. Pedro Tercero Garcia, the foreman's son and Blanca have been pals since they were young. Pedro, a well-known folksinger and significant revolutionary, has grown to be Blanca's lifelong love. In all of Tres Marias, he is the only person who has the courage to challenge the patron. The summers spent at Tres Marias strengthen Blanca's affection for Pedro Tercero, who, in spite of constant beatings from Esteban and his father for his impertinence has emerged as a voice for change on the hacienda. The two teenagers develop a covert romantic relationship and meet secretly at night for three years. The impoverished Count Jean de Satigny, a dapper Frenchman hoping to wed a wealthy lady, settles up with the Trueba family.

The twenty-four-year-old Blanca enrages her father with her stubbornness by turning down the Count's proposal of marriage. As he keeps his eye on Blanca, the Count finds out about her regular trysts with Pedro by the river and proceeds to pursue her further. Without delay, he alerts her father, who thrashes her with fury and then hits Clara for bringing up that "'Pedro Tercero Garcia hasn't done a thing you haven't done yourself', Clara said when she could interrupt him. 'You also slept with unmarried women not of your own class. The only difference is that he did it for love. And so did Blanca'" (Allende 233). Esteban Trueba looks at her with a stunned expression. He feels as though she is making fun of him for a brief moment, but then a wave of blood shoots straight to his head. She gets knocked against the wall by his outburst, which consists of striking her in the face. Silently, Clara drops to the ground. Seemingly waking from a daze, Esteban kneels at her side, cries, and begs her pardon while attempting to justify addressing her by all the unique names he has used. He carries her into his arms, puts her on an armchair with tenderness, moistens a handkerchief to place on her forehead, and attempts to get her to sip on some water.

Clara finally opens her eyes. Her nose is dripping with blood. She spits out numerous teeth that fall to the ground and a thread of bloody saliva runs down her neck and chin as she opens her mouth. She decides not to talk to him ever again, gives up using her married name and takes off the delicate gold wedding band he had put on her twenty years back. Karen Castelluci Cox in her book on Isabel Allende interprets as follows: "Though her revolt is a small one, it symbolizes a move to reject the male violence that menaces these women" (21). Clara and Blanca have returned to the Capital after departing Tres Marias two days earlier.

Esteban is left feeling as though something in his life has been permanently ruined. He is also ashamed and outraged. In the capital, Blanca's expanding tummy indicates that she is pregnant, while Clara revives her spiritualist circles.

> Clara, for instance, retreats into her spirit world to avoid being dominated by her patriarchal husband. Allende confirms that magic can help people cope with an otherwise hopeless situation, "When we live with all forms of violence and misery, we have to look for explanations and hope in supernatural," she explains. (Axelrod-Contrada 64).

When Esteban learns that Blanca is pregnant, he makes Count Satigny marry his daughter. He gives the Frenchman an explanation of the various provisions of the marriage contract, which significantly allays his fears. Returning to the city, Esteban Trueba now has a spouse for his deflowered daughter and a father for the young bastard. He declares, his anger catching fire, that he does not want to see Blanca, who must stay imprisoned until her wedding day. Clara does not show up to welcome him. Even when he tries to shatter his silver cane, she remains in her room and does not open her door. The effect is that the house appears to be a tangle of disputes and confusion.

Clara ignores the spouse and does not communicate with him, continuing on with her life. Being a virtual prisoner of Esteban, Count Jean de Satigny has stayed in one of the many guest rooms without ever seeing Blanca and has no idea how he became involved in this tragedy. Esteban Trueba has not seen his daughter since the night of the beating, until the day he calls her to take her to the dressmaker so she can try on her wedding gown. The following are Blanca's arguments with Esteban when she refuses to marry the Count:

> 'I'm not getting married, Papa,' she said. 'Be quite!' he roared. 'You're getting married. I don't want any bastards in the family, do you hear me?' 'I thought we already had several,' Blanca replied. 'Don't talk back to me! I want you to know that Pedro Tercero Garcia is dead. I killed him with my own hands, so you might as well forget about him and try to be a good wife to the man who's going to lead you to the altar'. (Allende 248)

Blanca's union with the French Count is likewise doomed to collapse. The bishop has approved the wedding, which took place in the cathedral. Clara makes the decision not to go to the celebration since she has always opposed the notion of marrying Blanca off without her will. Esteban forces her to go to the celebration in some way. Despite her reluctance, she manages to smile at the guests because she loves her daughter.

The marriage between Blanca and Jean de Satigny is never consummated. Jean admits to Blanca on their wedding night that he is not particularly interested in being married. They live their lives as friends, and Blanca feels quite relieved. Following their honeymoon, they relocate to the countries far north, where they take up residence in an old, deserted villa. She writes to her mother and speaks to her unborn child during her free time. She keeps Jean's odd behaviours from her mother a secret, including his opium smoking, cocaine snorting, hiring of incredibly unfit Indians to work as domestic help, and establishment of a lavish photo studio that Blanca is never permitted to enter. The only aspect of this that bothers Blanca is

his insistence on keeping their financial situation a secret, but even so, she decides to ignore it.

Jean soon starts a new business venture, smuggling Indian mummies into the home through illicit means. Blanca is convinced that the mummies are haunting the house, even though her mother has assured her that the dead are considerably less dangerous than the living. She is dubious when she tells Jean about this because of his aggressive denial of any such things. Once everyone has left the house, Blanca breaks inside the studio. She is shocked to learn that Jean and the Indians he works with are the source of the nightly sounds—grotesque amorous escapades they capture on camera—rather than mummies. Blanca has made the decision to go to her mother's house in order to give birth to her daughter Alba because she does not want her child to be exposed to these kinds of things. Karen Castelluci Cox in her book on Isabel Allende states, Blanca's boldness is proved by the following lines: "Allende argues, 'All the women in [*The House of the spirits*] are feminists in their fashion; that is, they ask to be free and complete human beings, to be able to fulfil themselves, not to be dependent on men" (21).

At the age of seven, Alba experiences Clara's death. Alba has learned from Clara that "'Just as then we come into the world, when we die we are afraid of the unknown. But the fear is something from within us that has nothing to do with reality. Dying is like being born: just a change,' Clara had said" (Allende 332). Clara thinks Alba would be at ease since, in her case, death would not be a separation but rather a means of closer unity—something Alba has grasped admirably. Since Clara's passing, Esteban has even gone so far as to act insane. Lying side by side, he uses his last hours to tell her everything he was unable to say earlier. He believes that she has accomplished her purpose in life and has departed to another realm where her spirit, at last freed from the weight of earthly possessions, may rest more comfortably. In his opinion, she still exudes beauty even after passing away. Their marital discord remains unaltered despite the unavoidable circumstance of her death.

## Conclusion

The women in the present scenario should adore the qualities of Clara like remaining silent, cool and creating another world inside their minds. If they obtain these qualities they can avoid disharmony and dissonance with their partners. On the other hand Esteban is always inconsistent in his behaviours which cause discord between himself and Clara. This attitude of Esteban makes Clara go far away from him. So men should be consistent in their attitude and give equal importance to their better halves. The Couple and the people can benefit from cognitive dissonance by using it to better understand how their values, beliefs, and desires connect to their interactions and behaviours. This journey frequently strengthens the bond between the couple and might be enlightened. To sum up, in a marital relationship, maintaining one's sense of self as well as their partner's requirements can bring harmony and comfort to lead a successful married life.

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# Introducing Menolit Studies: A New Theoretical Framework for Analysing Menopause in Literature

Y.MERCY FAMILA



**Abstract**

Menopause is a significant transition in women's lives but this has been largely overlooked in literary and cultural studies. Though there is an evolving body of research on women's health and aging, the specific focus on menopause as a literary and cultural phenomenon remains under explored. To address this gap, this article proposes a new theoretical framework named, "Menolit Studies". This new field of study by examining menopausal narratives in literature, aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of women's experiences, societal attitudes, and cultural representations of menopause. By bridging the gap between literature and women's health, this framework offers new insights into the female experience and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of menopause in contemporary society.

## The Emergence of Menolit Studies

Women have been significantly undergoing physical and psychological changes throughout their life but no serious study is being done on women in the transitional stage. To be specific, menopause marks a pivotal phase in a woman's life, signalling the end of her reproductive years and bringing with it a range of physical, emotional, and psychological changes. Despite its significance, menopause has been notably absent from mainstream academic and cultural discussions. This omission reflects broader societal tendencies to marginalize and overlook the experiences of older women. To address this critical gap, Menolit Studies emerges as a novel research area that seeks to explore and elevate the understanding of menopause through a multidisciplinary lens.

The feminist movement of the late 20th century played a crucial role in bringing women's issues to the forefront of academic and cultural discourse. As feminist scholars began to explore the complexities of women's lives, it became increasingly apparent that menopause, as a significant life stage for women, had been largely overlooked.

Simultaneously, there has been a growing interest in the intersection of literature and medicine, or the medical humanities. This field has fostered a dialogue between the arts and sciences, prompting scholars to examine how health and illness are represented in cultural texts. Menopause, as a condition with both physical and psychological dimensions, has become a fertile ground for this kind of interdisciplinary inquiry. Furthermore, the aging population

and the increasing visibility of older women in society have contributed to the emergence of menolit studies. As women live longer and active, there is a greater need to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with aging. Menopause, as a marker of this transition, has gained prominence as a subject worthy of scholarly attention.

Also the development of specific theoretical frameworks, such as post-feminism, queer theory, and disability studies, has provided new lenses through which the menopausal experience can be examined. These theoretical perspectives challenge traditional notions of womanhood and aging, opening up a new arena for understanding menopause in literature.

**Potential Research Directions**

Menolit Studies offers a wide range of potential research directions. One area of focus could be the exploration of menopausal narratives in different cultural contexts. By comparing and contrasting representations of menopause across various cultures, researchers can identify both universal and culturally specific themes. Additionally, Menolit Studies can examine how menopause is portrayed in different genres of literature, such as novels, poetry, and drama. This comparative analysis can reveal how different literary forms shape the representation of menopausal experiences.

Another promising research direction involves investigating the relationship between menopause and other social and cultural factors, such as class, race, and sexuality. By exploring how these intersecting identities shape menopausal narratives, researchers can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences. Furthermore, Menolit Studies can examine the ways in which menopause is represented in relation to other life stages, such as motherhood and old age. This approach can illuminate the complex and evolving nature of women's lives. Key areas of focus for menolit studies include:

**1. Literary Analysis**

Menolit Studies can analyze texts to see how menopause is shown in different literary genres, including novels, poetry and plays. Literature is a space where silence, stigma, aging and transformation are expressed in ways that medical talk cannot capture. Scholars can look at character development, narrative strategies and the use of symbolism and explore characters and stories that indirectly address aging and life transitions. They can also explore how menopause is represented, supressed, metaphorized and reimagined. Simon de Beauvior in her work *Second Sex* critiques how biological processes are used to confine women to reductive identities. Media portrayals often stereotype menopausal women as irritable, unattractive, less productive etc. In media studies, the field explores portrayals of menopause in films, television, and digital media, analyzing both the presence and absence of menopause-related narratives and their impact on public perceptions and attitudes. Because media does not simply reflect reality, it actively constructs social reality.

## 2. Cultural and Sociological Studies

Cultural and sociological studies examine how menopausal transition is interpreted, studied, understood, and experienced within certain cultural, historical, and social contexts. These approaches help understand menopause as a constructed phase of life that is shaped by belief systems, language, power relations and gender norms. The meaning of menopause varies significantly across societies showing that culture influences not only perception but also lived experiences. Researchers can study how different cultures perceive and experience menopause, including studies on rituals, myths and societal attitudes toward menopausal women. They can also look at the stigma and taboo often associated with menopause and how it affects women's self-perception and social interactions. This study also analyzes cultural rituals and traditions related to menopause, exploring how various cultures celebrate or manage this transition and the implications for women's identities and roles within their communities. Study the experiences of menopausal women in professional settings, including workplace policies, support systems, and societal perceptions. The recent movements advocating "menopausal-friendly-workplaces" shows how personal bodily experiences become sites of policy and institutional reform.

## 3. Historical Perspectives

Studying menopause from a historical perspective involves exploring how perceptions, attitudes, and treatments of menopause have evolved over time. This can include examining historical texts, medical records, personal narratives, and cultural artefacts to understand how menopause was viewed and managed in different eras and societies. This can reveal shifts in attitudes towards aging women and the social roles of menopausal women across different time periods. For example, in some cultures, menopausal women might have been revered as wise and experienced elders, while in others, they may have faced marginalization and stigma. In the recent times menopause is framed within discourses of healthy ageing, empowerment and life course development.

## 4. Medical Humanities

Medical humanities bring together literature, history, philosophy, gender studies, and culture studies to investigate how illness and bodily transitions are interpreted, experienced and represented. Medical humanities challenge the reductionist medical view that defines menopause as an estrogen deficiency or ovarian failure. Rather it tells women to narrate their experiences and how medical language defines their bodies also how cultural metaphors influence perception**.** French physician Charles-Pierre-Louis de Gardanne coined the term menopause in 1821, marking the beginning of formal medical categorization. However medical humanities researchers argue that naming also creates authority and power, once defined medically menopause becomes a subject to clinical surveillance or medical intervention. The humanities lens question who benefits from such definitions and whose voices are marginalized. Researchers collaborate with medical professionals to study the physical, psychological, and

emotional aspects of menopause, linking them with literary and cultural studies. Explore how women's experiences of menopause are narrated in medical case studies, patient narratives, and autobiographies. This holistic approach involves reviewing medical literature, integrating patient narratives, and providing a comprehensive view of the health impacts of menopause.

**5. Gender and Queer Studies**

Gender and queer studies perceive menopause as not a simple biological endpoint of reproduction but a socially constructed, politically charged, and heteronormatively framed life transition. These fields rather than asking what menopause does to the body, ask how power structures define whose body counts, whose experiences are recognized, and how reproductive capacities are linked to femininity and social value. Judith Butler in her work Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, argues that gender is not innate or natural essence, rather, it is performatively constructed through repeated social acts. Furthermore, scholars can explore how menopause intersects with gender identity, particularly in non-binary and transgender individuals. Investigate how menopause is experienced and represented within LGBTQ+ communities. Gender and queer studies insist that no single menopausal narrative can represent all bodies.

**6. Psychological Studies**

From the psychological perspective menopause is understood both as a biological transition and a crucial psychosocial life event. Scholars can study the psychological effects of menopause, including issues related to mental health, self-esteem, and emotional well-being. Research how women cope with the changes brought by menopause, focusing on resilience and support systems. In cultures where menopause is framed positively women experience fewer psychological symptoms, suggesting that meaning-making shapes emotional experiences.

