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Contours of Selfhood: Negotiating Postfeminist Identity in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* and *Mistress*

**Ananya Ratha*
&
***Chandramani*

ABSTRACT: The ideas of healing and recovery emerge as defining concerns in Anita Nair's fiction, articulating the strength and vulnerability of individuals navigating the layered realities of postcolonial and patriarchal India. Through novels such as *Ladies Coupé* and *Mistress* Nair explores the intertwined processes of emotional renewal, cultural reconciliation, and the reclamation of identity. Her characters, often wounded by personal and social constraints, undertake journeys of introspection that lead to empowerment and self-awareness. Nair's narrative world engages deeply with the intersections of gender, memory, and autonomy, revealing how the remnants of colonial thought continue to shape contemporary consciousness. Yet, within these spaces of constraint, she discovers the potential for healing through storytelling, empathy, and self-realisation. Her protagonists embody resilience, challenging the moral and cultural hierarchies that suppress individuality while asserting their right to redefine the self. In examining these personal quests for wholeness, Nair's fiction transcends the private sphere to address collective renewal, offering a vision of recovery that unites personal agency with cultural affirmation. Her works thus stand as compelling studies of the human capacity to heal, remember, and reimagine identity within the fractured realities of postcolonial existence.

Keywords: recovery, Healing, Self-discovery, introspection, post-colonial identity

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Anita Nair: Exploring Identity and Self-Discovery

When I discover who I am, I'll be free. (*Ellison,263)*

Along with various socio-cultural, political, and economic concerns, the focus on the self has been an inevitable assertion of writers during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Contemporary women novelists emphasise the inner struggles of modern women caught between age-old traditions and evolving modern values. They explore feelings of frustration, isolation, and emotional conflict within a patriarchal society. These narratives highlight the subtle complexities of feminine identity and psychological depth. The authors underscore a persistent tension between inherited cultural traditions, familial duties, and societal norms, and the opposing drive for personal autonomy and the intricate task of self-definition.

The psychological landscape of women from various social strata engaged in their existential battles has provided a rich source of inspiration for Indian women novelists. Anita Nair is among the writers who have highlighted the marginalisation of women within Indian society. As a bestselling author of both fiction and poetry, Nair has consistently demonstrated a passion for writing and the determination to pursue her craft regardless of circumstances. Her works resonate with the diverse roles women assume throughout their lives, a theme that is prominently featured in her literature. Nair's writing is characterised by its vibrant energy and the creation of remarkable narratives.

Anita Nair's fiction captures the struggle of Indian women to assert their individuality and rights within the confines of traditional social institutions such as marriage. Her novels often reflect the transformation of women who reclaim their sense of self and evolve into fully realised individuals by redefining the relationships that shape their lives. Through her writing, Nair sheds light on the ongoing search of contemporary Indian women for meaningful connections and personal renewal. Her journey as a writer mirrors the resistance faced by women who sought to engage in feminist discourse in India during the mid-twentieth century, a period marked by deep-rooted social conservatism. Writing from a woman's perspective, Nair not only articulates the realities of women's experiences but also strives to establish her identity as an author deeply concerned with women's emotional and intellectual

worlds. Her fiction probes the complexities of the human mind, portraying women who, despite their education and financial independence, remain bound by social expectations and external control over the most crucial decisions in their lives. In this way, Nair underscores the paradox of modern womanhood in India that is empowered in appearance, yet constrained by invisible social and psychological barriers.

Anita Nair's fiction focuses on the psychological depth of Indian women's inner lives, portraying with empathy the emotional struggles they face within patriarchal structures. Her narratives reveal the silent endurance and resilience of women seeking balance and meaning amid social and emotional constraints. In *The Better Man* (2000), translated into over twenty languages, Nair depicts individuals who transcend traditional roles to pursue personal growth and fulfillment. Set against the cultural landscape of South India, her writing combines emotional realism with intellectual sensitivity, reflecting a belief in the transformative power of self-awareness and perseverance. As Kumar and K observe, Nair's nuanced portrayal of women "deconstructs patriarchal binaries" and redefines identity as a dynamic process of self-discovery and empowerment.(Kumar and Janardhanreddy)

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* and *Mistress* serve as compelling reflections of modern Indian society, portraying women's struggles for identity, freedom, and emotional fulfillment. While *Ladies Coupé* captures the collective suffering and awakening of women within a patriarchal framework, *Mistress* delves into the crisis of identity through the intertwined lives of Radha, Shyam, and Koman, where art functions as a metaphor for desire and self-expression. Nair's narrative technique, grounded in realism and psychological depth, reveals how her characters navigate the conflict between personal autonomy and societal expectations. As Sooraj Kumar and Seema Rajan note, *Ladies Coupé* "employs a fragmented narrative structure … [which] attempts to deconstruct traditional gender roles, exposing the vulnerability of social constructs that impose marriage, motherhood, and female submissiveness" (Kumar and Rajan). Similarly, Richa and Singh observe that in *Mistress*, "female rebellion emerges not from defiance alone, but from a yearning to redefine emotional and moral boundaries" (Richa and Singh). Although distinct in form and style, both novels converge in their

exploration of the human need for self-realisation and the search for meaning within the intricate web of relationships that shape identity.

Ladies Coupe: A journey towards self-exploration

Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe, published in 2001, is a classic feminist novel that explores the inner worlds of women struggling with identity and autonomy in a patriarchal culture. The story revolves around Akhilandeswari (Akhila), a single Tamil Brahmin woman and income tax clerk who is 45 years old, and travels by train to Kanyakumari. Within the cosy confines of the ladies' coupe, she meets five women, namely Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Marikolanthu, and Karpagam, whose lives provoke her introspection and pursuit of autonomy. Through an analysis of Akhila's transformational process and the stories of her co-passengers, the discussion sheds light on Nair's representation of women's resilience and self-discovery.

As stated by Geeta Doctor, "In Ladies Coupé Nair has resorted to one of the oldest ploys. She has taken a leaf out of Chaucer's mixed crowd of pilgrims travelling to Canterbury, telling tales to each other. He himself, as is well known, borrowed from Boccacio, who had his well-heeled cast of characters relating stories to each other while sitting out the plague. Nair's characters, too, are singularly life-affirming." Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* focuses on the heroine Akhilandeshwari, or Akhila, a forty-five-year-old spinster working as an income tax clerk whose life has been defined by familial duty and strict social roles. Constantly playing in roles assigned by others as daughter, sister, aunt, and breadwinner, Akhila never had the luxury of defining her own self or her own desires. The story picks up when she takes a solo train ride to the seashore town of Kanyakumari, an act that denotes physical and existential freedom. She is attempting independence for the first time in her life, trying to break free from the social norms of her traditional Tamil Brahmin upbringing.

Along the way, Akhila ends up in a women-only train compartment, the eponymous "ladies coupe" with five other women, each of whom embodies a different aspect of womanhood. Janaki, a spoiled but insecure wife and mother; Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher held captive in a loveless marriage to an egotistical husband; Prabha Devi, a conventionally compliant woman whose perspective is

transformed through contact with modern recreational culture; Sheela, a sensitive teenager gifted with intuitive perception; and Marikolanthu, a woman whose tragedy and loss of innocence continue to inform her character. Through their personal confessions and life history, Akhila is induced to look at her own repressed desires and hidden fears. Akhila begins the conversation after a preliminary introduction. She says:

> As far as I am concerned, marriage is unimportant, companionship, yes I would like that. The problem is I wish to live my myself but everyone tells me that a woman can't live alone. What do you think? Can a woman live by herself? (Nair, p. 21)
>
> To this her fellow traveller Janaki replied, "why should a woman live by herself? There is always a man who is willing to be with her."(Nair, p. 21)

Janaki, the eldest among the women in the *Ladies Coupé*, recounts a life marked by affection, duty, and quiet endurance. Married at eighteen to Prabhakar, she shared with him a bond rooted in mutual respect and emotional warmth. Together they raised their son, Siddharth, with care, only to face disillusionment when his marriage altered his temperament and estranged him from his parents. The ensuing emotional distance compelled Janaki and Prabhakar to withdraw from their son's home. Throughout her life, Janaki embodied the roles of devoted wife, nurturing mother, and accommodating mother-in-law and each defined by selflessness and stability. Yet, within the reflective space of the coupe, she recognises that beneath her dependence lies an enduring strength. Her quiet resilience and capacity to adapt reveal a woman who, despite conforming to familial expectations, preserved an inner core of autonomy and emotional intelligence.

Sheela's narrative in *Ladies Coupé* offers an important reflection on childhood, loss, and the formative power of feminine wisdom. Her bond with her grandmother, Ammumma, shapes her understanding of dignity and moral awareness. Even in illness, Ammumma's grace and self-discipline affirm a quiet strength that profoundly influences Sheela's perception of beauty and resilience. A crucial episode arises when Ammumma forbids Sheela from visiting a friend's house, a prohibition later revealed as a protective gesture rooted in the trauma of another child's abuse. This moment awakens in Sheela an early consciousness of

boundaries and self-preservation. The death of Ammumma deepens Sheela's awareness of womanhood, as she honours her grandmother's memory through ritual care and remembrance. Through Sheela's recollections, Anita Nair delicately addresses the realities of child sexual abuse and the silent vigilance women maintain across generations. The narrative captures how emotional inheritance and intuitive strength shape a young girl's evolving sense of identity within a world marked by unspoken dangers and societal restraint.

"Love is a colourless, volatile liquid. Love ignites and burns. Love leaves no residue – neither smoke nor ash. Love is a poison masquerading as the spirit of Wine."(Nair, p. 104) Margaret Shanti's account in *Ladies Coupé* unfolds as a study of repression, trauma, and gradual self-assertion within a patriarchal marriage. Initially enamoured of her husband, Ebenezer Paulraj, Margaret soon discerns the subtle coercion concealed beneath his affection and intellect. Her individuality is stifled by his self-absorption and rigid ideals of womanhood. The coerced termination of her pregnancy becomes the decisive rupture that transforms emotional compliance into awakening. In her reflection, Margaret conceives of herself as water—fluid yet potent—capable of both sustaining and eroding. This metaphor encapsulates her journey from vulnerability to self-possession. By manipulating Ebenezer's vanity through his appetite, she quietly destabilizes his authority, reclaiming a sense of power denied to her. Through Margaret's transformation, Anita Nair exposes the psychological mechanisms of control that sustain marital patriarchy while illuminating the subtle forms of female resistance. The narrative thus reveals emancipation not as defiance alone, but as an inward reclamation of selfhood and dignity within a culture of silenced women.

The immediate first-hand experience in Ladies Coupé that followed was that of Prabha Devi whose life journey encapsulates the silent negation of women in family circles and social mesh, though one is fooled by the sheen of material well-being. Right from a young age, Prabha Devi had been denied emotional acknowledgement by her father, who considered her presence an inauspicious sign for his business transactions. This superstition ended up creating a father-daughter relationship that was a far cry from the warm, but only practical, involvement of her mother, who saw her daughter as a safeguard for domestic skills and heirlooms. Within this milieu of the home, Prabha

Devi herself was repeatedly neglected emotionally and turned into less of an active individual and more of a passive recipient.

The convent school is a space that not only serves as an educational institution but also a disciplinary space in which bourgeois notions of womanhood are insisted upon. She later married Jagadeesh, a rich diamond merchant, and had a decent and happy married life on the surface. Prabha Devi was always thanking her stars and was content in the socially permitted privileges of a domestic woman. In this context, Prabha Devi's decision to learn swimming takes on symbolic significance. The action is a metaphor for self-help, flexibility and recovering control. She was determined to master swimming without anyone to teach her, without any guidance or push at all back from the norms of passive dependence implanted into her very being as a child. In her story, the water represents both an alien land and a space where she is changed. It is in this environment that she starts to form a self-defined identity, one which comes from her experiences. Even with everything that one could call life's comforts wrapped around them, Prabha Devi's life profoundly explains an assertion in modern feminism: the pursuit of a life where identity is formed is far greater, even if the person's existence seems outwardly stable.

Anita Nair, through the life of Prabha Devi, makes an argument against the so-called comforts of a household and domestication that women passionately crusade for and shows us the far more valuable crusade these women instead take upon themselves as silent warriors: finding meaning beyond their everyday life dictated by society. Prabha Devi's journey is one of metaphorical swimming where she learns to gracefully glide between the boundaries of tradition and the individual strife for unparalleled freedom, which paralleled her self-discovery.

> "The sixth passenger rolled her magazine and said, 'I'm not telling you that women are weak. Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally."(Nair, pp. 209-210)

The final testimony in *Ladies Coupé* comes from Marikolanthu, whose narrative serves as the most viscerally tragic and socially charged account of gendered violence and marginalisation. A survivor of sexual

assault, Marikolanthu recounts her traumatic past with raw honesty. Born into poverty and denied formal education, she occupied the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, both economically and culturally. From a young age, she was burdened with adult responsibilities, contributing to her family's survival by working in the household of the affluent Chettiar family.

Her life was irrevocably altered at the age of nineteen when Murugesan, a relative within the Chettiar household, violated her physically and emotionally. The assault destroyed not only her bodily autonomy but also her sense of self, leaving deep psychological scars. Her youth and innocence were stolen, and in her confusion and trauma, she initially processed the violation through denial—treating the experience as an unbearable nightmare rather than confronting its harsh reality. The violence resulted in an unplanned pregnancy, which further alienated her from her own body and emotions. Her response to the birth of her son, Muthu, was marked by deep resentment and detachment. Unable to reconcile the child with the circumstances of his conception, she distanced herself entirely, leaving the care of the infant to her mother. Only after her mother's death did Marikolanthu reluctantly assume responsibility for the child. Over time, however, her attitude evolved. With emotional maturity and self-reflection, she came to regret the pain she had inflicted on Muthu through her indifference and eventually embraced him with compassion and maternal acceptance.

Marikolanthu's journey is one of profound transformation-from a position of voiceless suffering to an assertion of independence and self-worth. Despite enduring one of the most dehumanising experiences a woman can face, she refuses to let society's judgment define her. She chooses not to be shamed or silenced by the violence inflicted upon her. Instead, she seeks to live authentically, guided by her inner resolve and her belief in her intrinsic dignity. Anita Nair, through Marikolanthu's narrative, presents a powerful critique of class- and gender-based oppression, illuminating how systemic inequalities render women vulnerable to exploitation and erasure. Yet, Marikolanthu's refusal to internalise the stigma of victimhood reclaims her agency in a society eager to deny it. Her story is emblematic of a radical feminist vision, one that does not merely expose patriarchal violence but insists on the possibility of healing, reclamation, and self-definition beyond trauma.

Akhila's transformation forms the emotional and ideological core of the narrative. After engaging with the deeply personal and diverse stories of the five women she shares the train compartment with—Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolanthu—Akhila undergoes a significant shift in her perception of self, womanhood, and independence. Each story functions as a mirror and a challenge to her own internal conflicts, prompting her to re-evaluate the conventional, patriarchal roles she has performed throughout her life. Together, the stories narrated by her fellow travellers force Akhila to grapple with the primal question on which her life is premised: can a woman have a purposeful, happy life on her own terms, or must fulfilment necessarily be dependent on the presence of a man? The novel, therefore, is an arena for dialogue in which female agency, survival, and right to self-determination are interrogated with deep complexity.

The culmination of the novel suggests an affirmative answer. Akhila begins to believe that she does not need a man or society's approval to validate her existence. The act of undertaking the journey to Kanyakumari alone symbolises a metaphorical pilgrimage toward selfhood, and her decision to revisit her relationship with Hari on her own terms, possibly to reclaim it or perhaps to let it go, is emblematic of her newly acquired agency.

Anita Nair, through Akhila's transformation, dismantles the entrenched myth that a woman's completeness is contingent upon marriage or motherhood. Instead, she foregrounds the idea that selfhood is not derivative but autonomous. The novel closes not with finality, but with the quiet empowerment of a woman who has learned to listen, to reflect, and to choose—on her own terms. In doing so, Nair reimagines Indian womanhood not as a monolithic identity but as a multiplicity of voices, each valid, each powerful, and each deserving of space in both narrative and society.

Mistress: Identity Crisis and Self-Discovery

In literary studies, the intricate relationship between cultural conflict and identity is a pivotal area of exploration, particularly in narratives situated within multicultural societies. Cultural conflict arises when individuals or groups with differing cultural norms, values, or practices come into contact, often leading to tensions or

misunderstandings(Bhabha). These conflicts may be explicit, involving visible clashes over cultural customs, or implicit, manifesting as internal struggles tied to issues of identity and belonging (Said). Identity in such narratives is typically shaped by both self-perception and external recognition, deeply rooted in cultural heritage, social context, and individual experience(Hall). In multicultural frameworks, identity is rarely fixed; instead, it reflects a dynamic and hybrid construct formed at the intersection of diverse cultural influences(Clifford). Characters in these settings often find themselves negotiating fragmented identities, oscillating between their cultural origins and the influences of the surrounding environment.

Anita Nair's third novel *Mistress,* is situated within this literary tradition, offering a nuanced portrayal of characters profoundly affected by cultural conflicts and identity crises. *Mistress* is structurally organised into three distinct sections, each comprising nine chapters that align with the classical Indian aesthetic theory of 'Rasas'- the nine fundamental emotional states. These Rasas include Sringaram (love), Hasyam (humour), Karunam (compassion), Raudram (anger), Veeram (heroism), Bhayanakam (fear), Bibhatsam (disgust), Adbhutam (wonder), and Shantam (peace). Each chapter embodies one of these emotional essences, serving as a thematic lens through which the internal and external conflicts of the central characters are portrayed. The narrative unfolds across the geographical landscapes of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and the fictional town of Arabipattanam, and is delivered through a multi-voiced first-person perspective, allowing a rich exploration of individual subjectivities and emotional depth.

The opening prologue of *Mistress* sets the emotional and thematic undertone that resonates throughout the novel:

> Look at me. Look at my face. The naked face, devoid of colour and make-up, glitter and adornment. What have we here? The forehead, the eyebrows, the nostrils, the mouth, the chin, and thirty-two facial muscles. These are our tools and with these we shall fashion the language without words. The navarasa: love, contempt, sorrow, fury, courage, fear, disgust, wonder, peace.(Nair, *Mistress*, p. 1)

Radha's journey is marked by emotional conflict and societal pressure. Before marriage, she is everything a modern woman aspires to be: intelligent, attractive, and financially independent. However, her life takes an unexpected turn when she becomes involved with a senior colleague, believing his promises of leaving his wife to be with her. When she discovers that he has no intention of doing so and has a history of similar affairs, she is left devastated. To avoid public shame, her parents intervene, arranging for her to terminate the pregnancy and marry a man named Shyam, without truly considering her feelings. Although hesitant, Radha ultimately agrees, prioritising her family's reputation over her own desires. Her experience echoes Simone de Beauvoir's claim that society has long defined a woman's fate as inevitably tied to marriage: "The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage" (De Beauvoir,452).

The arrival of Christopher Stewart, a foreign traveller, marks a pivotal moment in the evolving relationship dynamics between Radha and Shyam. When Radha accompanies her uncle Koman and her husband to the railway station to receive Chris, she is unexpectedly drawn to him. His ability to pronounce her name, *Radha*, with unusual precision immediately captures her attention, signalling a subtle emotional shift. In contrast, Chris's mispronunciation of Shyam's name as "Sham" irritates Shyam, revealing a layer of insecurity masked by politeness. Nevertheless, Shyam puts on a gracious front, recognising the potential value Chris represents. Shyam sees Chris as an opportunity to elevate the visibility and prestige of his resort, Near-the-Nila, especially if Chris chooses to feature it favourably in his travel writing. Proudly, Shyam shares details of the resort's development and his personal accomplishments, positioning himself as a successful entrepreneur in front of the foreign guests. This initial encounter not only introduces Chris as a catalyst for forthcoming changes but also hints at deeper emotional and relational shifts that may unfold, particularly as Radha's curiosity and attraction begin to surface. Shyam says:

> Each time I look at Near-the-Nila, I feel a great frisson of excitement shoot through me. This is mine, I tell myself, all of it, from the concept to the last tile. If it wasn't for me, Shoranur would have remained a dying railway town. Now there is a tickle of life, which I have breathed into it. I, Shyam, twice removed poor

> nephew and outsider. It is I who have done this, nor the heaving bulwark of Radha's family.(Nair, *Mistress*, pp. 17-18)

Shyam's constant need to assert dominance in the marriage often manifests through his dismissal of Radha's opinions and preferences. While he occupies the space with confidence and control, Radha finds herself increasingly detached, merely observing rather than participating. Within the framework of their marriage, she feels imprisoned, emotionally stifled by a relationship that denies her equality. In Radha's eyes, she is no more than a treasured object; valued, perhaps, but not respected. She reflects that Shyam does not seek a partner but rather a mistress- someone to charm, please, and remain compliant. This internal conflict is poignantly captured in Radha's comparison of herself to a butterfly captured, pinned, and displayed, its delicate wings spread for admiration, yet painfully alive and yearning to escape.

> . . . I think that for Shyam, I am a possession. A much-cherished possession. That is my role in his life. He doesn't want an equal; what he wants is a mistress. Someone to indulge and someone to indulge him with feminine wiles. … I think of the butterfly I caught and pinned to a board when it was still alive, its wings spread so as to display the markings, obvious that somewhere within, a little heartbeat, yearning to fly.(Nair, *Mistress*, p. 53)

Radha longs for freedom, for the chance to unfold and reclaim her autonomy. Beneath her quiet demeanour lies a restlessness. She is waiting for the moment when she can step out of the psychological cage that Shyam's emotional coldness has built around her. His inability to truly connect or acknowledge her as an intellectual and emotional equal makes her invisible in the relationship, pushing her to question not only her marital role but her very identity as a woman. In search of comfort and emotional support, she turns to her uncle, Koman. During one of her visits, she is surprised and quietly pleased to find Chris sitting with him. As their eyes meet, a quiet yet unmistakable joy passes between them-an unspoken connection that momentarily lifts the weight she carries. Koman, ever perceptive, notices the tension and subtle energy in their gaze. Reflecting on what he sees, he compares the moment to the silent passion of Kathakali performances. He begins to contemplate:

> I think of Nala and Damyanti. Of lovers in Kathakali who embrace without actually doing so. Only an experienced veshakaaran, an actor with more than mere technique, can perform that embrace. With arms that do not touch the woman, and with only his eyes, he lets her know that he desires her.(Nair, *Mistress*, p. 29)

Over time, Koman begins to notice Radha's deepening feelings for Chris. Rather than reacting with disapproval or moral judgment, he finds himself quietly pleased. For the first time in years, he sees genuine happiness in his niece's eyes-something her marriage to Shyam has never brought her. Choosing empathy over interference, Koman decides to support Radha in whatever brings her fulfilment. He understands that the joy Radha now feels in Chris's presence has been absent throughout her eight years of married life. Wanting to build a bridge between their personal histories, he invites both Radha and Shyam to his home so he can share his past with Chris. Yet, Shyam grows increasingly uncomfortable. He becomes resentful of Radha's frequent visits to Koman's home and especially of her visible bond with Chris. Shyam's jealousy deepens as he witnesses Radha's emotional shift. Meanwhile, Radha herself is unsettled by the strength of her attraction to Chris. It takes her by surprise-this powerful connection that defies the boundaries of her existing life, forcing her to confront feelings she had long buried beneath duty and routine. As she reflects on it: "I don't understand what is happening to me, a married woman, a wife. When I married Shyam, I swore I never to flout the rules of custom again. How have I become so disdainful of honour, so contemptuous of convention? " (Nair, *Mistress*, p. 54). Though Radha's relationship with Chris is ultimately a betrayal of her marriage, she experiences it as a response to the emotional void and suppression she has long endured. For her, the affair becomes less about romantic fulfilment and more about reclaiming a sense of self. Yet, the moment their bond turns physical, Radha is overwhelmed by guilt. She started getting confused between her identity as a wife and herself. She says, "What can I do? You knew I was married. I didn't spring it on you, all of a sudden. Do you think I like lying, or that I enjoy this deception? It makes me feel sordid, too. It kills me, this guilt over what I am doing to Shyam. He has very frail sense of dignity and if someone found out about us, he wouldn't be able to handle it."(Nair, *Mistress*, p. 252)

Radha finds herself trapped between two competing emotions. On one hand, her relationship with Chris becomes a silent protest

against the restrictions Shyam has placed on her autonomy. On the other hand, her conscience constantly reminds her of the ethical cost of her actions. Radha confronts her inner thoughts and confesses to herself, "I feel disgust for what I am doing. Can anything be worth this repugnance? How much longer can I do this? This cheating, lying and pretence?"(Nair, *Mistress*, p. 290). Radha's attempt to challenge societal norms and understand her own moral boundaries through her relationship with Chris is filled with inner conflict. She neither fully escapes her marriage to Shyam nor finds lasting meaning in her affair. The relationship with Chris does not bring her the identity or freedom she hoped for. In the process, she breaks trust with both men and is left alone when Chris leaves for London. Upon learning she is pregnant, Radha decides to raise the child by herself. Surprisingly, Shyam accepts her and the unborn child, expressing love and support she had not expected from him. Radha confronts her own truth and confesses to herself:

> All my life, I have stumbled from one thing to another, persuading myself that this is how I should be. I have never behaved as if I have a mind of my own. I have never made a decision. I have let myself be swept along. Isn't it time I assumed some responsibility for my life? What will you do? I don't know. But I will, one of these days.(Nair, *Mistress*, p. 402)

At the end of the novel, Radha attains her self-realisation in bringing up her child by playing the role of a caring mother. Thus, the journey of Radha's life paves the way for her future happiness. In conclusion, Anita Nair's *Mistress* offers a compelling portrayal of one woman's search for selfhood in a world shaped by rigid traditions and social expectations. Radha's journey serves as a powerful lens through which the novel explores the emotional and psychological complexities of identity formation. As Radha navigates through love, duty, guilt, and desire, the narrative captures her inner struggle to define herself beyond the roles imposed upon her. Her choices, especially the emotionally charged relationship with Chris reveal both her need for connection and her yearning for freedom. While she tries to break away from societal norms, she is also forced to face the consequences of doing so. Through Radha's evolving relationships and her quiet moments of introspection, Nair sheds light on the deeper tensions between personal fulfilment and the constraints of tradition.

A Comparative Analysis

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* and *Mistress* stand as remarkable portrayals of women's search for identity and selfhood in the context of Indian society. Through characters like Akhila and Radha, Nair brings to light the struggles of women who strive to define themselves beyond the limitations imposed by patriarchy. Her narratives give voice to women from varied social and economic backgrounds, showing that the desire for independence and dignity is universal among them. The women in her novels refuse to conform to traditional expectations and instead undertake a journey toward self-awareness and emotional freedom. Nair's writing reflects a distinctly Indian perspective, sensitive to the cultural and moral frameworks that shape women's lives, yet questioning the norms that silence their individuality. Her characters, grounded in everyday reality, express the inner turmoil and resilience of women caught between personal longing and social duty. Both *Ladies Coupé* and *Mistress* reveal that liberation is not merely external but deeply psychological and a process of recognising one's worth and choosing one's path with courage. In depicting this evolution, Nair reaffirms her belief in education, introspection, and emotional honesty as instruments of empowerment, making her novels significant contributions to the ongoing discourse on women's emancipation in Indian literature.

Conclusion

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* and *Mistress* together encapsulate the evolving discourse of postfeminist thought in contemporary Indian fiction. Both novels reveal the struggle of women to negotiate freedom within the constraints of social and emotional expectations, thereby offering a nuanced redefinition of autonomy. Nair's protagonists—Akhila and Radha—are emblematic of modern Indian women who refuse to be confined by traditional ideals yet do not entirely reject their cultural roots. Instead, they seek meaning through self-reflection, emotional courage, and the acceptance of personal responsibility. As Debotri Dhar observes, Nair's *Mistress* "dislocates centre–periphery, global–local and universal–particular binaries," situating female desire within a dynamic space of self-definition rather than simple rebellion(Dhar). Similarly, *Ladies Coupé* celebrates the power of introspection and female solidarity as transformative tools that enable women to redefine their identities

within patriarchal frameworks. Sharma and Chauhan note that Nair's women transcend subjugation through resilience and introspection, portraying the shift from feminist resistance to postfeminist self-awareness.(Sharma and Chauhan) Through these narratives, Nair affirms that liberation is not merely an act of opposition but a journey of self-realisation, where women reclaim their voices and assert individuality within the evolving socio-cultural fabric of India.

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2.

Subversion or Submission?: Critiquing Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya*

Camellia Kumar

Abstract: After controversy arose following the release of *Ahalya* (2015), amid allegations that it bears an uncanny resemblance to a Roald Dahl story, Sujoy Ghosh addressed the matter in a tweet stating that, "My film, as is evident, is an age-old myth, slightly adult in nature, adapted with a feminist twist...." Consistent with Sujoy Ghosh's tweet, this paper retraces Ghosh's 14-minute short film *Ahalya* to critically assess its status as a feminist reimagining of the original myth to investigate whether Ghosh's adaptation truly reinterprets the patriarchal narrative under the guise of empowerment or actively subverts it. This revaluation of Ghosh's purported feminist interpretation of the original myth is attempted through questions that ask if Ahalya is truly autonomous or if she is merely another woman inscribed within a male-authored narrative, enacting a form of rebellion restricted by a new type of confinement. Framed through Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" as articulated in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Ashish Rajadhyaksha's extension of this psychoanalytic "male gaze" into an ideologically coded and institutional domain as expounded in "Viewership and Democracy in Indian Cinema" (2000) [2], and ultimately but very briefly Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), this paper attempts to evaluate whether Ahalya genuinely challenges the contents from which it draws its structure, or inadvertently upholds the very norms it seeks to critique; whether Ahalya merely reconfigures traditional gendered frameworks, or offers a meaningful critique that unsettles them.

Keywords: Myth, feminism, patriarchy, female body, reinterpretation

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Sujoy Ghosh, in the realm of contemporary Indian cinema, has gained prominence for shaping storylines that regularly and repeatedly gravitate towards resilient, complicated, yet sophisticated female protagonists instead of simply incorporating them into pre-established templates that validate gendered hierarchies. Ghosh, in fact, thoughtfully reforms genres such as crime dramas, psychological thrillers, and action-packed mystery films to defy sexist-stereotypes that have ceaselessly suppressed women or restricted them to mere ancillary roles.[1] In a similar trajectory, Sujoy Ghosh's 14-minute thriller, *Ahalya* (2015), follows the trend of feminist storytelling by diverging from the myth of Ahalya in *The Ramayana*, on which it is based. Upon diving into the traditional myth, one would recount how Brahma's embodiment of ideal beauty, Ahalya, despite being given in marriage to Sage Gautama by him, becomes the site of the valorous yet sensuous King Indra's carnal desires. Indra, therefore, driven by a desire to consummate a physical relationship with her, disguises himself as Gautama and crafts an illusion for Ahalya that he is her husband, and, under the spell of this illusion, Ahalya is deceived into an intimate union with Indra. Ahalya's husband, Gautama, nonetheless perceives this deception to be an act of infidelity, becomes incensed, and transforms Ahalya into a stone through his ascetic prowess. However, Ghosh's *Ahalya* intriguingly inverses the episode of Ahalya's petrification—into a state of insentience and immobility—by imprisoning Indra's soul and life into a doll, and rendering him voiceless and powerless. This subversion of the original myth's gendered penance in *Ahalya*, apparently gestures towards Ghosh's characteristic pattern of creating robust female characters, but ultimately uncovers a more nuanced and convoluted relationship with patriarchy. Instead of offering a departure from the long-established gender beliefs and norms, *Ahalya* may be seen as operating within the very structures it seems to critique. Therefore, through an analytical breakdown, this paper seeks to argue that although *Ahalya* apparently offers a feminist twist, turning the once-punished woman into an individual of autonomy and retribution, it does not successfully subvert the content from which it draws its structure. Framed through Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" as articulated in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Ashish Rajadhyaksha's extension of this psychoanalytic "male gaze" into an ideologically coded and institutional domain as expounded in "Viewership and Democracy in Indian Cinema" (2000), [2] and ultimately, but very briefly, using insights from Angela McRobbie's book *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), the paper attempts to establish that *Ahalya* upholds the patriarchal norms

it seeks to critique through a more stylised and seductive form that is palatable to the patriarchal culture.

Looking through Indra's Eyes: Constructing the Male Gaze

Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya* opens with the chime of Inspector Indra Sen (played by Tota Roy Chowdhury) ringing an electronic doorbell, an ordinary marker of his arrival at the residence of Goutam Sadhu (played by Soumitra Chatterjee). Yet this moment is deeply loaded—it contributes to the larger narrative of his entrance into an eerie, unknowing, and deceptive space, and indicates the onset of the binary between fact and fantasy, objective truth and optical illusion. As the door hinges open, the enigmatic Ahalya (played by Radhika Apte) is unveiled to Indra, as well as us, the spectators (viewers). And right from that moment, the seductive and captivating presence of Ahalya is scrupulously crafted through the lexicon of the camera. The camera not only pans to Ahalya from bottom to top, but the light cast on her by the camera setup also lends an almost dreamlike quality to her movements. In fact, the camera's visual framing of Ahalya through Indra's eyes by isolating her in tight close-ups, lingering on her body, and dwelling on her gestures aligns with the concept of "male gaze." "Male gaze," especially as elucidated by the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, expounds that while visual representation (primarily mainstream cinema) often situates the spectators in a hyper-masculine, heterosexual subject position, it objectifies the woman on screen through a dominant visual lens. Since the 1970s, this theoretical construct has been a subject of extensive discussion not only in film studies but also predominantly within the second-wave feminist discourse, emphasising how female characters are rendered as spectacles "to-be-looked-at." And, this concept of "male gaze" which functions as a mechanism of control by presenting women primarily as objects of desire rather than subjects with agency, and, posits that visual media often reduces female characters to objects of male desire (Tores et al.), is strongly reflected in *Ahalya*.