By exploring these avenues, Menolit Studies can develop into a rich and multifaceted field that addresses the complexities of menopause from various scholarly perspectives. As research in this area continues to grow, it is essential to prioritize the voices of menopausal women and to work towards creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for all. Additionally, this field can inform the development of policies and programs that support women's health and well-being during and after menopause. It is to be noted that the establishment of Menolit Studies as a theoretical framework is a crucial step towards acknowledging and valuing the experiences of menopausal women in literature and culture. This field not only provides a space for critical engagement and scholarly inquiry but also serves as a platform for advocacy and social change. By bringing menopause into the spotlight, Menolit Studies challenges the silence and stigma that have long surrounded this natural transition, promoting a more informed, empathetic, and inclusive understanding of menopause and its significance in women's lives.

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# Veil of Control: Defiance, Surveillance, and Feminist Resistance in Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*

P.ANUSOOYA



**Abstract**

Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* presents a compelling dystopian vision of a patriarchal society where reproductive control and state surveillance define the lives of women. Set in a future South West Asia, the novel explores themes of gender oppression, autonomy, and resistance against a totalitarian regime. Through the lens of feminist literary criticism, this paper examines how Shah critiques systemic patriarchal structures while portraying the resilience and agency of women in oppressive environments. The novel's use of technology as a tool of control, the significance of female solidarity, and the symbolic representation of sleep and defiance further deepen its impact. By drawing parallels to contemporary feminist discourse and dystopian literature, *Before She Sleeps* emerges as a powerful narrative that not only warns against gender-based subjugation but also envisions a path toward liberation through collective resistance. This study also highlights the novel's relevance within postcolonial feminist frameworks, emphasizing its critique of both cultural and political hegemonies in the Global South.

**Keywords:** Dystopian fiction, feminist literary criticism, gender oppression, resistance, surveillance, postcolonial feminism, female agency.

## Introduction

Bina Shah's dystopian novel *Before She Sleeps* presents a harrowing vision of a patriarchal society dominated by strict reproductive controls and state surveillance. Set in South West Asia, the narrative explores themes of gender oppression, resistance, and the psychological toll of living in a totalitarian regime. This analysis examines the novel through the lens of feminist literary criticism, focusing on its portrayal of gender dynamics, agency, and the subversion of patriarchal authority. Additionally, it explores the novel's engagement with postcolonial feminist discourse, the psychological dimensions of oppression, and its critique of contemporary global gender struggles.

## Dystopia and Gender Oppression

Shah's *Before She Sleeps* draws from classic dystopian literature, particularly Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* in its portrayal of gender oppression and state control. Like Atwood's Republic of Gilead, the Panah enforces rigid reproductive mandates, stripping women of autonomy and reducing them to tools of biological and social reproduction. This

reflects contemporary feminist concerns over bodily autonomy, systemic oppression, and the ways in which patriarchal structures manipulate reproductive rights to sustain male dominance (Atwood 217). As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, women's bodies have historically been perceived as instruments of reproduction rather than as autonomous entities (Beauvoir 272). Shah's novel situates these anxieties within a South Asian context, engaging with feminist and postcolonial critiques of gender-based subjugation.

Shah's depiction of gender oppression is deeply rooted in South Asian socio-political realities. By setting her dystopian world in South West Asia, she draws attention to ongoing struggles against gender-based violence, honor killings, and state-sanctioned restrictions on women's autonomy. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, feminist discourse must acknowledge the intersectionality of oppression, particularly in postcolonial contexts where race, class, and gender intersect in unique ways (Mohanty 51). The reproductive restrictions imposed by the Panah mirror real-world policies in various nations that seek to control women's bodies through legislation, cultural expectations, and systemic discrimination. For instance, Amartya Sen notes that gender bias in South Asia manifests in issues such as sex-selective abortions, forced marriages, and restrictive laws governing reproductive rights (Sen 204). Shah's novel serves as a fictional extrapolation of these realities, imagining a future in which such controls are taken to their extreme.

**Female Agency and Resistance**

Despite the oppressive environment, Shah's female characters exhibit resilience and defiance. The protagonist, Sabine, along with other women who form an underground resistance, challenges the imposed restrictions. Unlike traditional dystopian heroines who often rely on male figures for liberation, Sabine's resistance is rooted in female solidarity. This aspect aligns with the tenets of intersectional feminism, which recognizes the necessity of collective struggle against oppressive systems. According to bell hooks, feminist movements that emphasize community and solidarity are more effective in dismantling patriarchal oppression than those that prioritize individual resistance (hooks 24). Shah's portrayal of Sabine and her allies exemplifies this ethos, emphasizing that survival itself is an act of rebellion.

The underground collective of women who refuse to participate in the state's reproductive mandates represents an alternative form of power. These women reclaim control over their bodies and identities, refusing to conform to the roles imposed upon them. Shah's depiction of these women resonates with Audre Lorde's assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"—in other words, genuine resistance must arise from alternative structures, rather than within the confines of the existing system (Lorde 110). The sisterhood among the rebels in *Before She Sleeps* reflects the solidarity seen in real-world feminist movements, such as the Gulabi Gang in India, a collective of women fighting against gender-based violence and systemic oppression (Kumar 132). Their existence within the dystopian world suggests that resistance is always possible, even under the most restrictive conditions.

Moreover, Shah challenges conventional narratives of heroism by focusing on survival as a form of defiance. In dystopian literature, acts of rebellion are often dramatic and overt, but Shah emphasizes the quiet strength of women who endure, adapt, and resist in ways that may not always be visible. As Judith Butler argues, subversion of power does not always take the form of direct opposition; rather, it can be embedded in everyday acts of defiance that undermine hegemonic structures (Butler 93). By centering on these subtle forms of resistance, Shah expands the definition of rebellion beyond grand acts of defiance to include endurance, resilience, and the courage to exist outside of patriarchal expectations.

**The Role of Technology in Control and Surveillance**

The Panah employs technology as a means of maintaining control over women, using biometric tracking and constant monitoring to ensure compliance. Shah's critique of such technological authoritarianism resonates with contemporary concerns about digital surveillance, data privacy, and the weaponization of technology against marginalized groups.

The use of surveillance technology in *Before She Sleeps* reflects growing anxieties about state control in the modern world. From government surveillance programs to corporate data collection, the novel draws attention to how technology can be wielded as a tool of oppression. Women's bodies are tracked, monitored, and policed, reinforcing their status as commodities rather than autonomous individuals. This theme connects to contemporary feminist critiques of digital surveillance, particularly in relation to reproductive rights and the policing of women's health choices.

Furthermore, the novel raises questions about consent and autonomy in the digital age. In a world where personal data can be used to enforce compliance and restrict freedoms, Shah's dystopia serves as a warning about the potential dangers of unchecked technological power. The Panah's surveillance system mirrors real-world instances of digital oppression, from China's social credit system to restrictions on internet access in authoritarian regimes. By incorporating these elements, Shah extends her feminist critique beyond gender politics to encompass broader discussions on state power and individual freedom.

**Symbolism and Narrative Technique:**

Shah employs powerful symbolism throughout the novel to underscore its themes. The act of sleep, for instance, represents both vulnerability and defiance. The title itself, *Before She Sleeps*, suggests an interstitial space where agency and resistance can still exist before ultimate submission to the system. Sleep functions as both a physical necessity and a symbolic act that reflects the characters' struggle against an oppressive regime. In dystopian literature, sleep often embodies either a loss of agency or a moment of respite from societal constraints, and Shah utilizes this motif to highlight the precarious nature of resistance within a surveillance state (Booker 45).

The motif of sleep operates on multiple levels. On the one hand, it represents a moment of rest and escape from the oppressive realities of the Panah. As Sabine and other women in

the resistance seek temporary refuge in secret spaces, sleep offers them a semblance of control over their own bodies, however brief (Shah 89). On the other hand, it symbolizes the fragility of resistance, as those who rebel must constantly navigate the dangers of being discovered. Scholars of feminist dystopian fiction argue that such motifs reinforce the theme of female autonomy being undermined by patriarchal power structures (Moylan and Baccolini 132). In Shah's narrative, sleep becomes both a necessity and a liability, a metaphor for the precarious existence of those who dare to challenge authority. This dual function aligns with Margaret Atwood's use of sleep in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where rest is both a respite from trauma and a state in which the protagonist is most vulnerable to control (Atwood 145).

Shah's narrative technique also plays a crucial role in shaping the reader's understanding of oppression and resistance. By alternating perspectives between different female characters, she provides a multi-dimensional view of the dystopian society. This polyphonic approach, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, enables a deeper exploration of systemic control by presenting the subjective experiences of multiple oppressed individuals (Bakhtin 324). Through Sabine, we see the psychological strain of constant surveillance; through other women in the underground resistance, we witness varying degrees of compliance, resilience, and fear. Scholars note that this technique is essential in feminist dystopian literature, as it dismantles the singular authoritative narrative often imposed by patriarchal regimes (Hutcheon 78).

Furthermore, Shah's use of shifting perspectives aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques of authoritarianism. Her representation of women's resistance in *Before She Sleeps* can be read in conversation with the works of Gayatri Spivak, who argues that subaltern women often resist in ways that are not immediately visible to dominant power structures (Spivak 92). By framing resistance within acts as subtle as sleep, Shah illustrates that survival itself becomes a form of defiance. The novel thereby contributes to broader feminist discussions on bodily autonomy, surveillance, and the ways in which gendered oppression is maintained through technological and ideological control.

Shah's symbolic use of sleep and her narrative structure deepen the novel's engagement with themes of gender oppression and resistance. By drawing on dystopian traditions and feminist discourse, *Before She Sleeps* offers a nuanced exploration of the psychological and emotional toll of surveillance while also foregrounding the quiet but persistent acts of defiance by women.

**Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives:**

In addition to its feminist themes, *Before She Sleeps* engages with postcolonial discourse by critiquing how colonial histories shape contemporary gender oppression. Shah's South West Asian setting reflects the lingering impact of colonial rule, including the ways in which patriarchal structures have been reinforced through cultural, religious, and political institutions. As Leela Gandhi argues, postcolonial societies often internalize colonial ideologies, leading to the perpetuation of oppressive structures long after formal independence (Gandhi 67). In Shah's dystopian world, the Panah's rigid control over women's bodies can be seen as a

reflection of this colonial legacy, where patriarchal power is not only preserved but intensified under the guise of state security and national stability.

Postcolonial feminist scholars argue that gender oppression in formerly colonized nations cannot be understood in isolation from their colonial pasts (Mohanty 55). Shah's novel illustrates how the control of women's bodies has historically been tied to national identity, colonial rule, and post-independence state-building efforts. The Panah's strict reproductive mandates echo historical instances where women's roles were dictated by the needs of the state, whether through colonial policies that sought to control native populations or postcolonial governments that reinforced patriarchal norms under the guise of nationalism (Spivak 92). As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously posits, women in postcolonial societies often find themselves positioned as symbols of cultural purity, tasked with preserving national identity even as they are denied agency over their own bodies (Spivak 100). Shah's depiction of the Panah's rigid reproductive policies aligns with this critique, demonstrating how women become the battleground on which national ideologies are contested and enforced.

By situating her dystopian critique within a postcolonial framework, Shah challenges Western feminist perspectives that often universalize women's experiences. Postcolonial feminism contends that mainstream feminist discourse, particularly in Western contexts, tends to overlook the specific socio-political histories that shape women's oppression in formerly colonized nations (Mohanty 63). Shah's novel highlights the unique ways in which South Asian women navigate oppression, emphasizing the importance of culturally specific feminist struggles. This aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's assertion that a homogenized view of female subjugation fails to account for the intersections of colonial history, class, and religion in shaping gendered experiences (Mohanty 70). Through *Before She Sleeps*, Shah critiques both patriarchal oppression and the limitations of Western feminist frameworks, advocating for a more nuanced, intersectional understanding of women's struggles in postcolonial contexts.

## Conclusion

Bina Shah's Before She Sleeps serves as a poignant critique of patriarchal control, state surveillance, and the resilience of women in oppressive environments. Through its intricate dystopian world, the novel highlights the perils of extreme gender discrimination while celebrating the power of female solidarity in resisting systemic subjugation. By weaving together feminist resistance, technological critique, and postcolonial discourse, Shah not only exposes the dangers of authoritarian control over women's bodies but also provides a compelling meditation on agency and defiance.

Furthermore, Before She Sleeps challenges universalist feminist frameworks by emphasizing the specific socio-political and cultural realities that shape oppression in South West Asia. The novel's engagement with postcolonial feminism critiques the lingering effects of colonial histories on contemporary gender struggles, aligning with scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Its exploration of surveillance, reproductive control,

and intersectional resistance offers valuable insights into the ways in which gender, politics, and technology intersect in dystopian literature.

Future scholarship could further investigate the novel's relevance within postcolonial feminist discourse, particularly in comparison with other South Asian dystopian narratives. A comparative study with works such as Prayaag Akbar's Leila or Samit Basu's Chosen Spirits could reveal broader patterns in how contemporary literature navigates themes of gender oppression, state control, and resistance. Additionally, an analysis of Shah's novel in relation to global feminist movements and the politics of surveillance capitalism would enrich ongoing discussions on power, agency, and resistance in the twenty-first century.

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# Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* as a Postcolonial Metanarrative: Nigerian Fictional Interface as a Third Space of Enunciation



SUJARANI MATHEW

**Abstract**

Metanarratives in postmodern parlance attempts to explain power structures according to certain totalizing regimes of thought through a certain narrative schema. In postcolonial literatures, the native or the new subject takes on a stand of their own in order to create new modes of thought through their lived experience. *Double Yoke*, by the Nigerian woman writer Buchi Emecheta, speaks of the double colonization that Africa underwent in terms of Race and Gender. The novel, in the form of a metanarrative, speaks of the hybridized acculturation that the modern African generation undertakes in hoisting the double yoke of tradition and modernity- the Native and Western values. According to the critic Homi K Bhabha, colonial/colonized relations in the postcolonial world exhibit mimicry and ambivalence which is also depicted in the novel. The contemporary Nigerian fiction exemplifies the Third Space of enunciation wherein hybridity operates new cultural equations and brings in new systems of signification.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Ambivalence , Double colonization, Hybridity, Metanarratives, Third Space

The novel *Double Yoke*, born in the second phase of Buchi Emecheta's writing career, is embellished in the form of a metanarrative. This 'novel within novel' depicts Nigeria in its postcolonial interface to Western *grand narratives*. Set in the postcolonial period, the novel presents the modern African generation that adumbrates both Western and Native ideologies. The colonial hangover in postcolonial times and the indelible effect of dominant power structures of the ex-colonisers can be read in the African fiction of the times. These erstwhile metanarratives of the West undergo acculturation in the once-colonised lands, in order to bring in a new order of things in a postcolonial society.