Ahalya, from the outset, is framed within the shots that invite the male gaze while Indra becomes the proxy for the camera's perspective. Indra's "male gaze," in fact, mirrors the camera's and is charged with desire and curiosity as he is drawn by Ahalya's beauty, composure, and quiet allure. This visual framing that operates through Indra's gaze is, as Mulvey points out, rendering the woman as an object to be looked at:

> ... women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with her appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey 11)

Ahalya, in fact, becomes not only a cinematic embodiment of "to-be-looked-at-ness" through Indra's gaze but also becomes the gaze through which we, the spectators, are invited to perceive Ahalya. And, this encountering of Ahalya, by the spectators, not as an autonomous subject but as an object of masculine visual economy, is further deepened when seen through Ashish Rajadhyaksha's theorisation in "Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema" wherein he argues that mainstream cinema constitutes its spectators not only by reflecting how they see but also by indoctrinating as well as instructing their way of seeing. In fact, cinema itself, according to Rajadhyaksha's deduction, is a self-sustaining system/ institution in which the act of seeing is not unconstrained but calculated, and the "film-going spectators" become the constituted subject of the "apparatus" that mediates between "the screen itself, and the filmed and projected moving image" (270). In this network, therefore, the spectators' perception, much like the citizen's participation in democracy, is organised through an institutional contract that appears spontaneous but is cautiously structured. So, applying Rajadhyaksha's theory to *Ahalya*, it can be argued that Ahalya's "to-be-looked-at-ness" is reproduced institutionally since the spectator's act of looking is already "managed through an encounter between release and reception" (271).

Ghosh's portrayal of Ahalya through Indra's gaze, then, does not merely remain restricted to a reflection of Indra's desire but also hints at an activation of a larger cinematic mechanism that incorporates all the spectators as participants within Indra's gaze. Ghosh, therefore, transforms Indra's gaze into an apparatus that institutionally interpellates Ahalya into a site for scopophilia—designed to be gazed at, desired, and consumed visually—for all the spectators. In fact, the apparent contradiction between cinematic institutions granting spectators the illusion of "choosing" what to see, while ensuring that the spectators' choices are already structured within its frame of intelligibility, is rendered all the more explicit through the visual codes employed in *Ahalya*. For instance, when Ahalya walks across the room, offers tea to Indra, or even glances over her shoulder, the camera treats these little but significant moments not as narrative progression but as the site of erotic visual pleasure. Even Ahalya's silence seems intended for visual indulgence because she does not speak unless prompted, and

when she does, her voice is measured, calm, and sensuous. The spectators' pleasure, in this manner, stems from how Ahalya appears—a form of scopophilia that aligns with Mulvey's assertion:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. (Mulvey 11)

Ahalya's presence in the film, despite its mythological allusion and supernatural twist, is not active in narrative terms—her power is symbolic/passive, suspended within the visual realm. Although it may initially seem that Ahalya exercises control by seducing Indra and luring him into a trap, Indra culminates in being the narrative's motor since his arrival initiates the plot, his choices create tension, and his gaze structures the viewer's own. Ahalya, on the other hand, remains reactive and decorative, her supposed power being part of the phantasmic image that is constructed around her. In this sense, Ahalya's primary function to be "looked-at," interpreted, and desired does not escape the patriarchal cinematic logic that Mulvey critiques—*Ahalya* becomes an aesthetically seductive form in which the old binary of "active/male" and "passive/female" persists unchanged.

Song as Spectacle: Passive Femininity in "Esho Esho Amar Ghore Esho"

Laura Mulvey's concept of "active/male" and "passive/female" is reinforced through the structuring of Indra Sen's gaze, extending beyond visual framing into the domain of the auditory. Sound in Ghosh's *Ahalya*—specifically the tactical use of the Rabindra Sangeet "Esho Esho Amar Ghore Esho"—is an important cue that powerfully heightens the dynamics of the spectators' gaze. "Esho Esho Amar Ghore Esho" (which translates to "Welcome, Welcome to My Home") functions not only as a provocative invitation but also as a beguiling veil, drawing Indra Sen into the illusory space of the diegesis. Within the diegetic world, Ahalya becomes the object of Indra's gaze, while outside the diegesis (for the viewers) too, Ahalya becomes an unconscious desire made visible, crafted by the camera and soundtracked by "Esho Esho Amar Ghore Esho." However, it is important to recognise that Tagore's "Esho Esho Amar Ghore Esho" (Lyric 64), part of the Prema Parjāy (Love-Themed Section) in *Gitabitan*, delve into the intimate, emotional, and spiritual

dimensions of love. The transformation of this sentimental yet devotional lyric into a tool of sensuality, deeply detached from the original musical register, is an intentional cinematic invention by Ghosh to serve the apparatus of the male gaze. This visual as well as aural grammar of deliberate reorientation of the emotive register of the Rabindra Sangeet to align with the male gaze is, as Mulvey notes, a classic instance when "the image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man" (17) deepens the film's patriarchal coding.

Nevertheless, attention should be drawn to the fact that "Esho Esho Amar Ghore Esho," on the surface, seems to challenge patriarchal norms since Ahalya's very act of inviting Indra, with the repeated invocation "esho" (come/welcome), into her "ghor" (which literally translates to home, but can also refer to the inner self or the soul's dwelling) signifies possession, control, and dominance over the diegetic space which has traditionally belonged to men in visual storytelling. However, when this event is placed within the broader narrative and visual grammar of the film, the fact that the apparent agency witnessed is not autonomy but a constructed illusion, choreographed to sustain male visual and auditory pleasure, becomes evident. What becomes even more evident is the fact that even though Ahalya seems to beckon Indra into her home, her home/ space is mystical. Her home, in fact, is positioned beyond the confines of realism because it erases the disarray as well as distinctiveness, chaos as well as control of a flesh-and-blood woman's space. It becomes an immaculate, museum-like, mythical space without any bustling rhythm of domestic life wherein Ahalya's passivity is aestheticised—she becomes a part of the home's décor, but does not have dominion over the home. In fact, seeing Ahalya herself as a décor—figurine-like, poised and passive, her vitality subsumed into an aesthetic tableau—sharpens the point that Ahalya is not an active subject but a living extension of her sculptor-husband Goutam Sadhu's taste. Ahalya's home/ "ghor," in that sense, becomes not her lived-space but her sculptor-husband's art gallery wherein Ahalya is the most prised exhibit. The paradox, then, is that even though Ahalya appears to be the one extending the invitation, this invitation is a performance scripted by the male imagination, both diegetically and extra-diegetically. This paradox, in fact, manifests Mulvey's concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness," now extended to "to-be-listened-to-ness,"[3] with acute precision:

> …the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium (Mulvey 11)

Ahalya embodies this dual role flawlessly since she seems to neither own the home nor the extension of the invitation.

In fact, the argument that "Esho Esho Amar Ghore Esho" amplifies that Ahalya's "home" and her "invitation," like her body, is passivated and aestheticised twice over in order to serve rather than subvert the male gaze gets support from Rajadhyaksha who reminds us that what we "are seeing on screen is not identical to what the camera saw" (287). On-screen display, Rajadhyaksha argues, is a "narrative contract" since it is a result of conciliation shaped by "that image, … edited, and with a mixed soundtrack" (287). This contract, which ensures that every image or song is the product of an implicit agreement between the filmmaker and the spectators to read the coherent meaning of what is being shown on the screen, is created through deliberate manipulation—or what we call to be an "apparatus"—in order to mould our way of seeing and listening. So, applying Rajadhyaksha's "narrative contract" to *Ahalya*, it can be asserted that although "Esho Esho Amar Ghore Esho" works like a "mixed soundtrack" that guides the spectators toward accepting that Ahalya is proactive in extending the invitation to Indra, this "invitation" is not an unmediated act of female desire but a constructed cinematic illusion that is arranged, edited, and "mixed" by her sculptor-husband Goutam Sadhu, the male controller and director figure of Ahalya's life.

The Sculptor-Husband: The Architect of Scripted Governance

Upon diving into the myth of Ahalya in *The Ramayana*, it would be recounted that it was Indra who was captivated by Ahalya's elegance and transcendental allure, and consequently, it was he who devised a deliberate plan to engage in physical intimacy with Ahalya. Ahalya's husband, the revered Sage Gautama, however, remained entirely uninvolved in any such machinations. Upon later discovering that Indra had executed a deceptive scheme by exerting his divinely endowed faculties to impersonate Sage Gautama, and that Ahalya may have realised the ruse yet chose not to resist the encounter, he was deeply aggrieved by the incident. Sage Gautama, thus, incensed by Ahalya's infidelity, turned her into a stone through his ascetic prowess. However, in Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya*, it is not Indra but rather Ahalya's sculptor-

husband Goutam Sadhu who executes and orchestrates an intricate design to ensnare and entrap Indra through the very desire that had been kindled within Indra for Ahalya. This desire, however, is itself artfully incited by Ahalya's deliberate acts of seduction, which, in turn, has not been Ahalya's autonomous gestures but an integral component of Goutam Sadhu's broader and premeditated stratagem. In fact, it is not only that Ahalya's acts of seduction are artfully orchestrated under the immaculate direction of Goutam Sadhu, but also that Goutam Sadhu, by casually discussing Ahalya's appeal and allure, and, his inadequacy in bed, publicly situates Ahalya's body as an object of "male gaze"—initially for Indra, and later for the spectators. In fact, by openly remarking about Ahalya's desirability and his sexual limitations, Goutam Sadhu constructs an erotic image of Ahalya that effectuates Laura Mulvey's conviction that women are objects for male consumption and male visual pleasure:

> Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire (Mulvey 11)

Ahalya too attests being projected as an "erotic spectacle," and, this action of hers can be clarified through Ashish Rajadhyaksha's insight of the narrator as the mastermind as elucidated in "Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema." The narrator, Rajadhyaksha writes, "is clearly a figure of authority, the one who will tell you 'how to look'" (Rajadhyaksha 291). In fact, the narrator, for Rajadhyaksha, is someone who initially acknowledges the viewers' gaze but later asserts, "'no, it is not you who is looking'" (291). And, Ahalya's sculptor-husband, Goutam Sadhu, exactly performs this role of the narrator through his double gesture of simultaneously granting as well as withdrawing visual agency. By publicly discussing Ahalya's divine beauty and her desirability in deliberately provocative manner to Indra's curiosity, Goutam Sadhu positions Ahalya's body as an object of male desire and permits Indra (as well as us, the viewers) to conceive Ahalya as a sexualised object. And, through this act of his, he not only projects Ahalya as an "erotic spectacle" (Mulvey 11) but also "acknowledges" (Rajadhyaksha 291) the viewers' gaze. In fact, Ahalya's momentary chastisement of Goutam Sadhu for sharing intimate aspects of their private life to Indra is yet another scripted performance of hers since that chastisement itself is a "spectacle" (Mulvey 11) curated by Goutam

Sadhu to elicit sexual arousal in Indra for Ahalya. So, a while later when Goutam Sadhu invokes the connection between the mythical past and the present through the retelling of a particular anecdote from *The Ramayana*—whose "basic storyline" ("Ahalya" 07:15) Indra asserts to be familiar with—and presents Indra with a magical stone through which he can impersonate Goutam Sadhu, one might well assume that whatever follows is likely a stratum of execution within Goutam Sadhu's aesthetic world. And so it proves, for when Indra subsequently visits Ahalya in her room upstairs, she (taking him to be her husband Goutam Sadhu) questions him regarding his deceitful claim to Indra regarding his sexual inadequacy and seductively urges him to end his interaction with Indra and return to her for engaging in sexual intimacy. On the surface, it might appear that Indra is seizing control by "seeing" as well as "possessing" (Rajadhyaksha 290) Ahalya, but in truth, the bedroom scene is a perfectly timed narrative trap. Because even though Indra believes that he is "seeing" and "possessing" Ahalya, his act of "seeing" and "possessing" — be it his experience of desire or his sense of transgression or even his sensation of intimacy — is a "spectacle" (Mulvey 11) contained within Goutam Sadhu's larger orchestration.

Goutam Sadhu, in this sense, plays the role of Rajadhyaksha's narrator who initially "acknowledges" Indra's (as well as the viewers') desire to see and possess Ahalya and appears to serve Indra (and by extension, the viewers) with what seems to be the fulfilment of sensuality, but at the moment of gratification, reclaims total control by resonating Rajadhyaksha's "'no, it is not you who is looking'" (Rajadhyaksha 291). This moment of Goutam Sadhu's perceived mastery wherein Indra's desire to see and to possess Ahalya is turned back upon him materialises Rajadhyaksha's claim that any gaze other than the narrator's is not only far from being autonomous but is also a product of the narration. Indra's transformation into an immobile doll, therefore, literalises the idea that, besides being a supernatural act, this transformation is a symbolic culmination of his narrative submission to Goutam Sadhu. Indra's petrification, in fact, stands as the physical embodiment of Rajadhyaksha's "'no, it is not you who is looking'" because despite his eyes open, he sees nothing since Goutam Sadhu as the narrator apparently created the impression that Indra is "looking" but finally reclaimed it to prove that the gaze never belonged to him but has always been his illusion.

Based on this, Indra's transformation into a doll is a punishment as well as a revelation of the fact that he not only desired but also desired within the limits of an image that Goutam Sadhu scripted. So, although it might appear that Ahalya, through the initiation of her act of seduction, subverts traditional gender norms and positions herself as the dominant figure in her intimacy with Indra and later renders him an immobile doll, her autonomy is actually pre-scripted within her sculptor-husband Goutam Sadhu's experiment.

A Feminist Correction or a Post-feminist Irony?

Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya*, as he himself claimed in a tweet, "is an age-old myth, slightly adult in nature, adapted with a feminist twist...." And rightly so, since at first glance *Ahalya*'s shift of agency from the man to the woman, wherein Indra is punished while Ahalya remains unscathed, seems to offer a feminist correction of the mythic injustice recorded in *The Ramayana*. Yet when *Ahalya* is examined through the theoretical lens of Laura Mulvey and Ashish Rajadhyaksha, it emerges not as a feminist work of art but rather a sophisticated illusion of feminism, which aestheticises the notion of empowerment but never actualises it. In fact, Ghosh's *Ahalya*, which aligns with the idea of feminism but never questions the patriarchal machinery that orchestrates Ahalya's agency, exemplifies the phenomenon of post-feminism. Post-feminism, as articulated by Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), is a contemporary cultural formation which does not clearly denounce feminism but rather incorporates its language and imagery by re-embedding female empowerment within the structures of male control. And, Ghosh's Ahalya, being structurally scripted by two male directors, Goutam Sadhu and Sujoy Ghosh, precisely serves this dynamic. While within the diegesis, Ahalya's sculptor-husband Goutam Sadhu manoeuvres Ahalya in all respects; extradiegetically, the male director, Sujoy Ghosh, scripts her as the femme fatale archetype that viewers often mistake for empowerment. In this sense, Ahalya's apparent empowerment is inconsequential for a structural transformation, yet it becomes a scripted performance which, in McRobbie's words, is a "notional form of equality" (McRobbie 2) permitted "in exchange for feminism" (1). Ahalya's equality is "notional", and she embodies the transaction of "feminism" perfectly because although Ahalya is granted the appearance of autonomy to indicate that the goals of feminism have been fulfilled, her autonomy is theatrical instead of being transformative since the underlying hierarchy

where the male directors (Goutam Sadhu and Sujoy Ghosh) dictate her, remains unchanged. In fact, McRobbie argues that this kind of theatricality is one of the most insidious effects of post-feminism since it provides a reassuring sense of closure to both women and men — while the notion that "feminism is no longer needed" (8) allows women to believe that they "have now won the battle for equality" (57) without any subtle feminist politics, similarly it comforts men because after the apparent easing of gender tensions, they are absolved of dominance from feminist critique. And, Ghosh's *Ahalya* strictly conforms to this comfort since the film's reversal of the mythical injustice provokes the viewers to sustain the illusion that patriarchy has transformed to rectify itself. So, while the viewers feel progressive in perceiving the woman on screen as an embodiment of strength and resilience, the foundational frameworks of male predominance remain unchallenged. In this way, *Ahalya* exemplifies the postfeminist constraint in which the notion of equality is transacted at the cost of the dematerialisation of feminism.

In fact, when read through Angela McRobbie's theoretical framework, Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya* stands as a paradigmatic post-feminist work of art. Because even though *Ahalya*, through its acknowledgement of historical injustice and reversal of gender roles, takes feminism into account, its alignment with McRobbie's emphasis that post-feminist media landscape considers feminism only to perform "the undoing of feminism" (5) by transforming it into a gesture rather than a politics, positions *Ahalya* in a post-feminist settlement which McRobbie calls the "aftermath" of feminism. Had *Ahalya* truly been feminist, it would have dismantled the moral and sexual double standards of the original myth. But here, with Ahalya's sexuality being instrumentalised and Goutam Sadhu wielding the means to trap Indra, it confines to the reversal of surface roles wherein the patriarchal hierarchy remains unchanged. Ahalya, then, belongs to what can be called a post-feminist consolation, but not a feminist correction.

Notes

1. Ghosh's landmark feminist thriller *Kahaani* (2012) indicates an intentional deviation from the formulaic Bollywood female archetype by presenting Vidya Bagchi (the lead character) as not a docile character but a dynamic driving force fitted with the ability to destabilise the trope of defenceless and fragile women. Likewise, his 2019 thriller *Badla* (a retelling of Oriol Paulo's *The Invisible Guest*) is crafted by a stratified and delusive narrative that ultimately foregrounds the psychic complexity and cognitive depth of the female protagonist. Even Ghosh's

2023 gripping psychological drama, *Jaane Jaan* (based on Keigo Higashino's *The Devotion of Suspect X*), breaks the "damsel in distress" trope when the single mother, Maya (the lead female character), takes decisive action to assert her authority and autonomy by defending herself and her daughter in extreme circumstances.

2. Ashish Rajadhyaksha's essay "Democracy and Viewership in the Cinema" was originally published in 1998 under the title "Who's Looking?: Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema" in *Cultural Dynamics* (vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 171-95). However, as all quotations and references in my paper are drawn from the later anthologised version, titled *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, by Ravi S. Vasudevan (2000) rather than the original 1998 journal, I have cited the 2000 publication throughout, both in-text citations and in the Works Cited list.

3. Laura Mulvey never formalised "to-be-listened-to-ness" as a term, but here it has been used as an auditory counterpart to her well-known "to-be-looked-at-ness" from "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).

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3.

Mythopoetic Sustainability: Reading Sita through Ecofeminism and Archetypal Consciousness

**Chitra Jha*

Abstract: This paper explores how Indian mythology is an example of ecology ethics and feminine resilience through a reconstruction of the narrative of Sita from the perspectives of ecofeminism and that of archetypes. The current study frames Sita's discourse, from her birth to expulsion, being kidnapped to returning home, as a symbolic articulation of the female body and the living earth, which would include some contemporary adaptations such as that of Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Namita Gokhale's *In Search of Sita*. The methodological approach taken has been interpretive and qualitative in nature, incorporating a close textual analysis, Jungian archetypal psychology (as explained by his proponents Carl Jung and Maud Bodkin), and ecofeminist theory (informed by Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant). The research is based on the following questions: (1) What does Sita's epic journey represent from the perspective of ethical and environmental consciousness? (2) How do modern feminist persons transform their experiences of suffering into eco-spiritual statements? (3) Is there a viable paradigm for making a connection between gender, nature and ethics in mythological narratives again? The analysis proves that the story of Sita moves beyond the bounds of patriarchy by using nature as an ethical co-pilot and an agent of rejuvenation instead of as a passive background. Her departure and return represent biological cycles of decay and regeneration, which the study calls "mythopoetic sustainability." The paper argues in favour of the conception of mythology as a dynamic epistemology, in which Sita is once again re-centred as a kind of environmental archetype. This epistemological position creates some crossing between spiritual ecology and feminist resistance and makes ancient narrative into a repository within which visionary voices have inscribed visions of ecology that are relevant to the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Archetypal Criticism, Ecofeminism, Environmental Ethics, Feminine Ecology, Indian Mythology

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Introduction

Sita's story serves as a symbol of integrity, perseverance and moral steadfastness and is seen as a good influence in terms of both time and space. Nonetheless, this cultural ideal continues to be reframed in her cognition as a deeper ecological and spiritual comprehension, consequently provoking the reconfigured relationship of hers with the Earth. Born on earth and finally coming back to earth, Sita embodies the archetypal approach that strives for balance between human ethics and natural environment; she is a scholar's example of a living cosmology. Within the *Ramayana*, Sita's story of the transition from palace to forest, and of her escape from captivity and her choiceful self-re-return conveys not only a discourse on the responsibilities of womanhood but also is a proclamation of deep ecological wisdom based on care, reciprocity, and regeneration. These retellings construct Sita's exile and return as acts of resistance and reconnection, rather than passive resignation. In these narratives, Sita's voice affects an ecological and spiritual integrity of belongingness of Earth, effectuating a literal breach of the paternal virtue.

This paper presents a straightforward argument that, when taken as a whole, these retellings unfold a transformation of Sita from a feminine emblem of passivity (chastity) into an archetype of ecological and feminine consciousness. This is due to the fact that myth provides us with an essential epistemology for comprehending the concept of ethical coexistence and sustainability. In the study, it will be claimed that Sita's link to the Earth is ontological and not metaphorical, and that Sita's birth, exile, and return are patterns that are indicative of the cyclical patterns of regeneration and decay that occur in natural systems. The study re-contextualises Sita's mythological trajectory in terms of a mythopoetic sustainable narrative, which is based on the idea that ecological consciousness cannot be separated from emotional and ethical awareness. This is accomplished by reading Sita from the two perspectives of ecofeminism and archetypal critique. As Vandana Shiva explains, "to recover the feminine principle is to recover the continuity between nature, women, and life itself" (*Staying Alive* 45). This is exactly what happens in the story of Sita: her exile is not a kind of punishment, but rather an ecological pilgrimage to reach self-realisation. Her

connections with the forest are built up as a moral and spiritual transformation as a result of this journey.

The convergence of ecofeminism, ecocriticism, and Jungian archetypal theory—all of which provide a lens through which Sita's tale might be interpreted as an ecological text—is the foundation of this essay. Ecofeminism dismantles the patriarchal dualisms that have linked men to reason and women to nature, as explained by Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, and Vandana Shiva. It also demonstrates how both have been employed as instruments of dominance. In order to practice Shiva's politics of care, interdependency, and "Earth democracy," nature must be acknowledged as living, not dead; as a recipient, not a dispenser (Shiva 88). The analogy between the instrumentalisation of nature and the devaluation of the feminine is further extended by Plumwood's critique of Western rationality in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Plumwood 4). By illustrating how Enlightenment science supplanted earlier organic metaphors of the planet as mother with mechanistic and patriarchal systems of control, Merchant's *The Death of Nature* successfully advances this argument up to this point (Merchant 181). Collectively, these theorists offer a critical vocabulary for analysing Sita's myth as a counter-narrative of dominance—a counter-narrative that reestablishes an ethics of ecological balance, empathy, and reciprocity.

Sita might be viewed as an archetype of the "Great Mother, a symbol which in the past represented simultaneity of creation and destruction, expansion and decay"(Jung 217), thanks to Carl Jung's concepts of the collective unconscious and the Anima. These antithetical forces are mediated in the case of Sita's character by an intense identification with the Earth, and so make Sita not only a mythological construct but also a symbolic locale of cyclic rebirth. This hermeneutical practice is further enlarged in Susan Rowland's *Jung: A Feminist Revision,* where archetypal themes can be transmorphosed by means of feminist conscious awareness to re-actionize legendary figures into moral and ecological actors (Rowland 62). Consequently, Sita's sojourn in the jungle and her subsequent return to earth are representative allegories on the matter of life and death over successive generations, an active joining of natural and intellectual reality, rather than passive episodes of endurance. The environmental ethics of this analysis are taken from ecocriticism, as defined by Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty. Buell's idea of the "environmental imagination" focuses on the way that literature can facilitate the relationship between a person and their

environment (Buell 12). Furthermore, Glotfelty states that "human culture is tied to the physical world, and it shapes and is shaped by it" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xxii) and that "ecocriticism is at the crossroads of literary interpretation and environmental duty" (xxxi). By bringing these theoretical visions into the picture, the study places Sita's myth into an environmental discourse and allows it both to reflect and to react to environmental estrangement in the Anthropocene.

Combining these theoretical orientations, the article analyses the myth of Sita as a feminist resistance and as a symbolic ecology, showing the possibilities of myth being the storehouse of ecological knowledge. In this sense, the study aims at recovering the feminine consciousness implied in the *Ramayana* as an important dialogue between narrative and development, between nature and the ethical imagination. As a result, sustainability is argued to be fundamentally mythological and rooted in the collective memory of mankind's connection with the Earth, not in technological solutions.

Sita and the Archetype of the Living Earth

Recent feminist retellings focus more on an archetypal identification of Sita's identity with an imaginative representation of the living Earth -in its cardinal qualities of rooting, cycling, and regeneration - rather than on the moralised accoutrements that come with the tropes of wifehood and obedience. At the same time, Volga and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni find Sita as an ecological sensibility that aids in reestablishing balance between humans and nature, rather than as a tale of her victimhood. To render Sita's engagement with the natural world an act of ecological witness—a conversation between the feminine psyche and the environment in which she can survive—these stories are returned via the language of exile and forest existence.

In contrast, the jungle serves as a site of awakening rather than punishment in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*. Sita encounters several women—Ahalya, Surpanakha, Renuka, and Urmila—who stand for various forms of feminine wisdom after she and Rama part ways. Sita's interaction with other (or her own) similarly banished women overrides her internalised notions of shame and purity. The forest is written twice here: physically (as the location where one lives in relation to the earth) and symbolically (as the place where one lives in relation to the Other). She is informed by Ahalya that "Freedom is not in returning to

Ayodhya; it is in finding peace within the wilderness" (Volga 27). The ecofeminist principle put forward by Vandana Shiva, according to which "to be liberated from patriarchy's domination is to rediscover one's kinship with the Earth" (*Staying Alive* 53). According to Volga, Sita's "liberation" is ontological rather than merely emotional or personal. She regains a sacred reciprocity with the living world by building an autonomy based on ecological belonging, by identifying with the movements of nature.

Additionally, the forest serves as a moral and spiritual haven, reversing the categories of wilderness and civilisation that patriarchal myth established. As stated in "The masculine culture of control constructs nature as the other—irrational, subordinate, and feminized" (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 4), Val Plumwood's explanation of these dualisms appears particularly pertinent in this context. This construction is denied by Volga's Sita. An act of rebellion against the cultural logics of the superstructure that devalue the natural is what her communication with the forest represents. The forest serves as the base substrate for the ethical revitalisation and not as a force one must overcome. As a result, when Sita finally refuses to go back to Ayodhya, she refuses a modern, more mechanical order that Merchant refers to as the "moral economy of nature" (*The Death of Nature* 199), and not social order. By staying within the forest, Sita reveals the patriarchal meaning of exile as an ecological homeland and re-appropriates the soil as the spiritual homeland.

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a psychologically and internally regenerated version of this archetype. The novel, supposedly written by Sita herself, narrates her experiences in all its intricacies as a work of fiction, an attempt to grasp each question as a therapeutic act of emotive control and narrative truth-production. "In the forest I was no longer the queen of Ayodhya; I was the soil, wind and the fire which cooked our food. The trees were my guardians, rivers my sisters" (*The Forest of Enchantments* 121) shows how Divakaruni can envision the forest as a place of self-reflection, healing and creative potential. By taking off her identity with the elements, Sita shifts herself from a passive agent in suffering to an active participant in the creative process of the elemental earth. According to Lawrence Buell, the ability to find moral and spiritual meaning in ecological interdependence would be described as "environmental imagination" (*The Environmental Imagination* 12).

The Anima Mundi described by Carl Jung in discussions of the "world soul" which connects the energy of the universe with that of the human psyche is the Sita of Divakaruni, in this context (Jung 218). Her relationship with nature is phenomenological rather than metaphorical, with her body serving as a kind of interface between the self and nature. Her journey's leitmotif is birth, exile, and return to Earth—the quintessential sequence of life and death. Sita is looking at the world with completion rather than despair in the final scene of Divakaruni's adaptation, when she begs the Earth to take her in: "Mother, if I have been true, take me back into your arms" (*The Forest of Enchantments* 285). Placing her on earth brings her back into her mother's gaze and gives all mothers a fresh sense of daughterhood and maternity. She is re-embraced into our rightful ecology, both mortal and immortal, and one of them is Sita.

Thus, Sita's suffering is used by both Volga and Divakaruni to reconsider modernity from an ecopolitical and moral perspective. Their Sita is an ideal mother of renewal rather than the massed-up object of patriarchy. Susan Rowland refers to her return to Earth as "the feminine integration of the psyche with the living world" (*Jung: A Feminist Revision* 64), rather than a melancholy retreat. As a result, the myth undergoes a cycle that mirrors natural cycles and ecologically vital emancipation: from subordination to nature to reciprocity with nature, from estrangement to return. These retellings leap into mythology and environmental ethics by re-applying Sita as the archetype of the living earth, which brings us full circle to the necessity of seeing the recovery of our ecological imagining as inextricably linked to the recovery of the feminine divine.

Ecofeminist Revisions and the Politics of Return

More "liberal" feminist texts reinterpret the Ramayana's return of Sita to Earth as a radical denial based on the rejection of a particular mode of linguistic dependent-subjectivity—an act of re-appropriation of agency through withdrawal—whereas the Ramayana's return is typically viewed as a moment of tragic closure. *Revisiting Mythology: In Search of Sita*, edited by Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale is a chorus of female voices, academics, and authors challenging the patriarchal systems that have permitted Sita's identity to be constrained in, *In Search of Sita*. Her soul toward the Earth unites their essays and stories, transforming her otherwise earthly descent into an act of eco-political sovereignty that ties

her body's autonomy to nature's capacity for regeneration. The anthology reinterprets Sita's singularity as a deliberate becoming—with that source of the elemental from which existence itself arises, rather than a departure from pain.

Sita is described as "the Earth's daughter and conscience, whose endurance embodies the spirit of the soil" in the introduction by Gokhale and Lal (Gokhale and Lal x). Because Sita is incorporated into a continuum of life energies, this description aids in the instantaneous dismantling of the barrier between the ecological and the human. It turns out that her last deed, asking the Earth to adopt her, is a performative statement of identification, stating that her existence and agency are obligated to the higher moralising order of the globe rather than the royal household of Ayodhya. The ecofeminism of Vandana Shiva offers an intriguing lens through which to interpret this return. According to Shiva, "The liberation of women and the liberation of the Earth are not separate struggles; both involve recovering the principle of renewal and balance" (*Staying Alive* 90). Therefore, Sita's reappearance on earth is not a form of defeat, but a trigger for ecology to be restored; to bring back ecological harmony that has been disturbed by the system of hierarchy and anthropocentric domination maintained by patriarchy.

Another cliche is the patriarchal construction of the pure home. The idea of home as a place of purity is also being discarded by this political interpretation of homecoming. Sita's relationship with the Earth helps her to overcome the cultural obsession with virginity that has thus far shaped her identity. Val Plumwood would identify her act of return as a "counter-narrative to mastery" - to reject the logic that subsumes women and nature to structures of domination (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 8). Sita's fall is not her passive victimisation of a social ill, but rather an ethical refusal of the mode of production. Since even the least rebellion is a desperate attempt to survive and thus part of a higher reality, a harmony in the ecological cycle of rebirth and return rather than justice in patriarchal frameworks, it seems her retreat is part of that pattern. Thus, the embrace of the Earth turns into an auditory arena of extreme politics, a sanctuary of equality beyond the bounds of human law.

The politics of repatriation is also explored in several articles in *In Search of Sita,* which reframe exile as a ravaging psyche and the soil as a haven. "Her silence contains the sound of the Earth listening to itself"

(Gokhale and Lal 63) is how K. Satchidanandan's essay *Sita and the Self* figuratively explain Sita's journey as being about spiritual ecology. Carolyn Merchant refers to this quiet as "the ethic of care embedded in the Earth's cyclical processes" (*The Death of Nature* 202), but it is a language of nonviolent struggle rather than acquiescence. In the same vein, Urvashi Butalia transforms Sita's conduct as a break in historical narrative in her essay *What Happened Afterwards*, writing that “She chooses to end the narrative written for her, reclaiming authorship over her life and her end” (Gokhale and Lal 112). In this connection, authorship is used as a metaphor for ecological autonomy, referring to the ability to inscribe an individual story in the larger time beats of the Earth.

From a psychological point of view, the return of Sita represents the Jungian archetype of integration, by which a psychological whole reverts to the source (Jung 219). The return to origin is, therefore, not conceived of as disappearance but rather as a right turning towards wholeness, a concept that is, of course, repeated in specific feminist readings of Jungian theory. For example, in Susan Rowland's feminist reading, the feminist reading argues that "feminine archetypes save the world from stale by joining psyche back to the sacred" (Rowland 73). Sita's decision to return to Earth thus signifies healing and the reconciliation of man and the earth and has a symbolic as well as physical resonance.

The politics of return is well reflected in the existing discourse about the environment today, notably in the framework of the Anthropocene. Sita's story is an ecological myth which draws attention to the need for the potential extinction of human civilisation to bring about the balance between man and nature. Lawrence Buell's idea of the "environmental imagination" is relevant here, in that he considered that literature can "rework the moral connection between human beings and the non-human world" (Buell 21). From this perspective, Sita's gesture of returning is not a regression to a mythical period but an appeal for ecological awareness. Her narrative lies beyond time and space, and insists on prophetic relevance because it highlights how true emancipation, of either sex or nature, could only be gained by recognition of interrelatedness.