*Double Yoke* is a metanarrative in the literal sense of the term in that it is a narrative account that experiments with or explores the idea of storytelling. Here, the plot is a story written by Ete Kamba the male protagonist, during the creative writing classes by Mrs. Bulewao on how their ideal Nigeria should be. Ete Kamba tells the story of his relationship with this childhood sweetheart Nko and it reveals the "ideal Nigeria' in Ete's mind as one where male dominance and patriarchy remain intact. According to Wikipedia, a *metanarrative* is "an overarching account or interpretation of events and circumstances that provide a pattern or structure for people's beliefs and give meaning to their experiences." Ete Kamba, a

fiercely patriarchal male of Nigeria is shown vociferating against the 'supposed' promiscuity of his girlfriend Nko. The metanarrative of patriarchy which allows power to the male of the species is also pinned here as the "cognitive lens used to see the world through" (Adebanwa 281) by Ete Kamba, the protagonist, in the beginning of the novel.

The story is set in the campus of a Nigerian University and the protagonists are the couple, Ete Kamba and his sweetheart Nko, who tries to cope with the double yoke of tradition and modernity. As a postcolonial feminist novel, *Double Yoke* speaks against the metanarratives of colonial/patriarchal power structures. In the postcolonial backdrop, Buchi Emecheta depicts the neocolonial situation that existed in Nigeria, and the government that has sunk to lethargy. In her novel Emecheta also deals with Nigeria's painful experience of growing up.

The novel is set in the campus of the University Calabar and it presents the social and economic conditions of the country. The economy of the developing country is laid bare as follows: "Now high living cost was fast eroding the salaries of the academics; one had to go all the way for a Ph.D to be able to live (luxuriously) …. And an intelligent working wife was a must" (65).

The electricity failure mentioned at the beginning of the novel is really an index to the sad state of affairs in the University. While Mrs Bulewao, the noted writer, speaks to the University audience on Creative Writing, electricity fails. Emecheta seizes it as an opportunity to launch an attack on the corruption and administrative incompetence of the officials.

> NEPA people were at it again … They gave and took away electricity lights whenever they felt like it. They always gave some unheard of excuses like the cables being overloaded, or that they were doing some repairs.…And in a country where the telephone system was more of a decorative instrument than a functional one, warning the students for instance, was thought out of this world. (4)

The neocolonial situation in the country is also artfully introduced by Emecheta. The pathetic state of the University library constitutes another comical picture: Emecheta says that the Atlas was very dusty, so much so that the blue cover could only be imagined from its grey overcoat of dust (10). Emecheta appears a harsh critic of society when she speaks of the toilet cleaners who did not do their duty and just "had to be seen around the building… for the Federal Government was paying them full time till three thirty in the afternoon."(8)

The West which claimed that they brought "civilization" into the East was able to hammer in the notion of their inferiority, into the minds of the gullible natives, especially with the help of the 'education' they imparted to them. The native's unquestioning acceptance of the Western version of their own selves is given in the beginning of the second chapter itself: "Air conditioners…. one must not grumble about them; next to quinine, they are a must for tropical living". (7) Nigeria reputed for long distance runners, had transformed so much that a 'civilized' modern man would "rather be seen dead than walk along the main road. Walking was now an occupation for the very poor" (35). The imitation of the West to such a high

extent is ridiculed by Emecheta. According to Partha Chatterjee, the continuation of colonial practices in the postcolonial societies point at the internalization of metanarratives about the superiority of Western structures (*Nationalist Thought*,23-24).

On the other hand he also notes how Eastern nationalism tries to differentiate itself from Western modes of thought(Chatterjee,*Omnibus* 42). This can be seen in the novel too: The import of 'civilization' by the missionaries and education could be seen on the religion of the land. "Calabar is one of those places where a modern African brand of religion is mushrooming fast" (45). The ancient religious rituals were replaced by a brand of African Christianity later on complemented with Revivalist stream. In Ete Kamba's friend Isa's cynical words Emecheta poses the question 'You mean our people did not have any sense of decency before the arrival of this "'Alleluya, praise the Lord thing?" (69).

The changing patterns in the love-relations between the hero-heroine pair Ete Kamba and Nko in *Double Yoke* portray the transition from tradition to modernity in gender attributes. As the novel opens, one finds Ete Kamba, the proud son of the village finding his girl in Nko whom he wants to be a virgin and similar to his mother – a feminine stereotype.

> He would like her to be younger than he was and to be in a lower grade at school… a woman who would be like his mother but with this difference, she must be well educated… A very quiet and submissive woman, a good cook, a good listener, a good worker, a good mother with a good education to match. (26)

But at the same time he wants her education to be at a level a little less than his own so that she would not have the impertinence to talk back to him. Emecheta is here satirizing the average man's egoistic notions of himself over his wife. The time honoured traditional patterns and stereotypes into which women were to be moulded into is reflected here.

Such a concept of women unconsciously develops a chauvinistic attitude in the male exemplified in Ete Kamba. Though he wants an educated wife to suit his generation's needs, he wants her to be pliant with him to such an extent that he makes brutal love to her in the initial stages of their relationship. Again when she makes sensible and wise comments, Ete Kamba is pictured as a baffled and unhappy male unable to accept an equal wife in intellectual prowess. As the avenging male upon his rightful victim he manhandles Nko and vilifies her as a prostitute. He even resorts to physical assault in the campus hostel room as he suspects her of previous sexual relationships. Nko retorts that "it takes two people at least to make a woman a prostitute…You seem to be forgetting the men who slept with the women. So if I am one, then what are you?" (58). These are the words of a fledgling feminist, who is well aware of the discrepancies hidden in the gender stereotypes**.** Emecheta leaves the question of Nko's virginity unclarified "to destroy the obsessive image of the mother as a virgin…Nko affirms her new slant in morality and gender relationships by declaring that men turn women into prostitutes" (Ogunyemi 262**).**

Emecheta poses a striking question to the male of the species by making Nko her mouthpiece. The bewildered reply of the male is heard echoed in the room—"'Men are

never prostitutes, I have never heard of men being called prostitutes', he cried. 'I have read of male prostitutes' Nko remarked slowly"(59). The impact of Western ideas of feminism percolating into the colonized culture and the subsequent awakening of the native woman is depicted by Emecheta here. The slow transformation of Ete Kamba, and Nko as the modern couple in Nigeria is the essence of the novel *Double Yoke*. Ete Kamba is pictured at the moment as the bewildered native who could not understand the new woman of Nigeria before him. That Man tries to keep the woman under his thumb for fear of her superior nature is also voiced by Emecheta as she records Ete Kamba's mental process : "But now he knew that she knew many, many things. Could he cope with a woman like that?"(63)

Nko, the epitome of the modern woman that Emecheta depicts in the novel, is in the beginning a young girl with a distinct individuality. She is also intelligent and able to chart out her life and its path on her own. As she too acquires an entry to the University like her boyfriend Ete Kamba, she realizes that she was beginning to acquire a new self – one that questioned Ete Kamba's opinion and decision. Even when Ete Kamba questions her meetings with the spiritual leader Prof. Ikot, she remains firmly in her stand. But unfortunately, the Professor turns out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing and demands a trade of sex for her degree certificate. In spite of her entrapment, Nko is staunch in her determination to acquire her degree and serve her family. "Refusing to play the role of the helpless victim, she boldly demands from him the highest grade for her work, thereby attempting to dismantle the power structure" (Ogunyemi 63). She never loses sight of her dream, and makes calculated moves to secure her goal. She does not allow cultural dictum or the fear of losing her boyfriend stop her from following her decision.

Nko thus shows the modern woman of Nigeria – the woman from the village being educated and realizing a vision about herself–"a simple young woman whose ambition was to be a modern wife with a career, and children of her own" (109). But the sexual exploitation that she encounters in the university confuses her initially, and she decides to combine conventional female roles with academic success:

> Oh, blast it all. She was going to have both. She was going to maneuver these men to give her both. They thought that they could always call the tune and women like her must dance to it. With her, they were going to be wrong. (135)

The African woman in this new role finds herself in deep waters and Nko, the emblem of such a group, finds solace at her mother's breast and pours out her woes and uncertainties to her: "Oh, mother, I want to have both worlds, I want to be an academician and I want to be a quiet, nice and obedient wife, the type you all want me to be. I want them both mother. Oh please mother, help me" (94). As Nko's mother told her, "you are under a double yoke. So you need a stronger shoulder with which to carry it" (94) than that of the women of the older generation. The woman of Africa is thus at a juncture wherein she has to hoist a heavier burden— that of a private and public life — and bear it nonchalantly.

Here, the plot of the novel by Emecheta takes on a unique stand of the hybridization of values that both the Western and Eastern cultures enjoined. Homi K Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' as delineated in *The Location of Culture*, is brought out in this context.

The intermingling between the West and the East is evidenced in the novel *Double Yoke*, in the education sought for in the universities. Given in a postcolonial academic background, the novel fictionalizes the changes wrought on the mindset of the educated elite in Africa. Nko is the example of the African woman who has attained education imparted initially by the West in her country. This is evident even in her relationship with Ete. He began to suspect that Nko wanted and maybe loved him in a Westernized sense. But he realizes that even though their education was a westernized one, he was still a Nigerian male and had no wish to change himself.

Here it is quite obvious that colonization had a deep impact upon the African culture and country. It was left to the enlightened to make the best of both worlds and acculture themselves accordingly as stipulated by Bhabha in his essay, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of Modern Nation" (299). Emecheta's concept of the 'double yoke' is also mouthed by the confidante of the male protagonist: Ete's friend Akpan reminds him:

> I don't think it's right for us to allow that part of our way of living to change. I know we are now carrying a double yoke of two sets of civilization. But it is left to us to make our yoke lighter by taking what is good from the new and using those things to enrich our old one. (131)

Similarly there is an instance in the novel where Nko's friends discuss the similarity between the different cultures of the world. They were concerned about how the female is made to look enticing during marriage 'season' to the opposite sex. If the western trend was to look slim and the women starved to be beautiful for men, their counterparts in the East came out of fattening rooms to engage the attention of their males. But with the advent of foreign culture in the East, even Nigerian women were beginning to "be skinny here as well, though not as skinny as the western models". And that is the right kind of balance according to the 'would be' academicians of University of Calabar. Emecheta seems to evoke through passages like this that a commingling of cultures is essential in the modern world and a proper borrowing between different cultures is for the best of the future.

Here, Homi K. Bhaba's concept of the Third Space of enunciation comes into perspective. The in-between liminal area occupied by the Third World inscribes a hybrid culture where cultural syncreticity and transculturation takes place:

"The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the inbetween space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves." (The Location of Culture,38)

The life of Nko and Ete undergo a transition in the course of the novel. If in her youth she is content to conform to the patriarchal roles of feminine gender and 'to be a good wife and mother', she gradually transforms into a woman who strives with all her might to become a success, thus developing an individuality of her own. Finally even the male in the picture is moved on to acquire a different outlook from the chauvinistic, masculinist view held by him earlier. The creative writer Mrs. Bulaewao she prods him on:

> The average modern Nigerian woman is almost priceless …. Ete Kamba, the question is – are you strong enough to be a modern African man? Nko is already a modern African lady but you are still lagging; oh so far, far behind. (162)

Such motivation spurs on Ete Kamba to go to the village with Nko, when her father dies and gives her comfort. Emecheta represents the state of affairs in the University in the novel. The anarchy existing in the university is symbolized in the initial chapter where the class is plunged into darkness due to a power failure. Thus Emecheta poses the challenge of darkness where there should be light, as an institution of higher learning. It is Ete, the hero of the novel who brings out torchlight and dispels the darkness. Whereas the Mephistoplelean Ikot rapes Nko in the journey to Kwa Falls ('Falls' standing for Nko's fall in life), Ete though pictured initially as the angry male, finally decides to lend a helping hand to Nko, the expecting mother.

Thus with an education/academic success, and motherhood, with the added advantage of having the love of her life coming back to her, Nko looks forward to a rosy future where her dreams materialize. Thus Nko stands unique in that she has surmounted both the patriarchal and the colonial constraints single handedly. She – the average 'Modern African woman'—"transforms the cultural clash which results in a double yoke for African women into a progressive synthesis of the best each culture has to offer" (Iyer 134).

In Emecheta's novel *Double Yoke* the Nigerian society is represented as undergoing a profound transition – emerging from the bondage of the past and moving towards new ideas and new patterns of life. Though the novel is a metanarrative within the creative writing classes undertaken by the protagonist Ete Kamba, the actual author Buchi Emecheta, also works as the mouthpiece for postcolonial in the novel. This is brought out through the words of his mentor Mrs Bulewao who is able to bring on a new stance not only to his narrative but also to his patriarchal bend of mind. This change in the accepted patriarchal stand that comes out in the modern African generation is evinced in the gradual change in the relationship between Ete and Nko. As the noted critic Florence Stratton says:

> Promoting a derogatory image of woman, Ete's narrative valorizes the manichean allegory of gender. Untroubled by the double stands he employs, Ete portrays Nko as the moral antithesis of his virtuous (though not so virginal) hero, himself. Representing himself as the innocent victim of female perfidy, he fixes her in the status of a prostitute. (129)

But the story told also by the narrator from Nko's perspective subverts the codes of the conventional male narrative and questions the fictional author's perspective on gender. The

fiction is supposed to be a narration by Ete of the fall in ideal womanhood. But Mrs Bulewao, the discriminating factor in Emecheta's plot, points out to Ete that a change in outlook is imperative in his case, thus transforming existing traditional (mis)conceptions.

The novel highlights the changing potential of the African couple. They learn to overthrow the baggage of conventionality and stereotypical images, and strike out for new pathways of emancipation. Not only do the protagonists overcome patterned moulds set for them by patriarchy, but also the shackles set by colonization. The characters in *Double Yoke*, crystallized in Ete and Nko signify the changing flux of time in African history. Colonized by the English, Nigeria, the African nation, loses its integrity as their cultural values were questioned and denigrated. Missionary zeal educating the native people brought on a new wave of acculturation and assimilation of ideas into the colonized land. The return of the native to a hybridized national outlook introduces new vistas to the modern African generation.

According to Dristi Suri, there are two approaches to metanarratives by the postcolonial – Internalization or Resistance (*Postcolonial Subjects*). But in Buchi Emecheta, one can see that both internalizing and resistance can be seen in the process of hybridization in a postcolonial society. The political stand of the once-colonised native in modifying Western *grand narratives* to acculture them to the Eastern scenario can be seen in this unique metanarrative by Buchi Emecheta. Here the ambivalent quality of hybridised cultures acquires a new sphere of empowerment. This Third Space of enunciation brings forth new systems of thought and cultural statements that provide African culture with a new identity. The fictional interface depicts the identity of the postcolonial subject in the modern world.