The modern ways Sita's rescue is seen re-orientate her significance away from the archetypal figure allied with Rama in the

Ramayana and seen as the figure through which an ecological and feminist reversal is affected, reconfiguring the relationships between nature and culture, blurring the boundaries between passivity and agency, and remaking the connections between spirituality and politics. Sita is not represented simply as the daughter of the Earth but her "voice" representing virtue; her mythological role is that of a mother who silently weeps against the violence, with her seclusion, the harmony of a new world. Gokhale and Lal's anthology illustrates that repossessing Sita equates to reclaiming the land itself: sacred, sentient, and sovereign.

Sacred Ecology and the Feminine Principle

The notion of the feminine in Indian thought is not a symbolic one, or social; it is cosmological. The sacred feminine is the generative principle of the creation - *the Shakti* or primal energy from which the universe arises and to which it returns. In the context of this being of Sita is the Earth, there is nothing metaphorical about her bodily image - it represents the immanent divinities of the natural. Her descent from heavenly realms into the Earth means that she is associated with the Hindu philosophy of Prakriti, which describes the dynamic, creative force of the world and at the same time her ability to regenerate life on earth underlines the cycle of life that takes place in natural world. In this way, it is Sita who becomes the archetype of sacred ecology-a way of viewing the world in which spirituality, ethics and ecology all come together as a way of affirming the sacrality of the natural world.

From the viewpoint of Sita's relation to the earth, this text, the Ramayana, casts it into a perceived ecological form of intimacy. In the *Ayodhya Kanda*, she insists on joining Rama into exile saying, "the forest will be my home; the trees and the rivers will be my companions" (Valmiki 2.29). Her statement holds an anthropocentric un consciousness, or a non-anthropocentric consciousness that does more than human beings and recognizes the moral agency of the nonhuman world. This consciousness is similar to the ecofeminist claim by Carolyn Merchant that "to view the Earth as alive and female is to recognise our moral relationship to her" (*The Death of Nature* 190). Sita's conversations with the community of the forest - rivers, trees, animals - offer a dialogical conception of nature untraceable to dominance and ownership. Her love is not stewardship; she is her kinship, and not a protector, but a participant.

Vandana Shiva's interpretation of the feminine principle gives us an up-to-date framework for understanding this sacred ecology. She argues that "the recovery of the feminine principle is necessary to the recovery of the Earth as a living system" (*Staying Alive* 45). The feminine, as a theological category in relation to Shiva, represents values of nurturance, diversity and renewal, values that challenge the patriarchal recuperation strategies that ensure the persistence of the authoritarian paradigms of control. Sita's story illustrates this paradigm of feminine cosmology: not her hegemonic power but her moral strength is constituted through compassion, strength of patience and refined attentiveness to relationships. As a result of choosing to stand outside the prevailing social order after her ordeal, and then by choosing to return to the earth, she can be seen to become, through her actions, a sovereign of ecology in the purest stare of spiritual jurisprudence.

Similarly, Val Plumwood's idea of "relational autonomy" goes a long way toward generating a greater understanding of Sita's agency. Plumwood criticises the Western concept of independence as separation and suggests instead that autonomy needs to be based on interdependence (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 157). Sita's autonomy is just this sort of thing: it is generated through her communion with others - human and nonhuman; and through her acceptance of cyclical transformation. Her story is a model of ethics of balance against conquest, which reminds us of the principle in the *Gita* that the ethics of yoga is harmony between the individual and the cosmic order.

From an equivalence Jungian perspective, Sita is also the unification of the *Anima Mundi*, that is, the soul of the world, and personal consciousness. Jung's Great Mother archetype represents both nurturance and destruction, fertility and decay, and embraces the ambivalence of the natural cycles (Jung 219). In Sita, these two opposites are reconciled. Her exile is the descent part of the archetypal cycle; her return at the end represents regeneration. Susan Rowland sees this reconciliation in terms of "a return of the sacred to the mundane where the feminine mediates between psyche and the living world" (*Jung: A Feminist Revision* 73). Thus, the myth of Sita is both an ecological and a moral allegory, revealing what ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether refers to as "the symbolic union of the divine and the natural" (*Gaia and God* 87). This is a blend of an ecological, intellectual and spiritual synthesis: Sita is pictured as representing a "holy ecology",

a mode of thinking about the world in which nature no longer can be an inert, passive frame of reference for human activity -- but instead, is a moral and spiritual, active, world itself. From the furrow, through the forest, down into the heart of the earth, her journey depicts the principle of renewal in circles, which is central to all life. The merging of the feminine principles and the importance of ecology is then brought to the level of a sustainable paradigm in which an honour of the land necessitates a simultaneous honour of the divine feminine within creation.

Conclusion: Mythopoetic Sustainability and Feminine Ecology

Ecocriticism, while ecofeminist and archetypal constructs as relate to Sita, illustrates that myth remains as a dynamic set of ecological narrative. The narratives of exile of Sita, trials of Sita in the jungle, and Sita's ultimate return, as narrated by Volga, Divakaruni, and Gokhale, Lal signify the concept of mythopoetic sustainability, a dialectic comprising the psychological construct of resilience, moral consciousness, and biocultural affiliation. The story she presents epitomises what Lawrence Buell calls "the moral imagination of ecology," which views literature as a medium for conceptualising human accountability to the nonhuman world (*The Environmental Imagination* 21). Sita's voice, which in a patriarchal construct of virtue is restricted, in these reinterpretations becomes a plea in favour of relational ethics and acknowledges that the feminine and the ecological are not just metaphors but are mutually interrelated. By adapting the forest and defying the politics of purity, she is suggesting a kind of freedom that is based on interconnection and not dominance. Her return is an environmental metaphor for regeneration and is thus re-personified and alludes to the cyclical patterns of the natural world.

The paper argues that the principle of the feminine, when fused with Indian cosmological thinking and ecofeminist empirical theory, represents wisdom instead of weakness - it is the power of sustainable survival, of nurturing and regrowth. Viewed through this perspective, Sita's journey can be seen as relevant in a post-human one, for our survival in the Anthropocene: a reminder that ecological re-balancing is only possible through reconnecting with one another, defined by empathy, respect and equilibrium. Vandana Shiva concludes that "the Earth is a living system and her revitalisation will only happen due to the care offered by those who see her as the Mother" (*Staying Alive* 91).

Sita's story makes it very unlikely that humankind will succeed in breaking through this old covenant - to ethically live within the web of life and to forever remember that all acts of renewal begin, as hers did, with a return to the Earth.

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4.

Vulnerable Patriarchal Women and Convoluted Men: A Comparative Analysis of Amrita Pritam's "Stench of Kerosene" and Maitreyi Pushpa's "Binni: Whom do you Belong to?"

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&

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Abstract: Women have always been described as vulnerable beings in various literary writings, yet men, the so-called first wheel of society, are no exception to the concept of being vulnerable at times. Despite knowing the truth and situations, the patriarchal settings and social nurturing control men and curb their feelings and emotions. using comparative analysis as its tool, the present paper is centred on both these aspects. It attempts to compare the short stories of prominent authors Amrita Pritam and Maitreyi Pushpa. With the same implications, the present paper aims at a comparative study of Amrita Pritam's "Stench of Kerosene" and Maitreyi Pushpa's "Binni: Whom do you belong?" The grounds of comparison will remain some problematic socio-cultural biases and the role of women in procreation. The paper, in turn, analyses how all the characters perpetuate patriarchy as well as become the victims of it in the course of the narratives. The second part of the paper delineates men as the silent sufferers in the patriarchal system. Suppressing their emotions to show their manliness, men's silence in the cultural milieu and their undue frustration under patriarchy are analysed as revealed in the stories.

Keywords: Men, matriarchy, patriarchy, short story, women.

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I

When two texts share some common ground/s yet their progress unveils different denouements, the aesthetics of the authors lead the inquisitive minds to set them for contrast and comparison to bring out the subtle nuances of the texts. Comparative study, thus, paves the way to present the identical points in different shapes of ideas and expositions. Comparing the texts on common grounds and meaningful deviations also escalates the deeper understanding of themes, characters, their mannerisms, and different aspects of the same culture. With the same notion, the present paper tries to bring out how patriarchy has shaped and considered women as fragile beings through set societal norms and how the taciturn nature of men nurtures the patriarchal world to follow some rigid norms.

Men and women are synonymous with society and culture. While the practitioners of cultural norms in a society are men and women, the existence of both constructs cannot be imagined without the other. A sense of mutual sympathy, dutifulness, and a bond between these two social constructs can pave the way towards healthy and harmonious survival. August Comte, the father of sociology, opines that society is a "social organism possessing a harmony of structure and function." Morris Ginsberg speaks of society as a "collection of individuals united by certain relations or mode of behaviour, which mark them off from others who do not enter into these relations or who differ from them in behaviour (qtd. in Yamuna Kachru 21)." The definitions about the society tempt to ask questions like, if relations built between two individuals make them differ from others, who is given the rights to decide social and familial decisions; who are the makers of the rules and on what grounds the others have to obey those rules. . .? Of course, in Indian contexts, the answers are clear yet to get the answer more precisely in context of village social life, which is also the purpose of this paper, let us briefly go through the themes of the stories and the subsequent analysis.

Amrita Pritam's "Stench of Kerosene", translated from Punjabi into English by Khushwant Singh, is set in a village, Lakarmandi. The story opens when Guleri, the protagonist, finds that her father has sent a mare and the servant Natu to pick her up to Chamba, that is her parents' village, for the harvest festival. Once every year, Guleri and her friends gather at Chamba for the harvest festival, spend quality time, and dress

themselves in all their adornments. Guleri's has been married to Manak for seven years and they have no children yet. Long before the dawn, when Guleri is about to leave for Chamba, Manak comes along part of the way to see her off. Guleri insists that Manak be with her in Chamba, but Manak refuses. Seven years ago, they both happened to meet at the harvest festival, and then Manak had asked her hand in marriage. On their way to see her off, Manak behaves suspiciously but never unveils anything and just begs Guleri to stay with him and restrain her from going to Chamba this time. Guleri does not understand the reasons, behaves childishly and finally leaves for Chamba. Manak gets back home. Manak's mother rebukes him for his long absence and the story takes a turn where, paying obedience to his mother, Manak marries another woman. Since it had been seven years, Guleri could not give birth to a child, which annoyed the typical mother-in-law, and she secretly resolved that Manak give up on her will for a second marriage. When Guleri comes to know about Manak's second marriage, she soaks her clothes in kerosene and sets fire to them. Manak's second wife soon enjoys motherhood by giving birth to a son and hence Manak's mother rejoices in satisfaction. When the mother lays the newborn in Manak's lap, he begins to scream and shriek hysterically, saying, "Take him away! He stinks of kerosene" (Pritam, "Stench" 26).

On the other hand, Maitreyi Pushpa's "Binni: Whom do you Belong" portrays various dimensions of patriarchy, which is a step ahead of Amrita Pritam's "Stench of Kerosene". The story is a heart-wrenching saga of a little girl Binni, who is a victim of the so-called social dogma of privileging 'male child' over females and is projected through Binni's consciousness to the readers. Binni, in the story, is introduced as living with her grandmother in a village to save her from her frustrated mother's rage. Soon, we come to know that her mother, Arti, does not reprimand Binni as she was the third unwanted girl child in the family after Anju and Gudiya. Arti's longing for a male child under the societal pressures and her patriarchal notion of 'an incomplete family without a son' dominate the theme.

Since both the stories have been set in the villages, we come across two dimensions from which the concept of motherhood is presented how the themes acquire different treatments when seen through the same lens. Along with it, the importance of motherhood for a woman at a certain juncture in their life is represented with different perspectives by strange revelations to the fore, that how the women

characters take the cudgels of patriarchy. In "Stench of Kerosene", when Guleri, the protagonist, fails to bear a child, it is Manak's mother who makes a secret resolution as she says, "I will not let it go beyond the eighth year" (Pritam 104). It is the mother and not Manak who has already decided to pay five hundred rupees to get a second wife for her son, just because Guleri was unable to give an heir to the family. In "Binni", it is Arti, and not her husband Gopal, who reverberates in herself the craving to have a 'boy' instead of already enjoying motherhood with three daughters. The narrator puts Arti's self-imposed inner world as:

Dr Agrawal tried his best to take her out of trauma. Yes! Dr Agrawal had made all the foetal tests and clearly put in the reports "it was a girl child". The moment she heard this...she felt scatterbrained and dumbfounded. The roof of the room seemed upside down to her...suddenly my father supported and consoled her then. . . A good deal of time passed but again the buried desire to have a baby boy beset in some corner of her consciousness entangled her. She felt emptiness without a boy in the family. It was like a boat without a helm. In fact, she was failing to accept the so-called glorified 'motherhood' without being a boy's mother. . . Like an important part of life is widely unfulfilled to her, she always felt it worthless to foster daughters than a son. The sense of incompleteness often seemed to smear around her withered heart. All the social belongings began to prick her. (Pushpa 34-35) Though Gopal's mother objects Arti's misbehave with Binni yet being a woman, she also never expects Arti to remain contended without a 'son' or with three daughters and shows no empathy with her. She rather glorifies her son being innocent and expects a boy to be born next time, "Yes! God will surely listen to our prayers this time. My Gopal has never done any wrong to God," said the grandmother assuredly (35).

Quite special to see that the mothers-in-law in both stories have been presented as power holders. They are strong women and decision makers in the family. Nevertheless, these decisions are brainwashed in a way to impose on the other women, i.e. Guleri and Arti. In this way, the fact untangles that these 'vulnerable patriarchal women' have fixed the patriarchal demands in their minds as if they are altogether theirs. They seem to have terribly compromised their own wishes, feelings and surrendered themselves to the patriarchal notion that once married, motherhood is a hallmark of women's existence, else she might have to

face society and would alone be answerable for that. Clara Nubile, in *The Danger of Gender,* rightly points out:

> A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of married life and motherhood, otherwise she is perceived as useless and unworthy according to the traditional Indian views. . .Indian women do not appear to have their independent role in society. Moreover, they must become a male- appendix in order to have a role. Indian women are thus linked by male definitions. Only if a woman is wife and a mother - both examples of male appendixes - she gains a status in the outer world, although a very subordinate one. (22)

In Indian Culture, women are deemed to be acknowledged as mothers. The stories represent two aspects of motherhood. At first instance, we have Guleri, who is unable to conceive that shatters her to death and Manak and his mother are both overtly responsible for Guleri's catastrophic self-sacrifice. Contrasted to Guleri, we have Arti, who consecutively gives birth to three daughters but is discontented under hidden pressures for not having a 'son'. Preference given to a 'son', the successor, in the family leads her to opt for the illegal practice of female infanticide; and no one in the family, be it the husband, the mother-in-law, husband's sisters (*bua*), who pathetically participate in the act, objects to abort the female foetus in Arti's womb. No one bothers about her shrieks in pain. In this regard, Jasbir Jain opines, "Motherhood, it needs to be understood, subjugates the female body, and is primarily an asexual relationship without power" (87). It is an uncanny matriarchal notion to observe in the characters of both the mothers-in-law- law in the stories. In Guleri's case, she can go to any extent to get a grandchild; whereas the mother-in-law can see the daughter-in-law (Arti) in any situation at the stake of her life and cherishes the very thought of having a grandson in Arti's case.

Further, it is worth notable that in both stories, patriarchy is channelled through the women characters. They are the flag bearers of how patriarchy operates as a large abstract system in the small family of the village *per se*. Everyone is either a victim or participating in nurturing it. We see that Manak's mother perpetuates patriarchy when she insists that marriage should be followed by motherhood; Manak sustains patriarchy when he also conforms to his mother's verdict and customs; Guleri, too, conforms to patriarchy by being the victim of it and later

burning herself. The limit of the encroachment takes place when Manak's second wife, whom his mother brought with high hopes, also conforms to the patriarchy imposed upon her by Manak's mother. After Guleri put her to death, when the second wife feels herself as a 'utility object', she complains to Manak's mother but finds herself hapless in the entrenched system; the narrator, thus, puts it:

> ' I am not his spouse,' complained his second wife. 'I am just someone he happened to marry.'
>
> But quite soon she was pregnant and Manak's mother was well pleased with her new daughter-in-law. She told Manak about his wife's condition, but he looked as if he did not understand. . .
>
> His mother encouraged her daughter-in-law to bear with her husband's mood for a few days. As soon as the child was born and placed in his father's lap, she said, Manak would change. (Pushpa 26)

Being the victims of the contagious system called 'patriarchy', in "Binni", almost all the characters forswear it. It is epistemic to witness the functioning of this 'huge system' in two short narratives of Amrita Pritam and Maitreyi Pushpa. Manak's mother, Gopal's mother, Gopal's sisters and Arti, all of them keep the structure of the stories and in a kind of 'redefine' patriarchy through matriarchy. Also, as there is no father figure or the superior male member than Manak and Gopal portrayed in the stories, it is doubly powerful that women have held the cresset to adopt it. Manak's mother challenges his masculinity in "Stench of Kerosene" which is quite jarring to him, yet he utters no single sentence to retort to the mother as she says, 'Why do you croak like an old woman?' asked the mother severely. 'Be a man' (Pritam 24). Obscurely, in "Binni" at the end of the story, Gopal's mother too flattens down his wish to take Binni along and hammers his decision to use Binni for domestic chores.

II

Man as Taciturn, Silent Sufferers and Convoluted Being

If one sees patriarchy within its larger structure, one may find that it does not operate at one level. Enslaved by the preset social dogmas and

customs, men also have to get on board. Representative of the system, in both texts, the patriarchal functioning operates equally on Manak and Gopal, too. When we see the development of both the male characters in the stories, the curbed feelings and helplessness to vocalise the veracity of the facts are overtly presented there. In "Stench of Kerosene", when Guleri gets ready to depart for Chamba, Manak forces her to stay with him without presenting any specific reasons. He does not seem to have enough courage to open up and speak about the grounds of not wanting her to go; to talk about the aftermaths if Guleri will be there at her parents' place; to let Guleri know his mother's unhappiness towards them. The narrator, thus, puts it:

> 'Guleri, do not away,' he begged her. 'I ask you again, do not go this time.' He handed her back the flute, unable to continue.
>
> 'But why?' she asked. 'You come over on the day of the fair and we will return together. I promise you, I will not stay behind.' (Pritam 22)

Interesting to note that while something was bothering Manak, he did not ask Guleri about it further in the story and kept bothering. In "Binni", Gopal is an altogether silent sufferer and despite loving Binni, he could not save her when Arti beats her brutally. In fact, once introduced in the opening, his character just fades into the background. Although Gopal is equally responsible for the heinous offence of foeticide and subjugating Arti, under the pressures of a patriarchal set-up, he also prefers to follow the system blindly and pre-arranges the ceremony, expecting a 'boy' from Arti's womb. To quote from the story, "As everyone becomes busy after the child's birth, the father (Gopal) had pre-arranged *laddus* (sweets to distribute) and exchanged the hundred rupee notes to ten in advance to offer to the landlords, barber and washerman"(Pushpa 36). In the entire story, "Stench of Kerosene", from the 'chillum' incident to Guleri's urge to 'play the flute', Manak reverberates his perturbed psyche and seems lost in another world of melancholy. His silence and weirdness unfold when Guleri asks, "Come now, play the flute! But Manak, lost in his thought, paid no heed. 'Why don't you play your flute? asked Guleri coaxingly. Manak looked at her sadly. Then, putting the flute to his lips, he blew a strange, anguished wail of sound"(Pritam 22). Manak and Gopal both represent the obedient followers of patriarchy and surrender themselves to remain silent seers of society. Such a patriarchal mindset

to make men 'convoluted' is prevalent and taught in our homes, societies and cultures. In a way, it has snatched the rights of men to live in a natural emotional way as human beings are made. Thinking men's blind conformity to patriarchy, Bell hooks, in her essay *Understanding Patriarchy* writes, "Patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples. Since it is a system that denies men full access to their freedom of will, it is difficult for any man of any class to rebel against patriarchy, to be disloyal to patriarchal parent, be that parent female or male" (4).

The pervading silence of men leads to the destruction of the social order as well as their inner selves. In the due course of our staunch belief system, patriarchy has moulded cultures, societies, and men and women have learnt and inculcated the patriarchal attitudes compromisingly. The narrator's description of Manak's inner rage and agony describes this enslavement when Manak comes back to see off Guleri from halfway and submits to his mother's will to marry a second woman:

> Entering the house, he slumped listless on his charpai. 'You have been away a long time,' exclaimed his mother. 'Did you go all the way to Chamba?'
>
> Not all the way; only to the top of the hill,' Manak's voice was heavy.
>
> 'Why do you croak like an old woman?' asked the mother severely. 'Be a man'
>
> Manak *wanted to* retort, 'You are a woman; why don't you cry like one for a change!' But he remained silent. (Pritam, “Stench” 24)

As it was the seventh year, Guleri could not conceive. The mother, secretly resolute to marry Manak to get a grandson, pays five hundred rupees to get a second wife for Manak while Guleri went to Chamba for the harvest festival. Here too, the muteness of Manak and the narration reveal the stark reality of patriarchal nurturing: "Obedient to his mother and to custom, Manak' body responded to the new woman. But his heart was dead within him" (24). The obedience of Gopal in "Binni" is a step ahead as he opts to send Binni with the grandmother at the village

instead of deconstructing the yearning to have another child, or 'a boy' to be precise. Paul Hornacek, in his "Anti-Sexist Consciousness- Raising groups for Man" mulls over men's unwilling surrender to patriarchy and a need felt for consciousness-raising about their pains in accepting the patriarchal setting and writes:

> Men have reported a variety of different reasons for deciding to seek a C-R group, all of which have an underlying link to the feminist movement. Most are experiencing emotional pain as a result of their male sex role and are dissatisfied with it. Some have had confrontations. . . Some come as a result of their commitment to social change and their recognition that sexism and patriarchy are elements of an intolerable social system that needs to be altered. . . (126)

While portraying the inclusive struggle of men and women, the stories also question the elimination of love between husband and wife, between men and women. The bond that strengthens one to stand for each other in adverse circumstances seems disappeared in both stories. The authors have indirectly indicated this disappearance of love under the patriarchal tensions and the characters' mental struggle that pushes them towards liberation of minds as a priority. In an interview, Amrita Pritam herself contends to Rama Jha when asked about the liberation and the clutched mind-sets of men and women in the prevalent system:

> Women's Lib is not a separate thing from man's lib. Like woman, man also is mentally a slave. Man has not yet tasted the friendship and company of liberated woman as an equal partner. Men and women have not yet met as two independent human beings. If men and women are not economically independent, how can they love? Generally, women love out of the sense of insecurity. Love is admiration and companionship of the other person. Economic enslavement obstructs the experience of love. Women's liberation is not mere shouting of slogans for one's rights. At least I do not believe in that sort of liberation. To me woman's lib means a fuller development of personality, so that she does not have to ask for freedom. (188)

As per Amrita Pritam's remarks, Manak and Gopal can be projected as mental slaves. Both are enslaved by something that is bothering them, yet are unable to articulate their opinions. The ending of both stories

overtly suggests this as in "SOK" Manak behaves wildly uncontrollably, stares at the newborn baby, and shrieks out of subdued pain when his mother puts him in Manak's lap: "Take him away! He shrieked hysterically. 'Take him away! He stinks of kerosene"(26). On the contrary, in "Binni" Gopal could only regret the ill-treatment to Binni and finally speaks his heart to take her along but the grandmother refuses to do so: "Dear Gopal! Binni is your daughter, you have rights on her, but I have admitted her to the school here. She is very intelligent! She has secured first position in the mid-term exams! Her entire year would be ruined, dear! Now let her be mine." (Pushpa 49)

However, considering men and women as entrenched in the patriarchal framework does not mean men's exemption from the accusation of oppressing women. The fact cannot be negated that men have enjoyed and are in practice to enjoy certain privileges and freedom that the system has barely offered to them. Exemplifying men's obstinate ways practised upon women, Guleri's macabre demise by burning herself, little Binni's ruptured heart and Arti's pangs of mental, physical suffering cannot be overlooked, and it calls for incessant critical enquiries for diffusions and effusions.

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5.

The Absent Poets in Odisha's Literary History: Women, Bhakti and Questions of Literary Historiography

**Lotanya Panda*

Abstract: This paper provides a detailed description of the literary and spiritual history of Odisha, along with the causes and circumstances for the development of spiritual writings from ancient times through the medieval period up to the modern period. By focusing on poetry that has remained the most popular writing style in bhakti literature, this paper discusses the works of women writers who have performed a significant role in the spiritual and cultural heritage of Odisha and their marginalisation in literary and cultural history over time. Further, it delves into the medieval era's forgotten women poets and their works, including Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's arrival and how it affected women's status in the society by focusing on the works of Madhavi Dasi (16th century CE), also known as Madhavi Devi or Madhavi Pattanayak, a major writer of the medieval era and the first recorded woman writer of Odisha. Through Madhavi Dasi, the study explores the marginalisation and vague literary historicization of women writers in literary history. In the context of modern literature, this paper will focus on the poetry of Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-38), Purnamasi Jani (b. 1944), and Adyasha Das (b. 1969), marking the contours of shifts and evolutions of women's devotional writings in Odisha.

Keywords: Odia, Poetry, Bhakti, Chaitanya, Women

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Introduction

Odisha, land of temples, home to one of the four tirthas (sacred religious places) of Hinduism, and land of spirituality and peace, a state which lies in the south eastern coastal area of India down the shores of the Bay of Bengal, traces a heritage of long-standing spiritual consciousness. Mayadhar Mansinha in his book *History of Oriya Literature,* explains the spiritual nature of Odisha since early times and writes "... every inch of land in central Orissa is supposed to be holy according to Hindu scriptures." (Mansinha 2). Though Odisha's literary history dates back to the 2nd or 1st century BCE, which consists mainly of Buddhist writings in Pali at Udaygiri caves, the first poetry collection of Odisha is found to be *Charyapada*, written by Vajrayana Buddhist poets around the 8th century CE, where the language used is Prakrit. Earliest evidence of Odia literature, according to Mayadhar Mansinha, is found through the inscription of 1051 CE, during the rule of king Ananta Varma Vajrahasta Deva, ruler of Kalinga, which is even the "earliest inscription in any modern Indian language" (Mansinha 31). Mansinha even states that the Odia language has evolved and the "...Oriya as we know it today appears to have clearly emerged during the 13th-14th centuries ..." (Mansinha 31) through major writings of Sarala Dasa (15th century CE) and Markanda Dasa (15th century CE). Though Sarala Dasa was a writer of 15th century CE and many more writings in Odia language like *Sisu Veda* (12th-13th century) are written before Sarala Dasa, Mansinha likely wanted to refer that Odia language started to take shape in the form as we know today during 13th to 14th century, though the major known writings in the modern Odia language were written during Sarala Dasa's Age. Nirmal Patra in her essay "History of Oriya Literature (Odia Literature)" explains that "... Oriya emerged as a separate and independent language around the tenth and eleventh century A.D with a standard Oriya script" (Patra, 2013), but the Ganga Dynasty, ruling from 1100 CE to 1435 CE, had a great love towards Sanskrit literature, hence prominent Odia literature flourished only after 1435 CE under Emperor Kapilendra Deva of Gajapati Surya Vanshi Dynasty. During this time period, Adikabi Sarala Das was the leading poet. Whenever we talk about Odia literary history, Sarala Das is viewed as a significant landmark. He is popularly known for his great translation work of the *Mahabharata* in the Odia language and has written several other popular religious texts, like *Bilanka Ramayana*, and *Chandi Purana*, which is recited even today in Odisha's households. From the 16th century CE, the post-Sarala Dasa Age starts; this includes Saint Chaitanya's popularity and

Panchsakha poets' age or the Bhakti Movement Period, followed by the Riti Yuga, also known as 'Ornate Poetry Period'. During this time period, Vaishnavism flourished to its peak and hundreds of bhakti poetries were written, which are even popular today, and are sung and performed in temples and local households, villages or societies. In the modern age, which started during the late 18th century, the great trio flourished, which includes the names of Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918), Radhanatha Ray (1848-1908), and Madhusudana Rao (1853-1912). Later and till the contemporary period, writers like Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-38), Laxmi Kanta Mahapatra (1888-1953), Bidyut Prabha Devi (1926-77), Pratibha Ray (b. 1943), Gayatribala Panda (b. 1977), and others have been contributing to Odia literature in various forms.

Bhakti Literature in Odisha

In the field of spiritual writings or bhakti poetry in Odisha, one observes that poetry has been the writing style from initial stages even prose writings like *Rudrasudhanidhi* of 13th century by Avadhuta Narayana Swami, is called as a prose poem, meaning a prose encompassing a poetic style, and from earliest known texts till medieval age religious, spiritual, and bhakti related texts are produced in masses and are most popular among people. According to Biswajit Das in his article titled "Jainism in Odisha: A Timeless Spiritual Undercurrent in the Land of Kalinga", Jainism can be traced as the oldest religion found around 7th century BCE and it gained royal patronage under King Kharavela of Mahameghavahana dynasty during the 1st century BCE, who even made it the state religion. This is marked as one of the earliest traced religious activities, while later on Buddhism flourished in Odisha, under Bhauma dynasty which ruled up to 7th-8th century CE, and after them it is said that an organised format of Brahmanic tradition was brought by the Soma dynasty, and soon after this Saivite Adi Sankaracharya arrived from the south in 8th century CE and established one of the four great Mathas in Puri. Later Natha tradition was introduced, which comprised both Buddhist and Saivite ideals. Following these religious aspects, much Odia literatures were formed, whilst there were writings on courts and kings, a massive amount of religious and spiritual texts were formed. During the early stages of the development of Odisha's literature, Odia, Sanskrit, Apabhramsa, or Pali scripts consisted of spiritual thoughts and ideals. Later, Vaishnavism gained prominence, which is one of the major religious consciousnesses besides Shaivism. Introduction of Vaishnavism in Odisha can be traced to the time of the

10th-11th century CE, during the reign of Chodaganga Deva of the Ganga dynasty, who built the early form of Jagannatha Temple and wrote of *Geeta Govinda* (12th century CE) by Jayadeva. Saivism continued to remain as the most flourishing tradition during that time, while the wave of Vaishnava popularisation occurred mainly with the arrival of the great saint, Shri Chaitanya and the reign of King Prataparudra Deva, who enforced Vaishnavism on the public; even Maharis were forced to perform only on *Geeta Govinda*. During the period of the late-15th century to 17th century CE, even known as the period of the Bhakti Movement and the Panchsakha poets. This time saw a major and massive production of bhakti poetries and songs, which was a prominent reason for the popularity of Vaishnavism in Odisha. These evidences successfully establish the spiritual history of Odisha since the earliest times traceable till the late medieval stages. The spiritual literature or bhakti literature holds a massive heritage and history of Odisha.

Spiritual literature gained prominence in the early to medieval periods of Odia literature, likely due to the introduction and popularisation of several religious beliefs from time to time, that the spiritual texts were mass produced. First Jainism, after few centuries Mahayana Buddhism, then Saivism, followed by Natha tradition, and then Vaishnavism; and in-between these quick and coexisting religious beliefs, where each sector wanted to popularise their religious beliefs, Odia, as a native language, came into being and to popularise religion and language within the locals both took refuge within each other, that is evident through major translation works of medieval period by Sarala Dasa (15th century), Jagannatha Dasa (1491-1550), and Balarama Dasa (1472-1556). Later, with Chaitanya's settlement in Puri and the popularisation of Vaishnavism in Odisha, a massive amount of bhakti poetry was produced. The popularisation of bhakti poetry was certainly not just due to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, though he had a role, but even the larger peaceful and spiritual culture, and nature that is embodied by the natives. Naturally, the socially and spiritually oriented people of Odisha got attracted to nature, work, and spirituality, especially women. Perhaps this was even the reason for a certain decline of bhakti literature suddenly after the late-18th to 19th century, because during this time, due to colonial invasions and atrocities, people's attention was drawn from devotion to social and political issues. Stories like "Rebati" and, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* became famous due to their direct social and political engagement. Though the spirituality and devotion of people didn't vanish, new waves of writing emerged, especially among women

writers, as the learned women shifted their concerns, directly addressing social atrocities and feminist concerns.

Women's Spiritual Literature

Having recognised the preponderance of spiritual literature in Odia history, it is regrettable that women's absence continues to glare at literary historians. Scanning the time period of the 13th-14th century CE in old-Odia literature, and the time period around the 15th century CE when the literature in Odia language (as we know it today) came into being, it is unfortunate to notice that there are almost nil works of women found until the 16th century. In spite of the fact that women have maintained spiritual lives and have been the custodians and inheritors of cultural and spiritual traditions, passing them from generation to generation, there are no prominent women bhakti poets whose names can be recalled with ease in the context of Odia literature. Adyasha Das, an academic and poet who is most well-known for *The Yogini Poems: Life and Love* (2020), notes that 'women in society mostly wrote as charity, as the society was so constrictive then that women couldn't voice out, hence got lost in history[i]. Savitri Rout, in her book *Women Pioneers in Oriya Literature,* observes that 'women folks of Odisha have created thousands of folk songs even in the Pre-Sarala Age that are transmitted to generations through oral transmission'. Though written materials are rare and doubted as authentic proofs. Prateek Pattanaik, in his article "Ancient Poetesses of Odisha", has commented that Jira Dei, a tribal lady of the Dombi community around the 12th-13th century, is the oldest known poetess of Odisha who has written a commentary on *Sisu Veda* where the poet's name is mentioned as Dombi Mata, representing the Dombi community. It could be due to the lack of historical and literary evidence that she isn't named as the first woman poet of Odisha. Instead, Madhavi Dasi is recognised as the first woman poet of Odisha.