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# Vishkanya or Poison Damsel: The Legend of the Female Assassin

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**Abstract**

The legend of Vishkanya, or the poison damsel, has intrigued folklorists and historians alike. With their poisonous bodies and ethereal beauty, they instantly captivated the victims' admiration. Death by poisoning was a common method of assassination and a persistent source of fear among royalty in ancient times. The motif of beautiful, deadly maidens has long haunted the royal imagination. In the Indian context, the presence of the supernatural feminine is deeply embedded within folklore. Did the Vishkanyas really threaten the existence of kings, or were they themselves victims of weaponised femininity? In this paper, I have analysed their portrayal in Indian popular culture to trace a shift in their representation from a mere weapon to a superwoman.

**Keywords:** Vishkanya, Folklore, Poison, Mithridatism

## Introduction

During the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan dynasty and a contemporary of Alexander, the fear of Vishkanyas among the royalty was widespread. Norman Penzer argues that the European version of the poison-damsel motif derives from a pseudo-Aristotelian work, the *Secretum Secretorum*, supposedly composed for Alexander (Penzer 18). He further observes that "although the poison-damsel is found in the *Kathâsaritsâgara,* her appearance in Sanskrit literature is rare. There are, however, two or three works in which she is mentioned. Of these, the most important is undoubtedly Viśākhadatta's political drama, the *Mudrârâkshasa*" (Penzer 12). *Mudrârâkshasa* is set during the foundation of the Mauryan dynasty and features a Vishkanya as an unseen character. Following Chandragupta's accession, rebels plot his assassination; however, Chânakya anticipates their scheme and redirects the threat of Vishkanya towards the conspirators. The characters describe her as a lethal weapon employed by the royals to destroy their rivals.

In the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise, *Secretum Secretorum*, Aristotle warns Alexander about the dangers posed by women and poison, observing that numerous kings have been killed through such means**.** He suggests: "O Alexander, never confide in the works and services of women…beware of deadly poison, for it is no new thing for men to be poison'd. It is known what a multitude of kings and rulers have died before their time, by poisonous potions" (Secretum Secretorum 563). By the medieval period, particularly with the rise of the Mauryan

Empire, references to the Vishkanya appeared in literary texts and political treatises. Although Chandragupta and Alexander were contemporaries, they are not believed to have met. Nevertheless, Alexander's invasion of the Indian subcontinent facilitated significant cultural and philosophical exchanges between India and Greece. The historian R.C. Majumdar is of the view that the invasion of Alexander the Great has been recorded meticulously by the Greek historians, who naturally felt elated at the triumphant progress of their hero over unknown lands and seas. From the Indian point of view, its importance lies in the fact that it opened up free intercourse between India and Western countries, with far-reaching consequences (Majumdar 101).

> According to legend, young girls who were chosen to become Vishkanyas had to undergo rigorous training. A major part of this training included a practice known as 'Mithridatism'. Mithridatism was a method to protect oneself against various poisons by gradually consuming them in small doses daily, to develop immunity against them. Unfortunately, Mithridatism was not effective against all kinds of poison. Hence, many young women died during the process of becoming a Vishkanya. Those who survived were said to become insensitive to poison, and the immunity they attained was beneficial in killing their targets (Murthy).

The oral narratives of India travelled across cultural and geographical boundaries, including those concerning the poison damsels. The ritual of snake worship practised by the natives was a culture shock for foreign invaders. Claudius Aelianus observes that, during Alexander's invasion of India, he encountered a serpent that lived in a cavern and was regarded as sacred by the natives. They persuaded Alexander to ensure that it would not be attacked, and he granted their plea (Aelianus 243).

However, in popular culture, particularly in crime fiction, comics, and visual adaptations, the Vishkanya's portrayal shifts from a mere weapon to a humanised individual who voices her suffering. Om Prakash Sharma, one of the most popular Hindi crime fiction authors, penned a novel titled *Vishkanya*. The novel is set in the eleventh-century Pâtliputra, during the reign of king Samarsena. The plot revolves around an expert spy, Shankar Mishra, who strives to prevent regicide by identifying the Vishkanya, Ratnamallika (Ratna). She is an impostor princess of Kamarupa and the eponymous heroine of the novel, though not the protagonist, but her characterisation is most humanistic. The narrator describes the process of creating a Vishkanya and expresses empathy for her. Vishkanyas served as deadly weapons for the ruling dynasties, helping them eliminate their enemies. Young, good-looking girls were abducted and isolated from the world outside. It was forbidden for men to enter the space where Vishkanyas were trained. Small doses of poison were administered into their bodies, and the quantity was increased perpetually. At first, water snakes were used for intoxication. Later, the girls became addicted to the poison and subjected themselves to snakebites multiple times a day. They were provided with food in negligible quantities. Moreover, their meals consisted of only fruits and milk. The consumption of salt was prohibited (Sharma 17).

Ratna's fabricated identity as the princess of Kamarupa is symbolic, as Kamarupa derives from two Sanskrit words, kâma (desire) and rûpa (beauty). She yearns for love and affection,

even if it is short-lived. While awaiting the king of Pâtliputra, one of the primary conspirators, Veersena, is attracted to her. She is elated at the prospect of being loved by someone, but their encounter results in his death. The narrator emphasises Ratna's feminine side and gives voice to her repressed emotions. During the trial, she is not dehumanised or objectified as a "weapon" owned by royalty; instead, the court officials sympathise with her. They inform her that the current prime minister of Pâtliputra has banned the creation of Vishkanyas. She requests the death penalty to liberate her soul from her poisonous body, but is assured that her condition can be treated, enabling her to lead a normal life. The court of Pâtliputra acknowledges the injustice committed by their ancestors and ensures justice for the wronged woman. Sharma's reinterpretation of the Vishkanya legend highlights the inhumane treatment of young girls who are eventually turned into monsters.

**Vishkanya in Indian Comics**

Indian comics frequently draw upon Hindu mythology and legends, often incorporating powerful female figures into predominantly male narratives. The *Nagraj* series on *Vishkanya* (1996) begins with her origin story. The royal Tantrik performs a yajña (fire rite) to please Rakshas Garalgant. He secures a boon that can aid him in killing Nagraj, the protagonist of the series. Impressed by his dark ambitions, Rakshas creates a Vishkanya who can shapeshift as a "Sarpamanavi" (Snake Woman). Throughout the series, she secretly spies on Nagraj disguised as a snake. The Vishkanya has characteristics resembling the popular Ichchadhari Naagin (shape-shifting snakes). Penzer argues that the defining traits of a Vishkanya, such as her fatal look and poisonous breath, aid in characterising her serpentine nature and therefore cannot be studied in isolation. He observes that in all versions, the girl is portrayed as exceptionally beautiful, captivating the victim's attention at once (Penzer 35-36).

In the climax, Nagraj destroys the skull, withholding the powers of Vishkanya, and she transforms into a snake to escape. Kaur and Eqbal propose that the villainesses in Indian comics match their male counterparts in harbouring selfish motives and larger-than-life ambitions. Notable villainesses like Vishkanya, who appeared in the eponymous 1996 comic, were born of a yajna to kill Nagraj. She is portrayed as a ' death incarnate,' possessing the ability to absorb Nagraj's powers and render him powerless. They further argue that, "the villainess may also use feminine charms somewhere along her antics, invoking the idea of the femme fatale – the woman who is simultaneously attractive and dangerous. But this only manifests itself in a partially developed sense in Indian superhero comic books. Sexualisation may be noted in the representation of women, but acts of seduction are not" (Kaur and Eqbal 73). The Vishkanya in comics retains physical attractiveness associated with folklore, but it is not necessarily used for seduction.

V*ishkanya Ka Zehar* (The Poison of Vishkanya), written by Vijay Kumar Vatsa and published by Tulsi Comics, depicts Vishkanya as an assassin employed by an emperor. The plot centres on a conflict between two kings, Avantisena of Ballabhgarh and Dhavalsingh of Dhavalgarh, which is triggered by a perceived insult at a royal gathering. Embarrassed by the

affront, Avantisena vows revenge, but his minister advises him not to wage a war against Dhavalgarh. Instead, he proposes using the Vishkanya Mohini to seek revenge. The name Mohini may allude to the female avatar of the god Vishnu, who enchants the Asuras and secures 'amrit' (nectar of immortality) for the Gods. Similarly, in the comic, Mohini charms the princes of a rival kingdom and murders them to avenge her master's humiliation. She executes the plan efficiently through espionage, concealing her identity to infiltrate the enemy's kingdom and plot regicide. Though she functions at the king's command, she acts like a spy working for her kingdom.

*Dadi Maa Aur Vishkanya* (Grandmother and Poison-Damsel), published by Nutan Comics, focuses on female characters. In the world of comics, women are given less space than men. This series breaks free from conventions and portrays the collaboration between a wise granny, Dadi Maa and a Vishkanya named Bichhoo Kanyâ (Scorpion girl). Bichhoo Kanyâ has a poisonous breath and skin as resilient as iron. The villain, Trijata, is a fugitive scientist who has created a separate Bichhoo lok (Scorpion World). In the climax, Dadi Maa and Bichoo Kanyâ defeat Trijata and save one another. The poison is not deemed inherently dangerous; instead, it is portrayed as a supernatural power used for self-defence and the protection of others.

*Youngmaster Aur Vishkanya* is published by Goyal Comics and created by Master Sajid. The series begins with the World Martial Arts Championship, in which Youngmaster, an Indian martial artist, competes against a Vishkanya hired by a group of mercenary assassins of Japanese origin, infamous for their snakefighters. With her long, venomous nails, she dominates the fight but switches sides after her opponent donates blood to her following an accidental gunshot inflicted by her gang. She switches sides to support Youngmaster against the drug cartel and ultimately bites her creator to exact revenge. The Vishkanya, created to destroy the world, becomes a superpower and pledges to eliminate crime from society.

**Vishkanya in Visual Adaptations**

*Vishkanya* (1991), a supernatural revenge thriller directed by Jag Mundhra, features a Vishkanya as a protagonist. The plot revolves around a gang of poachers who smuggle snake venom and brutally murder an honest forest officer, Vikram Singh and assault his wife, driving her to suicide. Vikram's five-year-old daughter, Nisha, survives and is taken in by his loyal servant. Her recurring trauma results in nightmares, and to ease her anxiety, she is prescribed a potion by the local Tantrik. Ignorant of the poisonous nature of the medicine, she consumes it in excess. A grown-up Nisha is targeted by an unscrupulous man who attempts to molest her. In her defence, she bites him, leading to his death. This infuriates the villagers, and they set her hut on fire despite the Tantrik's assurance that her condition is reversible. She escapes, but with no relations left, moves to the city to avenge her parents' deaths. Her intoxicating beauty is both enchanting and fatal. Unlike the Vishkanyas in the folktales, poison is not administered strategically, nor is she isolated from the world outside. Her revenge is personal, and she meticulously carries it out, punishing the perpetrators one

after another. When she is tried in court for the killings, she is acquitted based on the argument that she is a mere "weapon" and no charges can be filed against her. As per the verdict, she will be under surveillance until the detoxification of her body. The removal of poison from her body signifies her assimilation into normative society.

The supernatural show *Vish Ya Amrit: Sitara* (2018-19) follows the journey of Sitara, born to a Vishkanya mother and a human father, a descendant of the mythical king Daksha, who was himself immune to poison. She was raised by her father and is unaware of her suprahuman powers. Upon entering the royal palace, she is attracted towards the Southern gate, unaware that her mother, Vrinda and aunts are caged inside. The imprisoned Vishkanyas seek vengeance against the royal family that created them to accomplish their personal interests and forced them into solitary confinement. What sets this show apart from others is that, for the very first time, the Vishkanyas rebel against their masters. They constantly plot to avenge the death of their eldest sister, Kâlindi and Vrinda's infant daughter (Sitara), who was taken away from her right after her birth. Kâlindi had tried to usurp the throne by attempting to murder the king. She claimed, "I was born to rule," and broke free from the control of the royals who had controlled them for ages. It is asserted that a Vishkanya can only die if she willingly commits suicide. She renounces the option of leading a normal life and bravely embraces death. Sitara possesses two opposing elements, 'vish' (Poison) and 'amrit', within her body, and can direct either to dominate her mind. Her mother disowns her when she sides with the royal family and protects them. She is stabbed but retaliates by eliminating her enemies, including her aunts. She spares her mother on the condition that she will not use her powers in the future, which she finds humiliating, leading her to commit suicide. The series ends on a happy note with Sitara enjoying marital bliss after the complete removal of poison from her body.

It is significant to note that, in the cinematic representation, the poison acts as a catalyst for vengeance, and its removal signals the Vishkanya's transition into a human. In contrast, the graphic narratives give her the potential to survive as an anti-heroine or a superwoman. Moreover, the Vishkanyas in popular culture deviate from their traditional roles and emerge as strong, rebellious women who transgress gender norms.

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# Archival Anxieties to Archetypal Consequences: Surveillance Capitalism and the Digital Dismantling of Female Archetypes in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*

ASHA PRABHAKARAN




## Abstract

The paper establishes an intersection between Jean Shinoda Bolen's Archetypal Psychology and Shoshana Zuboff's critique of Surveillance Capitalism to argue that Surveillance Capitalism functions by systematically activating, manipulating, and destroying specific female archetypes. Modern digital monopolies have come a long way in commodifying human capital. They have successfully colonised the physical body through manual labour and, in the twenty-first century, seek to colonise human consciousness. Bolen divides the archetypes into three categories: the Virgin goddesses (Artemis, Athena, Hestia), who are autonomous and task-oriented; the Vulnerable goddesses (Hera, Demeter, Persephone), whose identities depend on external validation; and the Alchemical goddess (Aphrodite), who represents creativity. Using Dave Eggers' dystopian novel *The Circle* (2013), this paper examines how the corporate giant known as the Circle systematically dismantles the protagonist Mae Holland's archetypal development and growth. The analysis traces her transition from a self-regulated independent woman to a hyper-visible digital icon, illustrating how the corporate system transforms and manipulates the intrinsic motivations of the Artemis (autonomy), Demeter (nurturance) and Hestia (peaceful solitude) archetypes while validating the Persephone(compliance) and Hera(commitment) archetypes. The paper examines how archival anxiety, fearing erasure if not archived and fearing exposure if archived, produces archetypal anxiety, the self-auditing of which femininity is safe to perform for the archive. Although existing digital media studies treat the human subject's exposure to data extraction as gender-neutral, the study argues that predictive algorithms are selectively optimised to map gendered psychological blueprints.