In ancient Odisha, there are multiple references to the existence of Maharis or temple girls who danced and sang for the Gods, as in Ratnagiri, where inscriptions mention the lineage of Maharis. Though Mahari tradition is a long-standing tradition in Odisha, which has recently ended, but bhakti songs written by them are not found. The lack of preservation could have been aggravated, given the nature of oral transmission and the various challenges it faced at the hands of colonial epistemology. Overall, the first well-known but forgotten female writer, as per sources, is Madhavi Dasi, also referred to as Madhavi Devi or

Madhavi Pattanayak, who was a popular bhakti poet in the early 16th century. Though Nandabai is also mentioned by Prateek Pattanaik as an author of popular *Nandabai Chautisa* or *Rukmini Chautisa* during the 16th century, which is also mentioned by popular poets like Upendra Bhanja (17th century CE) in his poetry, which he quotes in translated format, but the Chautisa isn't archived in any digital sources, making its accessibility challenging and localised. Later during the Riti Yuga or Ornate Poetry Age, various women writers, like Brindavati Dasi (17th century CE) and Nisanka Raya Rani (17th century CE) have left their marks. There is also the tradition of *Mangala Gita*, auspicious songs of marriage, written by almost two dozen unnamed princesses. The modern age is seen as the only time period when we begin to find recognition accorded to women's writings, which are accessed, written and even taught in schools and colleges. This was the time when women, who were largely engaged in spiritual and cultural activities, gradually shifted their concerns towards nature, societal issues and feminism, referring to nature and emotions to address social suppression and injustice against women. Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-38) and Bidyut Prabha Devi (1926-77) are a few of the poets who have addressed nature and feminist views.

Madhavi Dasi in the Vaishnava Tradition

Though there was a decline in devotional writings by women in the modern age, it doesn't mean that there are no bhakti poetries, jananas, or bhajans written by women during this period. *The Yogini Poems: Love and Life* by Adyasha Das is a contemporary spiritual poetry collection. It mainly concerns women's inner feelings, where yoginis express their feelings in the poems as a form of spiritual longing. Another contemporary poet is Purnamasi Jani, a tribal woman who has composed over 50,000 devotional poems. Her compositions are in the oral tradition, which shows how spiritual poetry has always been composed by women but the immediacy and intimate urgency of their voices are unable to withstand the dominance of the printed letter. In revisiting women's literary history, this remains a moot point. The archive is largely male-dominated and so is historiography itself. Even today, we hear newly made devotional songs or bhajans in the Odia language and many women singers perform them, but the writers are mostly men. Another possibility could be that women have been penning the songs but their names haven't been officially or publicly recognised. This is a major

reason why most women writers are forgotten and have their identities put to question, as in the case of Madhavi Dasi, who, by some literary critics, is even referred to as a male poet named 'Madhavi Dass'.

The Middle or Medieval Age of Odia literature starts with the Vaishnavite bhakti movement and then it ends with Riti Yuga or the age of ornate poetry. A major figure responsible for this bhakti movement and extensive writings of bhakti poetry was Saint Chaitanya. Hailing originally from Bengal, he had permanently settled down in Puri. *Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krishnadasa Kaviraja records that though he resided in Puri but he used to continuously travel to Bengal and even Vrindavan. He was very fond of literature and literary people and was closely associated with Panchsakha poets and was highly impressed by Ramananda Raya (late-15th to 16th century CE) and Jagannatha Dasa (1491-1550). It is believed by various literary scholars that Chaitanya's presence resulted in the upliftment of women's status, which is well pointed out by Jagadananda Das in his article "Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaishnavism (Part I)". One of the references he provides in support of his argument is Ramakanta Chakravarti, who, in his book *Vaishnavism in Bengal,* says, "One of the positive results of the Chaitanya movement was the elevation of the social and religious status of women in Bengal. This remarkable development was first seen in the assumption of ecclesiastical leadership by Jahnava Devi, second daughter of Suryadas Sarkhel and second wife of Nityananda." (Das, 2014). However, many contemporary scholars argue that women's status didn't really change, and women were still forced into their religious and social duties as daughters and wives, even though Chaitanya did not make a distinction for spiritual activities and promoted women to actively join and participate in spiritual activities. In his article titled "Exploring Jagannath Culture: The Intersection of Devotion, Rituals, and Literary Traditions" Dinesh Kumar Mali refers to Dr. Sarojini Sahu who has explained in her book titled *Sensible Sensuality* (2010) that Chaitanya himself held no qualms about interactions with women, highlighting that he marries two women and even hugged a woman who was singing *Geeta Govinda* in a very sensual way as mentioned in even *Chaitanya Charitamrita.* In this light, the popular literary narratives about him expelling Madhavi Dasi from his close group of devotees for being in love with her gurubhai seem incongruous. Other versions state that she was actually expelled not for being in love but only for letting Chhota Haridas, a fellow disciple, inside her boundaries for giving him some food. Apparently, she wasn't supposed to let men inside her house as

she was a saint, and this misdemeanour cost her rightful place at the feet of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Madhavi Dasi was even considered as a half disciple out of three and a half disciples of Chaitanya, most likely because she was a woman, as commented by Savitri Rout. The status of women under Chaitanya can be noticed from this that there are no other female disciples found under Chaitanya except Madhavi Dasi. Even during the whole 16th century, except for Madhavi Dasi and Nandabai, we barely find any names of female writers. Though there were multiple women followers of Chaitanya but none were his chosen disciples. There is another perspective to this, which is rightly pointed by Adyasha Das, who surmises that perhaps Chaitanya did not differentiate between Madhavi Dasi and his male disciples, and saw her as a common saint like others; rather, the society couldn't accept her as a great saint for she was a woman and her status couldn't be held at par with men.

Madhavi Dasi wasn't a marginalised figure of her time; she was most likely the only disciple of Chaitanya to write a Sanskrit text, a drama particularly named *Prataparudra Deva*. She was even a Deula Karani, temple scribe, during the reign of King Prataparudra Deva from 1497 CE to 1540 CE. She even wrote and published multiple devotional songs and poems. A woman during that time period of the 16th century, when women writers were unheard of, she not only read, wrote, and/or published poetry, but she even became a court member as a temple scribe. In all likelihood, she may have written and read more than Ramananda Raya or at least equal as him. She wrote thousands of works in multiple languages like Sanskrit, Odia, Bangla and Brajaboli of which very little is found, which is even is still stored in museum archives in the palm leaf format. Only two of her Odia poems are accessible, titled as 'Sri Nanda Nandan Se Jagabandana' and 'Chaka Nayana He, Jagu Jibana Sri Hari'. Such an admirable woman is now lost within the clouds of history, and though her name is vaguely known to people, few know of her works, and unknowingly, few still sing her poetry in villages, as some song recordings reveal[ii]. Sukumar Sen, a Bengali writer and linguist, in his book titled *History Of Brajabuli Literature* (1935) mentions Madhavi Dasi as Madhavi Dass and explains that because in some of her poems, like a Brajaboli poem, she referred to herself as 'Das' instead of 'Dasi' and Krishna bhaktas used to think that Krishna is the only man in this universe and so often called themselves as Dasi instead, so most probably Madhavi Dasi was a man or male[iii]. Sen must have ignored the fact that in *Chaitanya Charitamrita,* which is originally written in Bengali, Madhavi Dasi is mentioned as the sister of Sikhi Mahiti, a renowned

disciple of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Further, she is referred to as 'Madhavi Devi', settling all doubts about her gender identity.

In later periods of Riti Age, more women writers came forth and many literary works were written and though the works are remembered, often the writers are forgotten. Except for books specifically tracing women's literary histories, general Odia literary history texts rarely mention any women writers or their works. Madhavi Dasi's only evidence of existence in history is from *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. It's not just her but many other women writers whose history of existence is so vague and is traced through men's biographies/ hagiographies that they end up with confused and lost identities in history, which is rarely the case with men writers.

Spirituality In the Modern Period

In the Modern Age of Odia literary history, a lot of women writers have written strong viewpoints and perspectives on society. Now spirituality has taken a different viewpoint, where spirituality is not limited to God but has become wider and more than devotion. Adyasha Das expresses that in earlier times, the traditional social construct was such that women could not write bold poetry like they do in contemporary times and they could not come up with their differences of opinion. Hence, bhakti poetry by women was a way to convey certainly two things: firstly, devotion, and secondly, defiance. She further opines that these poetesses wrote in the time of such a patriarchal society, that their devotion towards Gods and Goddesses, projecting spiritual longing in the form of love itself, is a form of rebellion. She comments about the evolution of spiritual writings that, though there has been a change in the social and political landscape but spirituality has remained kind of cultural in Odisha, so while spirituality is still there while its projection in poetry has changed with time. The language of bhakti, becoming one with God, merging one's identity with God has evolved into expressions of identity, desire, introspection, questioning of social order and social structure in the modern era. Das says that contemporary poetry by women, unlike medieval era writing, is more about self, but whether in the earlier times or the modern age, the poetesses and their poetry continue to talk about liberation in their own ways. She correctly observes that women's spiritual writing has shifted away from expressions of devotion toward forms of awareness, moving from

practices of worship to modes of empowerment and embodied experience.

First feminist poet Kuntala Kumari Sabat projected 'nature and spirituality' in her poems. This is closely studied and explained in "Spiritual Quest through Nature: A Study of Kuntala Kumari Sabat's Poem 'Ode to the Jasmine'" by Anjali Sahoo. Sahoo explains, "... one can be incredibly spiritual without knowing anything about religious customs." (Sahoo, 73) The lines well explain how spirituality is not bound to religious customs and Gods, but it is beyond it, as Adyasha Das maintains, saying that spirituality is still an integral part of Odisha; just the way of looking at it and its projection in poetry has changed through time. Sahoo has noted that in the poetry of Kuntala Kumari Sabat, there is hardly any mention of God, yet the peace and spirituality are still felt through appraisal, not of God, but of nature, as God's most beautiful creation. Sahoo explores the themes of surrender, harmony, feeling of being one or dissolving in nature. Give an example of a poem here. This is even the expression of devotion used by Sabat in her poetry, where, rather than invoking a kind of unknown and unseen God, Sabat uses more practical experiences to project devotion and spirituality, and even highlights nature as an integral part of Odisha's culture and women's emotions, projecting feminism. Purnamasi Jani's devotional songs are also known as 'jananas'. Her devotional poems are not limited to Gods, but even spread awareness towards social evil practices[iv]. Jani, a Padma Shri Awardee, is a Kui tribal woman saint who has composed over 50,000 poems in Kui, Odia and Sanskrit languages, without any formal education.

Adyasha Das's poems in her collection titled *The Yogini Poems: Love and Life*, express feminist views through the voice of Chausath Yoginis, who are sixty-four Goddesses, who surround to Shiva in the centre of Chausath Yogini temple. Chausathi Yogini Temple, located in Hirapur, Odisha, is the first Chausathi Yogini Temple of India, built by the Bhauma dynasty Queen Hiradevi during 864 CE. It is a tantric roofless temple. Yoginis are 64 forms of Devi Aadishakti or Durga, depicting power, unity, and various emotions of rage, sadness, joy, desire and happiness. Das imagines the yoginis as representations of all women, voicing out their love, devotion and existence through the ages. The poetry collection expresses ordinary women who could include all other women being united with the thought of being connected to Shiva. Yoginis project spiritual longing and love, who are seeking to become

one with Shiva through awakening. She explains that these yoginis are not just devotees of Shiva; they are empowered consciousness of women, and the poems are an expression of divine femininity as energy and liberation. Das says that she has tried to transcend ritualistic bindings and express divine femininity through devotion. She says that her poetry collection projects spirituality in lyrical romanticism, connecting the personal to cosmos, and it is a celebration of the divine feminine that resides in all women.

Conclusion

This exploration into the history of spiritual literature in Odisha, focusing on the contributions of women from ancient times to the contemporary age, firmly establishes bhakti literature as a cornerstone of Odia literary heritage. This study illuminates the significant role of women writers in shaping this spiritual and cultural legacy. The journey from the orally transmitted folk songs of the Pre-Sarala Age to the significant figure of Madhavi Dasi (16th century CE) as the first well-recorded woman writer of Odisha, her life and vast multilingual works now largely fragmented and forgotten, serves as a powerful symbol of marginalisation and vague literary historicization of women writers. In the Modern Age, the spiritual voice of women has not vanished but has evolved. Poets like Kuntala Kumari Sabat shifted the language of devotion through nature, Purnamasi Jani embodying selfless devotion towards God, and Adyasha Das reclaims love, empowerment and liberation as a form of devotion. Ultimately, the literary and spiritual history of Odisha is incomplete without acknowledging the enduring and dynamic voice of its women. Their spiritual literature is not merely an expression of piety but also an early form of defiance and a quest for liberation and rebellion.

Notes:

i. Interview conducted with Adyasha Das through an online meeting held on 29-10-2025
ii. 'Chaka Nayana He, Jagu Jibana Sri Hari' can be found in YouTube and 'Sri Nanda Nandan Se Jagabandana' is found easily in JioSaavn under an album named 'Vandana (Devotional Prayers)' sung by Dvarkadhish Dasa.
iii. This is an important point that calls for further investigation into the gendered identities of bhakti poets. For instance, Pratap Kunwari Bai from medieval Rajasthan has referred to herself in a place of two as Pratap Das instead of bai/dasi in her bhakti poetry. Similarly, Sant Dayabai in the 18th century, while composing her bhakti poems, has referred to herself in one place as 'Dayadas'. While the gender shape

shifting of men poets is easily recognized as bhakti bhav, similar recognition is not afforded to women poets.

iv. The Newsroom Network. "Purnamasi Jani: An Epitome of Devine Mysticism." *Newsroom Odisha,* 25 February 2021, https://www.newsroomodisha.com/purnamasi-jani-an-epitome-of-devine-mysticism/

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6.

The Goddess as Iconoclast: Social Hierarchies in Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Purana*

**Pravamayee Samantaray*

Abstract: The *Lakshmi Purana* is an Odia devotional text of the 15th century written by Balaram Das, one of the Panchasakha poets of medieval Odisha. Despite outwardly being a Purana, it goes far beyond ritual devotion-it is a revolutionary work that rethinks divinity as a force for social justice. The study's primary goal is to investigate how Goddess Lakshmi redefines the moral and spiritual landscape of medieval Odia culture by challenging established gender, caste, and ritual authority structures through her moral and iconoclastic deeds. Lakshmi exemplifies an indigenous feminist and anti-caste consciousness that foreshadows later discussions on social reform by refusing to bless Jagannath's temple unless equality is accepted and by sanctifying Sriya Chandaluni, a marginalised, low-caste devotee. Balaram Das's use of symbolic inversion, household rituals, vernacular language, and story structure to democratise spiritual authority and acts of turning ordinary performances of devotion into platforms for ethical assertion is further examined in this article. In that sense, Lakshmi's iconoclasm is constructive rather than destructive. In the end, the study aims to prove that *Lakshmi Purana* serves as a literary and moral manifesto in which spiritual authority is in line with justice, ritual becomes inclusive, and devotion becomes dissent. The article highlights the Purana's contribution to feminist, Dalit, and ethical philosophy in South Asian literary studies, underscoring the text's ongoing relevance for discussions on religion, gender, and social equality.

Keywords: Social justice, Iconoclasm, Dalit, Feminist and ethical philosophy

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Introduction

The *Lakshmi Purana* by Balaram Das is a moral allegory that turns mythology into societal criticism rather than just a devotional work. The text, which was written in the fifteenth century in Odisha, differs from other Puranic stories in that it gives the goddess an ethical autonomy that is uncommon for gods in patriarchal religious traditions. A more thorough examination of gender and caste connections in pre-modern Indian society is revealed by Lakshmi's rebellion against the unfair actions of Jagannath and Balabhadra. Instead of rejecting tradition, Das transforms it from the inside out, enabling the goddess to speak as consciousness instead of decoration. Her deeds upend the caste system and the hierarchies of divine masculinity, establishing a compassionate religion of justice. The *Lakshmi Purana* is positioned in this introduction as a groundbreaking work of moral and social imagination that redefines holiness as human dignity and sees divinity as an ethical force for equality.

The Goddess as a Voice of Female Agency

A crucial framework for evaluating the *Lakshmi Purana* as a book that redefines divinity via gendered opposition is offered by feminist literary theory. By portraying Goddess Lakshmi as a self-aware, independent moral being rather than just a consort, the narrative challenges established patriarchal norms. The famous quote from Simone de Beauvoir that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283) perfectly captures Lakshmi's metamorphosis from the idealised goddess of wealth to an intentional force for societal change. Her godspouse Jagannath and his brother Balabhadra, who stand for male dominance in both the cosmic and cultural order, place domesticated expectations on her, but she defies them.

The significance of female-centred discourse that defies patriarchal literary conventions is emphasised by Elaine Showalter's concept of "gynocriticism" (Showalter 131). Despite being composed by a male poet, the *Lakshmi Purana* exemplifies this gynocritical viewpoint by granting the goddess her own moral voice and agency. Lakshmi's resistance is an affirmation of moral and social justice rather than a rebellion motivated by conceit or ego, a topic that strikes a deep chord with what Showalter refers to as the "female subculture of experience." Lakshmi appears as the moral judge who establishes the bounds of

virtue in a society where women were restricted to ceremonial roles. The radical edge of the text is further highlighted by Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is a performance influenced by cultural norms rather than a fixed identity (Butler 25). In this context, Lakshmi's decision to bless Sriya Chandaluni, a low-caste woman, and her departure from the temple can be interpreted as a rejection of her duty as the subservient, temple-bound consort. Rather, she embodies divinity via acts of justice, equality, and compassion that undermine both divine hierarchies and gender stereotypes.