**Keywords**: Surveillance Capitalism, Female Archetypes, Corporate Systems, Digital Monopolies, Behavioural Surplus, Archival Anxieties, Archetypal Anxieties, Predictive Algorithms, Data extraction, The Circle

## 1. Introduction

In an era marked by rapid technological expansion, corporate data analysis has undergone significant changes. It has gone far beyond normal consumer preferences and matured into a systematic psychological domination of individuals. The earlier industrial units sought to colonise and commodify the human body through manual labour. However, contemporary digital industries tend to monopolise and control the human consciousness. Shoshana Zuboff conceptualises this change as 'Surveillance Capitalism', a new economic order that claims

human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales (Zuboff 9). She clarifies this point by noting that "Google invented and perfected surveillance capitalism in much the same way that a century ago General Motors invented and perfected managerial capitalism" (Zuboff 15). These giant monopolies then feed the extracted data points into machine intelligence systems to construct "behavioral futures markets"- designed not merely to anticipate human action, but to actively modify it. This data, declared as 'behavioral surplus', immensely profited the surveillance capitalists. Eventually, they discovered that the most predictive behavioural data came from interventions aimed at modifying and shaping behaviour (Zuboff 71). This orientation led to the goal of automating consumers. Within the vast body of contemporary Digital Humanities, scholars have long treated the human raw material subject to data extraction as a gender-neutral phenomenon. Most critical studies read dystopian works using the framework of Zuboff or Foucault. What this kind of reading misses is the femininity it endorses. Connecting Jean Shinoda Bolen's psycho analytical model of Female Archetypes with Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism addresses this research gap. Bolen, in her classic work, *Goddesses in Every Woman*, proposes that the female psyche is structured by deep-seated, mythic blueprints – immanent psychic configurations that dictate instinctual motivations, vulnerabilities and relational dynamics (Bolen, *Goddesses* 22). This study seeks to establish a theoretical intersection between these two distinct areas by arguing that predictive algorithms are inherently optimised to manipulate and control these psychological patterns. Dave Eggers' dystopian novel *The Circle* (2013) offers a useful example of the study's theoretical trajectory.

## 2. Behavioural Futures and Archetypal Drives

Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism hinges on the extraction of human experiences as free raw material for continuous modification into behavioural data. It advances the concept of instrumentarian power, a form of control that replaces the totalitarian violence of the past with a soft, ambient architecture of continuous modification.

> "In this phase of surveillance capitalism's evolution, the means of production are subordinated to an increasingly complex and comprehensive "means of behavioral modification." In this way, surveillance capitalism births a new species of power that I call instrumentarianism. Instrumentarian power knows and shapes human behavior toward others' ends. Instead of armaments and armies, it works its will through the automated medium of an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of "smart" networked devices, things, and spaces. (Zuboff 14)

This power propagates behavioural compliance through friction-free psychological manipulation. The user's subconscious emotional state is revealed through the excess data generated by digital interactions, such as scroll speed, gaze duration, click paths, and typing cadence (Zuboff 8). The ultimate objective of this architecture is a closed-loop system that minimises human free will to produce predictable, more profitable market outcomes.

According to C.G. Jung, the archetype is a universal symbol or image that lives within the collective unconscious. Jung explicates the collective unconscious as "identical in all men and

thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a supernatural nature which is present in every one of us" (Jung 4). Archetypes are the contents of the collective unconscious and the frameworks for all perceivable ideas. They play a major role in human life, as they can help people understand themselves better by identifying their behaviour with a common archetype. Carl G. Jung's concept of psychological archetypes offers valuable insights into people's personalities and imagination. Understanding archetypes requires examining our unconscious motives, habits, and behaviours, which is a transformative process.

Jean Shinoda Bolen's Jungian–feminist approach provides a framework for understanding the vulnerability underlying this behavioural modification. Her Jungian perspective suggests that women are influenced by powerful inner forces, or archetypes, which Greek goddesses can personify. The feminist perspective has given an understanding of how outer forces or stereotypes – the roles to which society expects women to conform- reinforce some goddess patterns and repress others. Bolen sees every woman as a "woman – in – between": acted on from within by goddess archetypes and from without by cultural stereotypes (Bolen, *Goddesses* 4). The female psyche is categorised into distinct Greek goddess archetypes that have stayed alive in human imagination for over three thousand years (Bolen, *Goddesses 2)*. They operate as internal psychological forces that shape a woman's identity and determine her response to external stimuli (Bolen, *Goddesses* 14). The seven goddesses fall into three categories: the Virgin goddesses, the Vulnerable goddesses, and the alchemical (or Transformative) goddess. She defined these categories by modes of consciousness, favoured roles, and motivating factors. Artemis, Athena, and Hestia are the virgin goddesses representing autonomy, ambition and an independent inner sanctum. Hera, Demeter, and Persephone are those whose identities are fundamentally driven by the impulses of marriage, motherhood and external validation. Aphrodite, the most beautiful and irresistible among the goddesses, is the only one in the third category (Bolen, *Goddesses* 24-25).

When the instrumentarian apparatus of surveillance capitalism encounters these archetypes, it maps ways to monetise and exploit them. The algorithm primarily recognises their behavioural output and deduces the dominant archetype from the digital footprint left by the system's continuous feedback loops. The surveillance architecture can adjust its predictive models based on the individual's behavioural patterns. It targets the user's unconscious, archetypal vulnerabilities to induce impulse purchases, maximise engagement, or manufacture political compliance. The machine decodes ancient psychological blueprints into standardised, predictable nodes within the data industry.

Dave Eggers presents a singular, all-consuming techno giant, Circle, in his novel. It is developed as a corporate ideological system that has successfully unified all global search engines, social media platforms, e-commerce spaces, and financial transaction histories into a centralised mandatory digital ecosystem known as 'TrueYou'. This structural integration conveniently outlawed anonymity, ensuring that

> There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity —the *TrueYou*, unbendable and unmaskable—was the person signing

> up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. You had to use your real name, and this was tied to your credit cards, your bank, and thus paying for anything was simple. One button for the rest of your life online (Eggers 21).

The Circle's totalitarian philosophy is illustrated by the three slogans displayed across the hyper-designed campus: "SECRETS ARE LIES, SHARING IS CARING, and PRIVACY IS THEFT" (Eggers 303). Through Zuboff's framework, these aphorisms reveal the Circle's foundational ethos. One also finds it oddly familiar to *Nineteen EightyFour,* the Orwellian dystopia, where slogans like 'War is Peace,' Freedom is Slavery,' and 'Ignorance is Strength' are used (Orwell 7). Eggers underscores the inherently totalitarian nature of the Circle's ideology by connecting this to Orwell's novel. Within the Circle's logic, as Mae Holland slowly realises, any unrecorded moment, any unmapped thought or offline activity is an intolerable act of disloyalty to the company and the community. Withholding one's interior life from the corporate ledger is framed not merely as social subversion, but as a moral failure that invites reprimand. By narrowing the lens to a single figure, Mae Holland's, the study allows for a precise mapping of how a single woman's archetypal range is foreclosed. Bolen notes how there are multiple archetypes operating within the inner circles of a woman's mind: "There are many goddesses in an individual woman. The more complicated the woman, the more likely that many are active within her. And what is fulfilling to one part of her may be meaningless to another" (Bolen, *Goddesses* 2). Patriarchy divides women by restricting them to identify with only a single archetype. She remarks that "I became aware of inequalities and discrimination against women and learned that cultural standards determined by men rewarded or punished women for adhering to or rejecting stereotyped roles" (Bolen, *Goddesses* 4).

Zuboff provides the contemporary political economy for that division. In *The Circle,* archetypal performance is not spontaneous; it is behaviourally modified through what David Lyon calls "watching as a way of life" (Lyon 11). Michel Foucault's take on the panopticon is central to this argument: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 202). Mae's score in PartiRank functions as a Zuboffian nudge that guides behaviour. The Circle displays similar operations to today's Facebook, "as designed to exploit the human inclination toward empathy, belonging, and acceptance. The system tunes the pitch of our behaviour with the rewards and punishments of social pressure, herding the human heart toward confluence as a means to others' commercial ends" (Zuboff 293). This entails that Mae should do care work and exhibit institutional loyalty. Her work exemplifies emotional labour, which Arlie Hochschild defines as work that requires management of feelings to produce a publicly observable display (Hochschild 9).

Bolen describes the Artemis pattern as valuing solitude and wilderness (Bolen 48), the Athena pattern as strategic and affiliated with father figures (Bolen 81), and the Hestia pattern as valuing sanctuary and inwardness (Bolen 110). These patterns seek opacity while

Mae's arc punishes opacity and ensures transparency, in a way rewarding archival vulnerability. The Circle represents the 'arkheion', the house of magistrates who both commence and command (Derrida 9). It wields archival power, asserting Derrida's claim: "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory" (Derrida 11). Archival anxiety in Mae, on the one hand, illustrates her anxiety about not being properly archived. She expresses a desire to archive all the knowledge and experiences available in the world (Eggers 300). In her enthusiasm to share and make all knowledge accessible, private and public, she agrees to go transparent (Eggers 304). To be part of the archive validated her existence and reflected her archival anxiety. Her existence truly depended on her capability to be stored and seen. On the other hand, the anxiety of losing control of interpretation is inextricably linked with the anxiety of being archived. This emerges when Mae's transparency makes her live under constant surveillance. *Feminist Surveillance Studies* critiques instances where women's self-representation is reduced to a sign of empowerment (Dubrofsky and Magnet 99). Mae audits herself in the process of addressing the archetypal anxiety. She is caught in an ongoing internal debate about which archetypal persona she should adopt to fit into the broader system and which is safe to perform on camera. Artemis's boundary, Athena's critique and Hestia's privacy are unsafe, while Persephone's compliance and Hera's loyalty are safe to consolidate her position within the Circle.

## 3. Mae Holland and The Dismantling of the Goddesses

### 3.1 Artemis: From Autonomy to Asset

Bolen defines Artemis as the truly independent female spirit, the hunter who thrives in the forest and remains immune to the demands of patriarchy in outer society. "Artemis is an archetypal predisposition toward egalitarian, brotherly relationships with men, a sense of sisterhood with women, the ability to aim for a distant target or rise to a challenge, and a preference to be in nature rather than cities" (Bolen, *Artemis* IX). Mae's primary psychological refuge is the solo kayaking trips she takes on the bay. Eggers highlights this unmapped sanctuary early in the text:

> And only then did she realise how long she'd been free of thoughts of her parents, of Mercer, of the pressures at work. The wind picked up, now heading west, and she paddled with it recklessly, spray everywhere, soaking her legs and face and shoulders. She felt so strong, her muscles growing bolder with every splash of cold water. She loved it all, seeing the free-range boats get closer, the caged yachts appear and take on names, and finally the beach take shape with Walt waiting at the waterline." (Eggers 145)

This act of kayaking is a pure manifestation of the Artemis drive: it is solitary, physically demanding, unmonitored, and held in communion with nature; it offers Mae an authentic sense of self. However, for this very reason, it represents a systemic failure of the Circle's instrumentarian design. The human resources team interrogates Mae, framing her silent, self-contained joy as an outrageous anti-community offence. Dan, Josiah, and Denise aggressively educate her on "PPT? Passion, Participation and Transparency?", forcing her

to agree that by keeping a secret, she chooses to withhold something from her friends, colleagues, and the world (Eggers 185-88).

Through intense psychological pressure and gaslighting manoeuvres, the Circle and its inner cohort break Mae's internal Artemis drive. Her inherent need for the wild is subverted and replaced with an addiction to algorithmic visibility. She is surrounded by a medley of screens and devices that ensure her lifelong connectivity to the Circle's network system. When she returns to the bay later in the novel, she no longer experiences it firsthand but is happy to post the photos, constantly checking her phone for more likes and 'zings'. Her untamed, free Artemis energy has been controlled, domesticated, and converted into trackable, company-approved outdoor lifestyle metrics.

### 3.2 Demeter: Nurturing as Compliance

The Circle not only suppresses independent archetypes but also exploits vulnerable configurations, notably Demeter. Bolen notes that "Demeter is the maternal archetype. She represents maternal instinct fulfilled through pregnancy or through providing physical, psychological, or spiritual nourishment to others. This powerful archetype can dictate the course a woman's life will take, can have a significant impact on others in her life, and can predispose her to depression if her need to nurture is rejected or thwarted" (Bolen, *Goddesses* 171). Mae's Demeter drive is centred around her parents, especially her father, who is suffering from a degenerative case of Multiple Sclerosis (MS). The parents' situation mirrors the bureaucratic nightmare of the American healthcare system. With the mother losing her job to become a full-time caregiver and losing financial support, Mae is grief-stricken and thinking about the future. The company weaponises this family calamity, absorbing Mae's parents into its elite comprehensive healthcare plan, christened as the Complete Health Data Program, or CHAD for short (Eggers 357). The situation becomes one of instant jubilation "…and some very embarrassing talk about how Mae had become a real adult, how her parents were ashamed and humbled to be leaning on her, leaning so heavily on their young daughter this way, it's just this messed up system we're all stuck in, they said. But thank you, they said, we're so proud of you" (Eggers 162). Mae had saved not only her father's life but her mother's too.

However, this act of corporate benevolence is immediately transformed into an instrument of totalizing surveillance. The company installs high-definition SeeChange cameras in her house and attaches automated biometric sensors to her father's body to monitor his physiological data. The Circle, in its role as the surveillance state, co-opts Mae's maternal, nurturing instinct and turns it into a machine of psychological compliance. Mae now realises that her parents' well-being is permanently tied to her performance metrics at the company. Her compliance and obedience determine their comfort and luxuries. Eventually, her parents cover up the cameras, suffocated by the intense scrutiny and interventions of the community, in a frantic gesture to have some personal space and marital intimacy. Mae, meanwhile, is flooded with deep archetypal Demeter guilt at her parents' revolt and sees their need for privacy as a dangerous act of ingratitude that threatens the health security the machine

provides. Surveillance capitalism effectively holds her father's body hostage to convert the matriarchal instinct into a state of self-surveillance and total subordination. Mae's visits to her parents' home were stressful enough to make her decide never to leave campus again.

> Mae drove back to the Circle, determined that when she got back to campus, she would stay there. She'd had had enough of the chaos of her family, of mercer, her wretched hometown. She hadn't even asked her parents about the SeeChange cameras, had she? Home was madness. On campus, all was familiar. On campus there was no friction. She didn't need to explain herself, or the future of the world, to the Circlers, who implicitly understood her and the planet and the way it had to be and soon would be (Eggers 370).

### 3.3 Death of Hestia and Emergence of Aphrodite

The Circle's absolute triumph over Mae's psyche happens with the total eradication of her Hestia archetype and the subsequent perversion of her Aphrodite drive. According to Bolen, the Hestia archetype shares focused consciousness with the other two virgin goddesses. (In Latin, the word for "hearth" is focus.) However, that focus differs. Externally oriented Artemis or Athena focuses on achieving goals or implementing plans; Hestia concentrates on her inner subjective experience (Bolen, *Goddesses* 113). The goddess represents that part of the female soul that remains detached from the external marketplace, maintaining an inner home of silence and self-reflection. Under immense pressure from the Circle, Mae decides to go fully transparent, wearing a camera around her neck that broadcasts live to millions of viewers worldwide, 24/7. All her movements were monitored and recorded, leaving her exposed to the critical gaze of the online community. She loses her internal sanctuary, becoming an open window "needed to be living that ideal, always and everywhere, and especially on campus" (Eggers 310). The Circle and its insinuations compelled Mae to believe her Hestia drive was a psychological deviance that needed to be eliminated. Her inner monologues and thoughts lacked value unless properly recorded and converted into data points that improved her ratings and performance. This expressive energy for establishing connection with her community is redirected into a hyper-commodified manifestation of Aphrodite. In a healthy psyche, Aphrodite signified a fitting designation for the magic process or power of transformation.

> As the alchemical goddess, Aphrodite shares some similarities with the other two categories, yet is intrinsically different from both. For Aphrodite, relationships are important, but not as long-term commitments to other people (which characterized the vulnerable goddesses). Aphrodite seeks to consummate relationships and generate new life. This archetype may be expressed through physical intercourse or through a creative process. What she seeks differs from what the virgin goddesses seek, but she is like them in being able to focus on what is personally meaningful to her; others cannot divert her away from her goal. And in that what she values is solely subjective and cannot be measured in terms of achievement or recognition, Aphrodite is (paradoxically) most similar to anonymous, introverted Hestia—who on the surface is the goddess most unlike Aphrodite (Bolen, *Goddesses* 225).

Under surveillance capitalism, this Aphrodite energy is instrumentalised to serve the attention economy. Her entire waking life, except for a few intimate ones, was devoted entirely to the

voyeuristic consumption of the external world. Her life mutated into one of nonstop digital performance, curated explicitly to the public's tastes and interests. She identified herself as the ideal Circler, living life for its aesthetic value and its ability to generate 'zings' culminating in real-time 'PartiRanks'. This obsession with performance takes a dangerous turn, perverting relational empathy, as shown in her attitude toward Mercer, her ex-boyfriend. Mae uses the Circle's omniscient tracking app 'SoulSearch' to hunt down the extremely private Mercer, who had retreated to the forest lands in a desperate attempt to hide from the extreme surveillance. The live broadcast shows him being pursued by drones and a mob actively encouraged by Mae herself, resulting in his suicide by driving off a cliff (Eggers 461). His crime is that he opposed the surveillance culture precipitated by the Circle. This shows the extent to which Mae has disconnected from genuine experiences and meaningful relationships.

### 3.4 Transformation of Persephone and Hera

Bolen describes the Persephone archetype as compliant in action and passive in attitude, yet oriented toward pleasing the powerful others in her life (Bolen, *Goddesses* 197-99). Mae's entry in the first half of *The Circle* epitomises an anxious Mae, eager to carve out a place for herself in the Circle by being pleasant to everyone she meets there. She is elated to be part of the "most influential company in the world" (Eggers 1). At the Circle, her initial mentor, Annie Allerton, tells her, "People move up here pretty reliably, and as you know, we hire almost exclusively from within. So just do well and keep your head down and you'll be shocked at how quickly you'll be out of Customer Experience and into something juicy" (Eggers 15). This nudges Mae to seek approval from her superiors on the corporate ladder, including the founding fathers Bailey and Stenton. Her initial stint in Customer Experience is typical emotional labour, which the Wise Men label as the foundation of everything that happens there. The Wise Men who represent the Circle believed that "if we don't give the customers a satisfying, human and *humane* experience, then we have no customers. It's pretty elemental. We're the proof that this company is human" (Eggers 48). Hochschild, in an attempt to connect the emotional labour and the self, observes that "All companies, but especially paternalistic, non-union ones, try as a matter of policy to fuse a sense of personal satisfaction with a sense of company well-being and identity" (Hochschild 132). Mae, in her Persephone self, attempts to integrate her private self into her public one and does not disconnect herself from her work role. The validation she received after every significant improvement in her customer ratings and PartyRankings settled her as a loyal, hardworking employee of the Circle. Mae was celebrated for "what Annie called t*he highest score of any CE newb ever of all time suck it"* (Eggers 54).

The Hera archetype first and foremost represents a woman's yearning to be a wife. A woman with a strong Hera archetype feels fundamentally incomplete without a partner. For her, impending marriage evokes the anticipation of fulfilment and completeness, which fills her with joy (Bolen, *Goddesses* 142-43). Mae's transition to the Hera phase begins with her forced integration into the Circle's Transparency programme. Her kayaking adventure and Bailey's subsequent shaming of her theft are a critical turning point in Mae's character

development. Bailey successfully instils a sense of subservience through the wisdom and generosity he reflects in his conversation. His call to be transparent and honest relieves the anxiety that weighs down Mae: "Mae, we would finally be compelled to be our best selves. And I think people would be relieved. There would be this phenomenal global sigh of relief. Finally, finally, we can be good. In a world where bad choices are no longer an option, we have no choice but to be good" (Eggers 290). Mae's marriage to the Circle happened on her first on-stage performance with Eamon Bailey, the charismatic face of the Circle. At this moment, we see Mae taking her vows of loyalty to her master in the form of the three slogans of the Circle: SECRETS ARE LIES, SHARING IS CARING, PRIVACY IS THEFT. This stage performance acts as a conversion ritual from compliance to loyalty, announcing "the capper to it all—that Mae, in the interest of sharing all she saw and could offer the world, would be going transparent immediately" (Eggers 304).

**4. Discussion: Algorithmic Domestication**

Mae Holland's arc is not a coming-of-age narrative but a case study in archetypal enclosure, where surveillance capitalism limits the range of femininity it can profitably archive. Mae enters the Circle with a compliant, seemingly passive identity, which, according to Bolen, echoes the Persephone archetype (Bolen, *Goddesses* 197). The Circle rewards this pattern in new female recruits. Mae's initial enthusiasm is fuelled by repeated validation from the different sections of the Circle. This results in a heightened sense of performance anxiety in Mae and immediately orients her toward seeking paternal approbation from Bailey and Stenton. These father figures appeal to the Athena archetype according to Bolen. Mae identifies herself as "the Father's Daughter, Athena, who naturally gravitates toward powerful men who have authority, responsibility and power- men who fit the archetype of the patriarchal father or "boss man"" (Bolen, *Goddesses* 82). They later serve as patriarchal gatekeepers for the Persephone archetype in Mae. Her work in Customer Experience is what Hochschild describes as emotional labour- work which requires her to smile, thank, comment, and zing, converting affective behaviour into extractable data called as behavioural surplus by Shoshana Zuboff. These are rendered predictable and translate into prediction products, which considerably improve the company's profits (Zuboff 14). Her angst about her PartiRank standing is indicative of early archival anxiety. If her activity is not scored, she is rendered invisible and considered socially dead: "What is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way" (Derrida 18).

The kayak theft is a turning point in Mae's realisation of the Hera archetype. Mae is shamed not for theft, but for seeking privacy and for her apparent reluctance to share her knowledge and experience for the world's benefit. Her initial passive compliance turns to active loyalty once she embraces the Circle's core philosophies, articulated in the three slogans pasted across campus. Mae declares her eternal loyalty to the Circle by an onstage performance which is ritualistic, embodying marriage. She agrees to be transparent and act as a virtuous model for fellow Circlers to appreciate and emulate. She is aware of the power she wields as one of the three most visible Circlers, which gives her added purpose in life.

Mae's final phase in the novel demonstrates failure of Aphrodite integration. Her response is to ask for more transparency after mercer's tragic death during the SoulSearch demonstration. She seems unaffected by the nature of her insensitivity that drove Mercer to commit suicide. Her conviction that she could have saved Mercer if he had been transparent underlines how deeply she was manipulated into believing the world she occupied and represented.

> Mercer would have been saveable –would have been saved—if he'd made his mind known, if he'd let Mae, and the rest of the world, in. It was not knowing that was the seed of madness, loneliness, suspicion, fear. But there were ways to solve all this. Clarity had made her knowable to the world, and had made her better, had brought her close, she hoped, to perfection. Now the world would follow. Full transparency would bring full access, and there would be no more not- knowing. Mae smiled, thinking how simple it all was, how pure. Bailey shared her smile (Eggers 465).

Bolen describes Aphrodite as a power to integrate and transform, to be both autonomous and attached. Mae cannot integrate grief, wilderness privacy, or critique because that would require being outside the archive, or rather the non-archivable. This demonstrates the impossibility of Aphrodite integration under instrumentarian power. She is left not as an empowered transparent subject, but as Hera, without the Aphrodite pattern in her: the loyal wife to the company, having lost the ability to transform and achieve wholeness.

Surveillance capitalism traces even the minutest impulses of resistance shown in the databases and contains them within the corporate ecosystem. When a user experiences an enhanced sense of the Artemis drive or a penchant for Hestian solitude, the platform does not censor those impulses directly. Instead, it detects the shift in behavioural surplus and serves a customised, algorithmically generated aesthetic. In the novel's conclusion, despite her worries for Annie Allerton, Mae proudly asserts the Circle's achievement: "Ten million people were now transparent worldwide, the movement irreversible" (Eggers 490). This is ample proof of her complete surrender to the Circle's surveillance culture. The loss of privacy is not a concern but rather a positive achievement for the future of humankind. Her celebration of this milestone cements the final dismantling of her autonomy and individuality. The deep mythical pathways mutate into superficial consumer trajectories. The system's instrumentarian power neutralises the psyche's subversive nature, plunging the user into an abysmal deluge of predictable digital consumption.

## 5. Conclusion

Reconciling Jean Shinoda Bolen's Archetypal Psychology with Shoshana Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism critique has fundamentally expanded the terrain of critical dystopian studies. This has illuminated a new theoretical perspective regarding the mechanics of modern corporate control. The Circle stands as a chilling example of how continuous digital extraction affects the deep, instinctual domains of the human psyche. Dystopian novels usually feature protagonists who are aware of the adverse conditions in which they and their society live, and they often convey this to readers. This does not apply to Mae Holland, the female lead, who is increasingly committed to the company's core values and becomes its most accepted

face in community circles. In Mae, the Circle's founding fathers envision their future progress and success. Her tragic devolution from an independent, aspiring, casual digital user into a hollow, unempathetic, hyper-visible corporate stooge demonstrates the total colonisation of human essence and inner life. When humans are subjected to machine mapping, it strips the female psyche of its capacity for authentic self-discovery, integration, and autonomy. The Artemis archetype, dominant in the early stages of Mae's character through her disposition toward egalitarian, brotherly relationships with men and her ability to aim for a distant target or challenge, transforms into the Hera archetype, which is wife material. All of the goddesses are potential archetypal patterns in every woman, and Bolen stresses that "while Artemis may be dominant in the first third of a woman's life and can remain a strong influence, often one or more other archetypes may emerge in the second and third phases of life" (Bolen, *Artemis* 11). The Circle mechanism integrates well within the core of the protagonist, Mae, ultimately rejecting all unwanted archetypes and accepting only those it has approved and facilitated.

*The Circle* emphasises the importance of tangible human experiences and escaping the digital panopticon that sells fantasies of safety, effortless living and hyper-personalisation. Feminist surveillance studies warn us of the impending danger in framing patriarchal surveillance as personal empowerment. Surveillance capitalism does not force women into one archetype; it needs only to make one archetype safe to perform for the archive at any given time. Mae experiences the unarchivable, unprofitable archetypes as archetypal anxieties about performance and rejects them. The study establishes that surveillance is a feminist issue, especially in this neo liberal age where the presence of women is a constant in the digital world.

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## The Shore of Unspoken Rhythms

SHINY S.



No bloom is required to mark the grace,
No spoken word to bind the soul; Truth finds a hidden, holy place Where fractured spirits gather whole. Beyond the reach of wordly eyes, Where shadows coil and stars persist, A secret, sovereign wisdom lies Within the "Silver Layered Mist ".

It is here that this collection finds its home. It is dedicated to the "Daughter of Hours" – for the moments, the memories, and the love too fragile for the Sun's interrogation. It explores the vast, unmapped geography of the human heart: the depth of a love that aches in its own isolation, the quiet unfolding of a life lived in shadows, and the profound, heavy beauty of longing and loneliness. It's a tribute to the strength it takes to be a shore for someone who exists only in one's dreams or in the stillness of silence. May one find peace in one's own lullaby, and may the world finally understand that even the unbloomed flower carries the weight of the universe.

## A Morning Mist: Echoes of the Womb

Awakened by a dewdrop's breath–
A misty kiss that breaks the rest,
Behind the throngs of a night in throes,
Past shadows, silver-layered and deep.

A moment where the storms of the night
Settled into a warm morning mist;
Deep in a mother's womb,
The little one held on tight.

## A Father's Lullaby For The Hidden Mist

Shadows of time echo through the veils of snow,
Guarding the secret that we only know.
A vision of you, so vague, yet etched so deep-
My daughter of hours, stolen from night

My tiny, hidden, silver-layered mist,
You are wrapped in the cradle of my fatherly affection,
Where womb and heart are woven into one.

I cannot hold your tiny hands in the Sun;
For the light may ask what we are not ready to answer.
My hidden bud,my never-blooming flower,
Whose petals carry every alphabet but not my name;
So I keep you wrapped in silver- layered moonlight.

Though tides may rise and heavy winds may sigh,
You're safe in the fold of my lullaby;
Let the world's throes ache and the mists roll deep –
I am the shore while my little one sleeps.

If the "buried promise" had a voice, it would sound like a song hummed in a room where the door has been locked for years. It's a testament to the fact that while we move forward, we are often tethered to the shadows of the paths we "once trudged".

## The Buried Rhythms

As the clock devours the day into hollow beats,
The mist descends to veil the path they once trudged;
A soulful laughter lost to silent streets,
Where once their shadows danced –
Now cold and smudged.

Still waiting for the rhythm,
That hid past the mountains and oceans,
Across the sea where a promise was sailed;
To a tide that never found an anchor to hold.
Now, only the echo of a ghost rhythm remains,
And the promise still lies deep –
Buried, unkept and unseen.

# Draupadi: The Queen, Feminist and Human of Hastinapur

SUMITHRA DEVI S.



**Abstract**

Historically, male-dominated narratives often relegated female characters to passive roles, portraying them as silent observers or helpless victims of the injustices inflicted upon them and their kin. The advent of feminism across cultural, political, and literary spheres catalysed a wave of subversive writing, fundamentally reshaping twentieth-century fiction. Consequently, the influence of culture-specific mythological constructs, which traditionally shaped perceptions of the world and womanhood, is undergoing profound transformations in contemporary arts and literature. While the enduring relevance of these ancient texts is undeniable, contemporary authors, particularly women, are actively reinterpreting them. Their aim is to extract meanings that resonate with the social, personal, and political realities of modern women, rather than merely transmitting the original wisdom or ideology. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1995), a first-person fictional account of Draupadi's life, vividly portrays her multifaceted journey. Originally written in Odiya, the novel was translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharya. This paper examines the feminist characteristics of Draupadi as depicted in *Yajnaseni*, demonstrating her enduring and indomitable presence in contemporary discourse.

**Key words:** myth, feminism, contemporaneity, narrative, symbolism

A myth can be understood as a cultural lens through which a society interprets the world and existence. As scholars and mythologists have noted, the fundamental role of myth lies in its communicative power, forging connections between the vast universe (macrocosm), human society (mesocosm), and individual experience (microcosm). This communication is conveyed through narratives, symbols, and rituals. Far from being static systems, these timeless truths are remarkably fluid and adaptable, capable of evolving to reflect the shifting socio-politico-cultural realities of different eras, thus remaining open to constant interpretation and transformation. In India, mythological narratives, in particular, have undergone continuous organic reconstruction, leading to a rich tapestry of diverse and evolving versions. Women occupy a central place in the stories of the Mahabharata. In the words of Chaturvedi Badrinath:

> In living what life brings to them, the women of the Mahabharata show that the truth in which one must live is, however not a simple thing; nor can there be any one absolute statement about it. Each one of them, in her own way, is a teacher to mankind as to what truth and goodness in their many dimensions are. (8)

He furthermore states the contemporaneity of the text when he states:

> The women of the Mahabharata are incarnate in the women of today. To read the stories of their relationships is to read the stories of our relationships. They demand from the men of today the same reflection on their perceptions, attitudes and pretensions too, as they did from the men in their lives. (8)

The twentieth century witnessed a global fascination with reinterpretations of India's foundational epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, alongside its ancient *Shastras*, drawing widespread attention from writers, readers, and critics. These compelling narratives have, since ancient times, captivated humanity with their profound conviction that the limits of imagination are non-existent. The Indian mythologist, Devdutt Pattanaik, writes in *Myth=Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology* (2006):

> The unrealistic content draws attention to the idea behind the communication. Behind virgin births and parting seas is an entity who is greater than all forces of nature put together. A god with six heads and a demon with eight arms project a universe where there are infinite possibilities, for the better and for the worse. (xvii)

The historicity of mythic narratives has been a much-debated question. In his seminal work on mythology, *Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent* (2003), Pattanaik observes:

> Hindus also attribute historicity to mythic narratives. The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are traditionally considered history or *itihasa*. This is established by making the writers of the epic participate in the plot, turning them into reporters, not authors of the story. Valmiki, who wrote the Ramayana, gives refuge to Sita in the forest. Vyasa, who wrote the Mahabharata, is the biological grandfather of the protagonists, the Pandavas. But both Rama and Krishna acquire mythic power only because they are incarnations of Vishnu . . . . Thus, history becomes sacred when placed within a divine plot. (16)

Indian women's cultural standing is significantly shaped, among other influences, by mythological foundations. In her seminal work *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*, Tracy Pintchman observes that within the *Brahmanical* tradition, woman is conceptualized as the Goddess, simultaneously embodying *shakti*, the creative impulse linked to *Nirguna Brahman*; *prakrti*, the principle of materiality; and *maya*, the material principle of creation that bridges *shakti* and *prakrti* (211). This fundamental feminine essence, inherent in the Goddess, is expected to be harnessed and directed towards creative endeavours that fortify and sustain culture. Consequently, India boasts a rich pantheon of goddesses associated with diverse cultural activities, such as Saraswati, the deity of knowledge and patroness of arts and sciences, and Durga, the formidable leader of armies. However, Pintchman contends that these potent female figures do not necessarily serve as direct role models for Indian women. She states:

> Benevolent and submissive goddesses like Sita are the ones that are generally upheld as the best exemplars of proper female behaviour; independent goddesses, however, even when they are good, are not usually interpreted in this way, and dangerous goddesses like Kali are usually understood primarily as metaphors for spiritual, mental, or physical processes but certainly not as role models for behaviour. (212)

Indian mythological texts are replete with profound symbolism, particularly concerning the relationship between man and woman, a dynamic deeply intertwined with gender politics. This has historically fostered a system of rigid dichotomies such as right/wrong, sacred/ profane, and moral/immoral, often ensnaring women in value judgments that steer their destinies toward unfortunate outcomes. Both the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as foundational cultural texts, vividly illustrate how female purity and chastity were paramount to ancient India's dominant ideology. The feudal underpinnings of these epics underscored notions of cultural cohesion and purity, which were reinforced through the protection and control of women, exemplified by figures like Draupadi, Sita, Kunti, and Gandhari. These narratives effectively solidified a societal ideology where the veneration of female chastity further subjugated women, confining them to the domestic sphere.

Henrietta Moore challenges the conventional linking of men with righteousness, culture, and strength, and women with their antitheses: fallibility, nature, and weakness. She posits that such associations are not intrinsic to the biological or social makeup of the sexes. Instead, Moore argues they are "cultural constructs, powerfully reinforced by the social activities which both define and are defined by them" (26). The collective efforts of these writers and feminist activists were instrumental in fostering a heightened gender consciousness among women, empowering them to recognize and dismantle the intricate workings of gender as a societal fabrication.

Across arts and literature, culture-specific mythological constructs that shape perceptions of the world and womanhood are undergoing remarkable transformations over time and space. While the enduring relevance of these ancient scriptures is undeniable, contemporary writers, particularly women, are actively demystifying them. Their aim is to reinterpret these texts to address the social, personal, and political needs of present-day women, rather than simply transmitting the original wisdom or ideology. This trend is especially evident in fictional reinterpretations of mythologies, where contemporary authors breathe new life into mythological figures. These characters become conduits for analysing modern society and human relationships through a contemporary lens. Figures like Draupadi, Ganga, Thataka, Kannaki, Ahalya, Urmila, and Soorpanakha emerge as tangible women, advocating justice, love, and equality. The timeless nature of their legends empowers these writers to leverage their stories, making potent statements that illuminate the complexities of human existence. Ultimately, these reimagined mythological characters, through the hands of numerous poets, novelists, and playwrights, assert their own distinct personalities, contributing to a transformed understanding of the world.

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1995) offers a fictional first-person account of Draupadi's narrative. This novel, initially published in Odiya and translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharya, meticulously portrays Draupadi's character through all her trials. Notably, it emphasizes her profound humanity, which emerges as her most prominent trait, challenging the prevalent perception of her solely as a symbol of vengeance. In the Afterword of the novel, Ray describes why she has chosen to narrate Mahabharata in Draupadi's voice:

> Draupadi is a challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power. Such a woman- who has faced torment, insult, mental and emotional dilemma like Yajnaseni-Draupadi- has not yet been born on this earth . . . that the bride of one's own family should be stripped before many wise, qualified and honourable men who all keep sitting silently . . . a darker chapter than this will not be found anywhere in the written or unwritten history of the world. (400)

The story unfolds through flashbacks, with the protagonist recounting her life to her *sakha*, Krishna. This account is penned at the culmination of her earthly journey, as she lies fallen on the Himalayan stones, the first to succumb, while her husbands ascend towards heaven, never once glancing back. Even in the face of death, her voice of protest resonates, solidifying her status as one of the most formidable female figures in Indian mythology. She poignantly reflects, "How false is this bond between husband and wife" (3). Her self-sacrifice at the feet of her five husbands was, she believed, for the preservation of Yudhishtir's *dharma*. This narrative highlights the immense and escalating pressure on women, as cultural custodians, to adhere to patriarchal mandates. As Simone de Beauvoir famously observed, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is defined as feminine" (88-9).

*Yajnaseni* is not a mere retelling of the *Mahabharata* from a woman's vantage point; but it stages a deliberate act of what Adrienne Rich called "re-vision" (18), entering an inherited text from a new critical direction in order to reveal the assumptions that structure it. The novel is cast as a long epistolary confession addressed to Krishna. It is written in the first person as Draupadi looks back on her life on the verge of death. Through this, Ray displaces the omniscient, androcentric voice of the Vyasa tradition and grants Draupadi what the epic withholds, a sustained interiority. Her subjectivity is no longer inferred from the margins of male action but articulated as the organising consciousness of the narrative. This is precisely the point that Hélène Cixous theorises in "The Laugh of the Medusa" in the following words, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing" (875). In *Yajnaseni*, events conventionally attributed to male honour, dynastic ambitions, or *dharmic* obligations are reinterpreted through the dice game, in which Yudhishtir stakes Draupadi in the Kuru assembly, and her unwilling acceptance of five husbands. In each instance, Ray converts what the epic treats as plot into what the novel treats as Draupadi's testimony. Draupadi's famous interrogation of the assembly, which asks whether Yudhishtir lost himself before staking her, becomes in Ray's hands not a rhetorical episode but a deliberate act of

counter-narration, a refusal to accept the patriarchal dictates, where her body is property and her silence is virtue.

Equally significant is Ray's reimagining of Draupadi's desire, which retells the epic's confinement of female emotion within the framework of marriage and lineage: her feelings for Karna oscillate between attraction and aversion, her devotion to Arjuna is persistent yet repeatedly disappointed, and her bond with Krishna, her *sakha*, carries an ambiguous intimacy that Krishna himself redirects towards Arjuna. These relationships depict the image of Draupadi as a woman who resists being defined only by her duties as a wife. In this respect, the novel may be read alongside Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which examines the ways women writers have challenged restrictive literary representations of women. In the work, the "madwoman" in the attic, a figure of ritual endurance is transformed into a self-authorising agent whose suffering is not a redemptive spectacle, but a critique of the social structure that causes it. Although the contexts differ, in *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi's suffering is not merely presented as something to be endured or admired; it becomes a means of questioning the values that cause such suffering. Yet the novel's counter-narrative strategy does not reject the epic tradition entirely. Ray retains the epic's mythic frame, its divine elements, and Draupadi's identity as the fire-born *Yajnaseni*. Her critique therefore emerges from within the tradition she reinterprets. Her feminist intervention is akin to what Showalter describe as "double-voiced discourse" (263) and "gynocritics" (128) respectively. These concepts offer useful ways of examining how Ray works within an inherited narrative while questioning its patriarchal assumptions. *Yajnaseni* thus demonstrates that retelling an epic could mean reclaiming its narrative space, giving greater attention to women's experiences and opening familiar stories to new interpretations.

Alicia Ostriker's concept of "revisionist mythmaking" (73) is equally relevant in understanding *Yajnaseni*. Revisionist mythmaking refers to the way women writers rework traditional myths to challenge gender stereotypes embedded in them. In Yajnaseni, Draupadi's inner life receives greater attention than it does in a conventional retelling of the Mahabharata. A relevant instance occurs when Karna refuses the cooked food Draupadi serves him and questions her status because she has five husbands. He tells Draupadi's *sakhi* Maya that it is "the dharma of a woman to have only one husband. If the first husband dies, in some circumstances there is sanction for a second husband. But at one time to share the beds of five husbands is not sanctioned anywhere. . . . How can I accept food cooked by her? (133). This episode exposes the rigid moral standards imposed on women. Draupadi feels anger and humiliation though she does not argue with Karna. But anguish brings tears to her eyes as she muses thus, "Tears represented weakness. But sometimes even tears become companions of human beings when they are helpless. They reduce the burden of sorrow pressing on the heart" (134). By giving voice to Draupadi's emotional vulnerability and exposing the unequal moral standards imposed on her, Ray reworks the traditional myth in the spirit of Ostriker's revisionist mythmaking.

In her extensive letter to Krishna, Draupadi vividly portrays the complexities of her existence: an extraordinary birth, a daughter destined to fulfill her father's pledge, a bride whose marital joy was to be shared by five men, and a queen whose fate was to alter the course of history. Each significant role she embodies throughout her life is intrinsically tied to a name that defines her identity. Ray skillfully incorporates these names in the novel: Krishnaa, signifying her dark complexion; Draupadi, as King Drupad's daughter; Yajnaseni, born from sacrificial fire; and Panchali, the shared wife of the five Pandavas. In the words of Badrinath:

> That she was born from the flames of a *yajna*, fire, a most unusual form of human birth, is to be understood metaphorically; for her later life, at any rate the greatest part of it, would be lived in the flames of one kind of human fire or another, mostly in the flames of hatred and revenge that she let burn in her heart for thirteen years. (171)

The narrative traces Draupadi's profound transformation into Yajnaseni, a figure whose very existence is bound to fulfilling ancient prophecies. Yet, she fiercely resists this predestined role, declaring, "From even before birth, I was destined to avenge my father's insult. I was going to be the weapon for preserving *dharma* on this earth and destroying the wicked" (8). Draupadi's extended condemnation of patriarchal power structures vividly highlights her strong feminist leanings. Her aforementioned words clearly demonstrate her demand for justice and her unwavering belief that a woman's self-sacrificing denial of life holds no glory. Furthermore, she extends her quest for justice to Sita, whom she perceives as merely a pawn in a grander game of *dharma*.

A recurring motif throughout the narrative is the profound woman-to-woman bond, which the writer uses to facilitate the protagonist Yajnaseni's burgeoning consciousness. Yajnaseni shares a deep and intimate relationship with her *sakhi* Nitambini, who is privy to all her secrets and provides strength during her formative years. This bond perhaps exemplifies what bell hooks describes as Sisterhood, a decisive element for feminist sustenance. Hooks asserts that women must: ". . . bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the woman bonding feminist movement should encourage. It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood" (46).

Draupadi fiercely challenges "the laws of the abode of the gods" (92), which permit men to marry multiple women while condemning any woman with more than one husband as a sinner. She questions, "Who had laid down this law? It must be some male god! Otherwise, how could there be such a distinction of virtue and sin between male and female" (92). She further highlights the hypocrisy by noting that Urmila, despite her fourteen years of imprisonment awaiting Lakshmana in the Ramayana, is not celebrated as a *sati* (a chaste and devoted wife). Conversely, Tara and Mandodari, both of whom had multiple husbands, are still revered as *satis*. While Draupadi secretly resents being forced into polyandry by her mother-in-law Kunti, she passionately champions complete autonomy for women in choosing their life-partners, even if that choice involves having more than one man. In a pivotal moment within the novel, Draupadi, having been dragged into the assembly hall after Yudhishtir

gambles away his kingdom and brothers, refuses to remain silent and submissive. Despite being in her monthly cycle and secluded in a private palace mansion with unbound hair, she confronts the entire gathering of Kshatriya warriors, enduring both physical and emotional assault. Her defiant words, spoken in retaliation, effectively silence the men:

> But here, wicked people, driven by perverted lust, are insulting the bride of the Bharat dynasty and stripping her body naked . . . such a gross outrage on womanhood will never be wiped out in history . . . this lawless, gross injustice and tyranny of the Kuru clan will demean the entire male sex for all time. It will outrage all the chaste women of the Bharat dynasty and the entire female sex on earth. For this insult, there is no forgiveness, for this sin there is no expiation. (242)

Despite her *sakha* Krishna's miraculous intervention to preserve her dignity, this event irrevocably alters history, as declared by Yajnaseni, who transforms into an embodiment of fire:

> The remaining days of my life, I will fight against injustice, *adharma*, sin. I have sworn that I shall tie up my hair only after washing it in Dushasan's blood. Otherwise, these tresses will ever remain loose. Though the world may call me an ogress because of this, the world must know that the woman who creates, is auspicious, is also the destroyer of the sinful and the wicked . . . then will the world know that while a woman's heart is delicate, it is not weak. (252-3)

This profound self-realization achieved by Draupadi throughout the narrative reinforces its feminist themes, solidifying her status as an enduring contemporary icon.

Draupadi's humane traits are as much visible as her feminist traits in the novel. In her letter to her *sakha* Krishna, she writes, "whatever has happened in my life-let it not be repeated in the life of any other woman. Lay down a rule that no woman will ever have several husbands at a time" (396). The egregious violation of sanctity that happened with her in the court and the gravity of the humiliation that she faced is expressed by her when she laments, "the pain that I suffered in the court-let no other woman in the world ever have to go through this. Make women beautiful, but do not make men so lustful" (396). Draupadi's intense hatred for wars is depicted in the following lines, "I have suffered one war. Even now the mother's heart in me hears the lamentation of mother earth. Therefore, I request that because of race, religion, language and colour let no country split into parts like Hastina and Indraprasth" (396). In a poignant passage of the novel, Draupadi, weary from the relentless trials and profound betrayals of her life, voices a deeply human yearning: to be reborn not as a queen, or a warrior's wife, but simply as Krishna's beloved. This desire, far from being a weakness, reveals her profound capacity for love, devotion, and a longing for unburdened intimacy. She expresses her wish for a rebirth on the same sacred earth as a lover in the following lines, "Let me be born as a lover. Let me be born again and again as the beloved of Krishna and a lover of the world" (397). After a life dictated by dharma, duty, and the harsh realities of a patriarchal world, her wish to experience a pure, unadulterated connection, free from political machinations and shared obligations, underscores her innate humanity. It is a

moment where the formidable Draupadi discards her traditional image, exposing a soul that, despite immense suffering, still yearns for simple affection and the solace of a singular, cherished bond, highlighting her vulnerability and emotional depth. This aspiration to be the sole object of divine affection speaks to a universal human desire for unconditional love and peace, making her character all the more relatable and profoundly human.

Yajnaseni's heroism stems from her unwavering resolve and courage in the relentless pursuit of justice. For her, justice encompasses not merely a woman's right to freedom, but also the right to vanquish those who violate a woman's sanctity. It is in this fierce assertion that her contemporary relevance truly resides. As Ira Mukhoty notes, "Draupadi belongs to the Mahabharata . . . but she is as real to modern-day Indians as any historical figure, if not more so" (xii). Ultimately, Draupadi emerges not as an instrument of revenge and destruction, but as a powerful human force for preservation and continuity.

Ray's *Yajnaseni* reinterprets Draupadi as a woman who challenges patriarchal authority, while negotiating the social and moral constraints imposed upon her. Through Draupadi's retrospective narration, Ray foregrounds her agency, her inner conflicts, and her questioning of the gendered expectations embedded in the *Mahabharata*. Ray's novel contributes to scholarship on revisionist retellings of the epic by examining how its first-person narrative transforms Draupadi from a figure largely defined by her relationships with male characters into a self-reflective subject who questions the moral and social order governing her life. By bringing together narrative perspective, the representation of female desire, and the critique of patriarchal norms, *Yajnaseni* challenges established interpretations of Draupadi while retaining the epic's mythological framework. Ray's feminist reworking thus demonstrates how a woman-centred retelling can question inherited assumptions about female identity, agency, and desire from within the tradition itself.

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# Phenomenologies of Incarnation in Michel Henry and Emmanuel Falque: Saving Flesh, Redeeming Body. By Mark Novak. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025. 264 pp.

NANCY YADAV

Christianity proposes two radically opposed theses concerning the body. It insists on the body as sinful, yet it also appeals to resurrection. This presents a theological problem, i.e. if the material, visible body of Christ is to be excluded from what we understand as incarnation. Author Mark Novak in *Phenomenologies of Incarnation in Michel Henry and Emmanuel Flaque: Saving Flesh, Redeeming Body*, navigates through this aporia by drawing from the works of two minor phenomenologists, Michel Henry and Emmanuel Falque, who have often been neglected in the anglophone world and are eclipsed by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Novak exhumes their works that engage in a serious manner with embodiment; both Henry and Falque are most commonly associated with the theological turn in phenomenology (coined pejoratively by Dominique Janicaud in 1991), and thus engage with embodiment and religious phenomena like resurrection and incarnation.

From Plato to Kant, western philosophy has relegated the body to the periphery so much so that Chantuel Jacquet notes that the body is like the phantom limb of philosophy.[1] However, with phenomenology, especially in the works of Merleau-Ponty, there was a resurrection of the body, which underscores the primacy of the body in perception. Phenomenology studies how a phenomenon appears to us, thus it studies the structure of experience of a phenomenon. The book is divided into 4 chapters.

In Chapter 1, *Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Body and Flesh in Phenomenology*, Novak lays out a brief history of phenomenology starting with Husserl and Heidegger, the two prominent figures in the field. He elaborates on the method of phenomenology, such as *epoché* (bracketing), intentionality of the phenomena (i.e., that consciousness is always about something). Subsequently he expands on the distinction between body (*Körper*) and flesh (*Leib*), as classically laid out by Husserl. These two concepts are crucial to understand if the reader is to follow the arguments in the book. Further, the author also illustrates the importance of Heidegger for the theological turn (so much so that Janicaud writes in his critique that without Heidegger's *Kehre* (turn) there would be no theological turn).[2] Heidegger talks about the unconcealment of the Being, thus gearing towards that which does not appear. He marks a departure from Husserl and asserts that phenomenology should study not just the appearances but how they are made present. As highlighted by Novak, Heidegger's insistence on the invisible and inapparent becomes a critical entry point for Henry's *Essence and Manifestation.*

In chapter 2 *Tracing the Contours of the Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,* as the name suggests, Novak traces the ushering in of the theological turn in phenomenology, owing to the works of Levinas, Marion, and Chrétien. Furthermore, he highlights Janicaud's criticism of these philosophers for abandoning the method of Husserlian phenomenology where any type of transcendence is to be bracketed. However, they respond to the charges against them by effecting a broadening of phenomenology, which is already present in Heidegger. In this chapter, Novak provides a necessary framework onto which he then maps Henry and Falque to assess the relevance and importance of their contributions.

There has been a tendency in the scholarship to read Michel Henry as a dualist; for his insistence on the double mode of appearing; Husserl's ecstatic mode of appearing, and the immanent, immediate mode of appearing or auto-affection that Henry calls Life. Thus, Life is non-intentional, i.e. without any noematic correlate. In Chapter 3, *Life and World in Michel Henry,* Novak makes a thorough survey of Henry's oeuvre to exonerate him from the dualist accusations. In his quest to radicalise phenomenology, Henry goes beyond Husserl's transcendental reduction, and siding with Maine de Biran, he introduces radical immanence into the very heart of phenomenology. He makes auto affection, i.e. that which comes in itself, as itself, by itself, in full immediacy, as the foundation of any experience. Thus, effecting a shift in phenomenology as an eidetic science to that of an affective science. Novak goes at great lengths to explicate Henry's phenomenology of Life in which there are two modes of appearing: world and Life; it is the body that appears in the former and the flesh that appears in the latter. He understands flesh as auto affection; the body is however known as transcendent, in the ecstatic mode of appearing. Novak illustrates Henry's working out of his phenomenology introduced in his earlier works i.e. *The Essence of Manifestation* and *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body,* and carried forward in his later theological trilogy which includes *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity, Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh,* and *Words of Christ.*

After explicating Henry's double mode of appearing, i.e. world, the visible and Life, the invisible, Novak moves on to elucidate his notions of body and flesh. There is an ontological difference between the two, since it's a difference in their manner of being. The transcendental, subjective flesh is the revelation; the transcendent objective body is the manifestation. Thus, flesh is characterized by immediate knowledge or self-affection, organic body by the functional and organizational structure of the body and objective body as the transcendent object of natural sciences. Henry reinterprets incarnation not in terms of incorporating an objective body but as the becoming flesh of the divine Word. Thus, resurrection becomes not a mere physical reanimation of a corpse, but the essential, inward, and invisible manifestation of "Absolute Life" (or God) within the individual.

After highlighting Henry's philosophy of incarnation and resurrection, Novak moves on to elucidate upon that of Emmanuel Falque's. In the premier section of Chapter 4, *Flesh and Bones in Emmanuel Falque,* Novak highlights Falque's method, i.e. a crossing between phenomenology and theology, and his emphasis on materiality and finitude. Subsequently, he

also attempts to make salient the ways in which Falque's ideas align and diverge from Henry's. Falque is the foremost figure working in the "theological turn" in French phenomenology today, whose works have only now garnered attention in America.[3] In his works, the boundary between theology and philosophy often remains porous. Novak discerns in Falque's doctoral dissertation, his philosophy that dictates his later works, wherein he pursues the thought of Italian priest, Bonaventure, that stresses on the how, i.e. the appearing of God as opposed to the deliberation about substantial nature of God.[4] Thus, Bonaventure in Falque's opinion already effects a cross-fertilisation between phenomenology and theology by asking how God appears to humans. In his later works, *God and the Flesh, and the Other: From Iranaeus to Duns Scotus,* God/divinity, flesh/embodiment, and other/alterity become central loci of investigation. Falque launches himself in the heart of the medieval debate regarding the incarnation of Christ. While Christ's spiritual nature was generally agreed upon, it was the status of his body that was a site of contestation. Drawing from Iranaeus and Tertullian who firmly believed that the material body renders God manifest, and thus in flesh, God sees and is seen by the world. Thus, in Falque's opinion they give Christ's flesh real substance and solidity. The medieval philosophers often talked about flesh and the body interchangeably.

Novak also highlights Falque's engagement in his *The Loving Struggle: Phenomenological and Theological Debates* engaging Merleau Ponty on his notion of the flesh. In Ponty, the flesh (*la chair*) is distinguished from *Leib* (Husserl's lived body), and Descartes' *res extensa* (objective body). It is neither subject nor object but is a "spread body" ( *Corps épandu*). Falque contends that phenomenology has focused too much on *Leib* and in the process has forgotten the materiality or organicity of the body. He finds in Henry a forgetting of human's basic animality by an insistence on the invisible flesh. His insistence on finitude as the start of philosophy leads him to critique Henry's notion of self-affection. All this, as the author highlights, leads Falque to accuse Henry of Gnosticism, based on his misreading of Tertullian.

After having illustrated Falque's method and emphasis, Novak moves on to his theological trilogy, namely *Triduum Philosophique*. In his first book in the trilogy, Falque writes about the suffering and anxiety of Christ at the time of death. He opines that "through his incarnation … Christ teaches us first of all to be human beings... Not to flee from our finitude".[5] According to him, it is only by virtue of him being incarnate that Christ could fully experience anxiety and finitude, and thus for Falque "it is only flesh that is capable of expressing anxiety in all its radicality". In the second theological treatise, Falque extends the phenomenological distinction between organic body and flesh, to reinterpret resurrection. He asserts that resurrection is not the raising of a biological or organic body but the manner of living through the body. Thus, as Novak discerns in Falque, the flesh (manner in which we experience the body as living body, *Leib*) and the resurrected body are the same. He refers to examples of mis-appearances of Christ after resurrection in the gospels to bring home the resurrection of flesh, the lived body or how Christ lived as opposed to his objective body, *Körper*. He reads resurrection also as a metamorphosis of finitude, a transposition wherein the Father experiences consciously what the Son experiences bodily. This apperceptive transposition happens via

the holy spirit. Thus, in Falque, incarnated Christ is like the resurrected Christ; he reveals himself by withdrawing. Novak also brings into attention Falque's third book in the trilogy wherein he shifts his focus from the lived body, and digs deeper into the organic body characterized by chaos and forces. Falque notes, that in taking our humanity Christ took into his care our animal origins. Novak highlights Falque's indebtedness to Nietzsche, and painter Francis Bacon, in his conception of the organic body. The author also expands upon Flaque's idea of the *Corps épandu* (spread body) which is a middle ground between *Leib* and *Körper*. He also brings forth parallels between Falque and Henry. In a move away from phenomenology's overemphasis on *Leib* (subjective body), to the organic body as a living force, he shares commitment with Henry's immanent and material nature of Life.

This book could be a good resource for students seeking to study the minor traditions within phenomenology. The author brilliantly encapsulates the radical phenomenology of Henry and Falque. While he pits these philosophers against the more traditional phenomenologists, like Husserl, little attention is paid to his account on embodiment. For e.g., Husserl's later shift from a static to genetic phenomenology, wherein the body becomes crucial for the constitution of perception. In his later works, Husserl deals exclusively with hyletic, kinesthetic sensations and double sensation which precede one's experience of embodied subjectivity (*Leib*) and the objective body (*Körper*).

However, by bringing together Henry and Falque, the author Mark Novak offers readers novel ways to think about finitude and embodiment. Apart from minor divergences, both undertake a phenomenological analysis of incarnation and resurrection that go past the traditional biblical exegesis. The author makes a long survey into the phenomenological tradition and brilliantly unpacks important methods and philosophers of the tradition. There has been a veritable impasse between philosophy and theology with respect to the body; the insistence on the *Leib* (lived body) in phenomenology and the *Körper* (organic body) in theology. Novak, via a careful study of Henry and Falque, offers creative ways to bridge it. Thus, this book is an important resource for scholars of both theology, and philosophy, especially phenomenology.

## Endnotes

[1] In Le Corps, 200, she writes "Le corps devient le membre fantôme de la philosophie."

[2] See*Le tournant theìologique de la pheìnomeìnologie franc'aise*,1999.

[3] Three of his articles were translated in English in 2001, 2007 and 2009. Christina Gschwandter included a chapter on Falque in her Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy, 2013. In addition, there has also been growing secondary literature on Falque recently.

[4] In *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (The Journey of the Mind to God), 1295 he departs from Augustine's and Aquinas'

[5] See *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, Fordham Univ Press. 2016

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