Indian feminist theorists like Susie Tharu and Nivedita Menon contend that rather than being a rejection of tradition, Indian feminism must be understood as resistance within it. According to Menon (Menon 87), Indian feminist politics are "a continuous negotiation with patriarchal structures rather than a simple overthrow." Lakshmi's resistance is a wonderful fit with this indigenous female mentality; rather than giving up her heavenly function, she redefines it via moral behaviour. She demonstrates a feminism that is both devotional and defiant, sacred and socially transformative, both honouring Sriya and denouncing her own husband's temple. The *Lakshmi Purana*, thus, becomes a book of re-embodiment, a reinvention of women as a location of power and moral authority, from a feminist literary perspective. Lakshmi's iconoclasm transforms a patriarchal story into a feminist manifesto wrapped in religious devotion by reclaiming her gender as a tool of justice rather than rejecting it.

Dalit and Anti-Caste Theory: The Goddess as a Critic of Social Hierarchies

One of the groundbreaking aspects of the *Lakshmi Purana* is its criticism of caste, which makes it a proto-Dalit work long before contemporary Dalit literature appeared. The Brahmanical purity standards that governed medieval Odia culture are directly challenged by Lakshmi's acceptance of Sriya Chandaluni, a so-called untouchable lady. According to anti-caste theory, the goddess's rejection of what B. R. Ambedkar memorably referred to as the "graded inequality" of Hindu social order is represented by this act (Ambedkar 44). Ambedkar's analysis of caste as a structure upheld by religious approval sheds light on the dramatic intervention of the *Lakshmi Purana*. In the account, the goddess herself breaches the taboo, desacralizing caste from inside religion, rather than the human devotee who questions it. Another helpful perspective is

offered by Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's idea of "spiritual democracy" in *Why I Am Not a Hindu*. Ilaiah makes the case for a spirituality that prioritises equality above hierarchy (Ilaiah 109). By valuing Sriya's devotion over ceremonial purity, Lakshmi exemplifies this spiritual democracy.

Gender and caste are combined as two axes of oppression in Sharmila Rege's definition of "Dalit feminism". "Dalit women's resistance interrogates both Brahmanical patriarchy and mainstream feminism," according to Rege (Rege 74). This intersectional resistance is reflected in Lakshmi's ethical position, which challenges Brahmanical patriarchy by elevating a low-caste woman while simultaneously redefining what it means to be a heavenly woman. Her refusal to bless Jagannath's temple, a representation of ceremonial authority, until equality is acknowledged, is a metaphor for the spiritual and social deconstruction of caste hierarchies. This reading is further enhanced by Gopal Guru's work on "Dalit subjectivity." He contends that the foundation of every liberation discourse is self-respect and dignity (Guru 11). By sanctifying their devotion as equally honourable, the *Lakshmi Purana* provides dignity to all oppressed people, including Sriya. In this way, the goddess transforms supernatural grace into an ethical precept of equality, acting as a moral democratiser. Lakshmi's iconoclasm can be understood as both theological and sociological by embracing anti-caste ideology. Her acts demonstrate that discrimination based on caste is a spiritual degradation as well as a social evil. As a result, religion itself goes through an ethical purifying process in the Purana, moving from ritual exclusivity to moral inclusivity.

Ethical Feminism and Aesthetic Humanism: The Goddess as Moral Visionary

Beyond its feminist and anti-caste aspects, the *Lakshmi Purana* represents a deep ethical humanism that blends morality and beauty. Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, which emphasises the "ethics of care" as essential to feminine moral thinking, is consistent with the text's ethical framework (Gilligan 73). This ethic of care is exemplified by Lakshmi's empathy for Sriya and her emphasis on justice as love-in-action. Lakshmi's revolt is a subtle but effective kind of ethical opposition that uses moral persuasion and empathy instead of claiming domination.

Another interpretive key is provided by Martha Nussbaum's notion of the "capabilities approach" in *Women and Human Development*. According to Nussbaum, capabilities are the prerequisites for human flourishing (Nussbaum 5). For individuals who are marginalised by caste and gender, Lakshmi's intervention in the story establishes precisely such conditions—dignity, equality, and spiritual access. She reestablishes the moral equilibrium of the universe by offering divine grace to the marginalised, exemplifying what Nussbaum refers to as the "moral imagination" that connects compassion and justice (Nussbaum 88). From an aesthetic perspective, Balaram Das reinforces ethical transformation through symbolic contrast, irony, and inversion. The goddess's departure represents the retreat of prosperity when injustice reigns, while the conflict between the divine couple reflects human societal problems. The Purana becomes a moral metaphor because of its artistic framework, which holds that equality and remorse are the only ways to restore ethical order. Thus, Lakshmi's beauty becomes a sign of righteousness rather than decoration, connecting the ethical and the artistic.

Moral knowledge is relational and embodied, according to ethical feminism, which was established by intellectuals such as Margaret Urban Walker (Walker 19). Lakshmi's ethical understanding is derived from her interactions with her husband, Sriya, and the community; it is not an abstract concept. Her uprising is an affirmation of relational ethics in opposition to systemic injustice. She turns punishment into pedagogy, an act of moral teaching based on love rather than retaliation, by pardoning Jagannath and Balabhadra only after they acknowledge equality. Thus, the aesthetic humanism of the *Lakshmi Purana* unites social criticism and devotion. The goddess transforms into the embodiment of beauty that corrects prejudices, proving that morality and art may coexist in sacred stories. Lakshmi's iconoclasm is constructive rather than destructive; it breaks false idols in order to reestablish moral order based on justice and empathy.

Rewriting the Divine Order: Lakshmi’s Departure as Resistance

As a work that spiritualizes social revolt, the *Lakshmi Purana* holds a significant position in Odia literature. The narrative opens in the Jagannath temple in Puri, a hallowed establishment that represents both Brahmanical orthodoxy and Odia religious identity. However, Das turns this place of devotion into a place for moral reflection. An act of rebellion

against the divine patriarchy itself occurs when Goddess Lakshmi, the presiding deity of wealth and success, is banished from the temple for going into a low-caste woman's home.

Here, the tiff represents a severe social critique, in contrast to traditional Puranic stories, where divine disputes are metaphorical or light-hearted. Lakshmi's exile for transgressing caste norms highlights how deeply ingrained societal purity standards are. The cosmic order is upset, though, when she later withdraws wealth from Jagannath's temple and from the wider world. Instead of the goddess being unclean, it is the godly men who perpetuate injustice. The moral axis of divinity is altered by this inversion. By redefining the sacred as ethical rather than hierarchical, Balaram Das establishes compassion as the new standard of holiness.

Lakshmi's departure represents a symbolic break with caste and patriarchy. She transforms into a travelling figure of conscience rather than a domestic goddess restricted to ceremonial settings. A drastic transfer of divine mercy is symbolised by her journey from the temple to the residence of Sriya Chandaluni, a downtrodden woman. The goddess, who formerly ruled over plenty, now extends her holiness to the outskirts, demonstrating that the sacred is found where justice flourishes. In the *Lakshmi Purana*, this movement, both spatial and moral, becomes the primary iconoclastic gesture.

Sriya Chandaluni: The Marginal as the Moral Centre

A key role in Balaram Das's critique of societal hierarchy is played by Sriya Chandaluni. She is a low-caste woman who represents devotion that is unmediated by ritual purity. Despite being prohibited from accessing temples, her worship of Lakshmi on a Thursday undermines the fundamental basis of ritual authority. Her piety stems from genuine faith and service rather than knowledge or priestly training. To comprehend the egalitarian aesthetics of the Purana, the textual description of Sriya's house is essential. Das depicts it with simplicity and dignity; it is tidy, well-organised, and scented with devotion. The magnificent but spiritually empty temple of Jagannath, tainted by arrogance and hierarchy, stands in stark contrast to this vision. Das democratizes divinity by sanctifying the modest home of the Chandaluni. Thus, the Purana accomplishes what contemporary critics

could refer to as an epistemic shift: holiness is determined by ethical intent rather than social standing.

Balaram Das also addresses the societal marginalisation of women from lower castes through Sriya. She is portrayed as a moral role model who becomes the goddess's chosen disciple rather than as a victim. Once thought to be contaminated, her body now serves as a conduit for divine encounters. The distinction between the sacred and the profane vanishes when Lakshmi blesses Sriya. The goddess's presence in Sriya's house inverts the geography of holiness by turning her home into a temple. This episode foreshadows the politics of recognition, which Dalit feminism would later describe as the reclaiming of visibility and dignity by marginalised people from prevailing narratives. In a literal sense, Sriya becomes the moral focal point of the story. Lakshmi's ethical theology takes on human shape via the goddess, whose defiance is justified by her faith.

Jagannath and Balabhadra: Masculinity, Orthodoxy, and Moral Blindness

The depiction of Jagannath and Balabhadra as defenders of the caste system acts as a mirror to societal patriarchal systems. For his period, Balaram Das's audacious portrayal of celestial male characters in moral error was revolutionary. It was a theological correction rather than a blasphemy, demonstrating that even gods are flawed when they exhibit injustice. Balabhadra's haughtiness and Jagannath's silence represent two aspects of patriarchy. The orthodoxy's fixation with purity is shown in Balabhadra's tantrum, in which he insisted that the goddess not visit a low-caste woman's home. However, Jagannath's acquiescence is a sign of patriarchal complacency. Discrimination is sustained not only by the attacker but also by the silent accomplice.

Their reflexive rage stands in stark contrast to Lakshmi's response, which is her composed exit. The emotional core of the text is this moral contradiction between the feminine principle and male might. Balaram Das dramatises the metaphysical ramifications of moral blindness as affluence disappears from the world following Lakshmi's banishment. Later in the passage, the gods' repentance is noteworthy since it is brought about by ethical realisation rather than divine retribution. The cosmos is morally rearranged as a result of this remorse

and Lakshmi's conditional forgiveness; this symbolic restoration of justice is comparable to social change.

Ritual, Gender, and Power: Reinterpreting the Thursday Fast

The Thursday brata (fast) that ladies practice in honour of the goddess is one of the most important literary motifs of the *Lakshmi Purana*. This ceremony may initially seem to support traditional gender roles by portraying women as devout housewives who rely on divine favour. However, Das transforms the rite into an act of communal female agency. In their homes, women from all castes observe the fast by making modest offerings and calling upon the goddess. This decentralisation of worship is important because it takes male priests and temple establishments out of the core of religious activity. Spiritual autonomy takes place in the home. By supporting these women's dedication, Lakshmi turns the brata into a collective declaration of moral authority.

Balaram Das elevates women's daily labour to the status of divine ritual by sanctifying domestic tasks like cleaning, cooking, and serving. The ethics of caring that are important to subsequent feminist theory are anticipated by this aesthetic trend. As a result, the Purana turns ritual from a weapon of control into a tool of empowerment, enabling women to express their faith in ways that suit them. Furthermore, caste exclusivity is discreetly undermined by the accessibility of the Thursday fast, which is observed by women from all socioeconomic classes. By associating reward with moral conduct rather than birth, the story democratizes ceremony. The ritual becomes a moral institution of equality when devotion is reconfigured into an egalitarian deed.

Symbolism of Food, Purity, and Prosperity

In the *Lakshmi Purana*, food serves as a potent symbol of both grace and exclusion. Food becomes the subject of moral debate in the scene where Balabhadra chastises Lakshmi for dining in a low-caste woman's home. Lakshmi's act of dining at Sriya's house is not insignificant; rather, it is a direct challenge to the purity-pollution dichotomy, as sharing food is typically associated with social intimacy and hierarchy. This moment upsets social order in Odia society, where sharing a meal was a sign of caste. Lakshmi upholds the value of human dignity over ceremonial

rules by distributing food. The world descends into scarcity as she exits the temple, signifying that inequality and wealth cannot coexist. In Odia culture, prosperity refers to both ethical concord and material affluence. Lakshmi's homecoming represents moral rebirth, while her absence represents a moral drought. Thus, the Purana's ethical philosophy—that justice feeds while discrimination starves—is encoded in this symbolic economy of food and fortune. The theme of food turns into a metaphor for moral sustenance, with compassion serving as the final sacrifice.

Language, Imagery, and the Democratisation of Aesthetics

Similar to Lakshmi's moral uprising, Balaram Das's choice of straightforward, melodic Odia vernacular instead of Sanskritized vocabulary indicates an aesthetic insurrection. Das challenges the linguistic elitism that frequently accompanied caste power by writing in the vernacular language of the people, opening sacred speech to common audiences. The Purana's poetic tone is characterised by loving speech, moral parables, and striking natural imagery. Lakshmi's beauty is characterised by moral brightness rather than embellishment; her shine is the result of virtue rather than conceit. Balaram Das's humanism is characterised by this aesthetic change, which unites ethics with beauty.

Even the details of the deterioration that occurred during Lakshmi's absence—disease, starvation, and societal unrest—are depicted with brutal yet sympathetic imagery. The world is personified as a morally diseased body. The text connects aesthetics and ethics through this moral poetics, using beauty as a vehicle for justice. Thus, the democratisation of divinity is reflected in the democratisation of language. Das erases the distinction between the sacred and the social by letting the goddess speak in the language of the people, turning art into a kind of moral instruction.

Redemption and Reconciliation: Ethics of Forgiveness

The narrative of the *Lakshmi Purana* ends with repentance and redemption, but not before moral change. When Jagannath and Balabhadra experience the repercussions of their conceit, their realisation comes from moral awakening rather than terror. They recognise the hollowness of divinity in the absence of justice. Lakshmi's return to the temple is contingent upon her request that all devotees, regardless of gender or caste, be treated equally. Therefore, rather than being

submissive, her forgiveness is educational. It creates a new moral agreement founded on justice, compassion, and reciprocity between God and humanity. Salvation itself is redefined in this scenario of reconciliation. Ethical insight, not ceremonial penance, is the path to liberation. Lakshmi's return to affluence represents the reestablishment of moral equilibrium. The cosmic order only reappears when social harmony is recognised as divine law. The Purana presents a vision of reform based on love rather than retaliation by ending with reconciliation rather than destruction; this idea strikes a deep chord with both humanist spirituality and ethical feminism.

Cultural Continuity and Contemporary Resonance

The *Laxmi Purana* is still pertinent today because it addresses social ethics through cultural continuity rather than rupture. Balaram Das reinterpreted the religious framework of his time to express moral advancement rather than rejecting it. This tactic is similar to what contemporary Indian feminists such as Uma Chakravarti refer to as "the politics of subversion within tradition." The goddess's uprising is a spiritual restoration of justice rather than a secular criticism of religion. By speaking from within the holy, she integrates reform into faith rather than rejecting it. This subtlety accounts for the Purana's ongoing appeal among Odia women, who still recite it on Thursdays. Every recitation becomes a silent act of moral remembrance, a declaration that justice, equality, and compassion are heavenly obligations. According to modern interpretations, Lakshmi is a celestial character who humanises authority, challenges privilege, and upholds equality, an archetype of ethical dissent. Thus, the Purana emerges as a timeless text of moral instruction that unites spirituality, ethics, and aesthetics into a cohesive vision of social peace, transcending its temporal setting.

Conclusion

The *Laxmi Purana* by Balaram Das is one of the most groundbreaking religious stories in Indian literature, which turns the goddess from a passive symbol of wealth into an active moral reformer. The story destroys the interwoven caste and patriarchal systems through Lakshmi's moral rebellion, substituting equality for hierarchy and ceremonial purity for moral purity. Divinity is redefined as justice in action by her exit from the temple, her embrace of Sriya Chandaluni, and her insistence on remorse and change. Das transforms beauty into virtue

and devotion into dissent by depicting a goddess who corrects by conscience and instructs through compassion. Thus, the Purana offers a profoundly indigenous vision of intersectional liberation that anticipates feminist and Dalit thought centuries before it was formally articulated. Lakshmi's iconoclasm is the revitalisation of a world in which morality, equality, and faith coexist rather than their eradication. In the end, the *Lakshmi Purana* transcends its cultural roots to become a worldwide story of ethical feminism—a reminder that justice, in its purest form, is the ultimate form of devotion and that the divine must always side with the downtrodden.

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7.

Women, Oral Traditions, Sexism and Patriarchy: A Feminist Rethinking Approach to Balaram Das's *Laxmi Purana*

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Abstract: The *Laxmi Purana*, inscribed by the fifteenth-century Odia classic poet Balaram Das, provides a pioneering feminist chronicle that not only challenges deep-rooted patriarchal structures but also challenges caste hierarchies through the medium of oral tradition and religious narratives. This paper provides insight into how this classic oral folklore plays a vital role as a tool for highlighting the resistance against dominant gender and caste ideologies while being transmitted primarily through rituals and religious practices performed during the month of 'Margasira' in Odisha, popularly known as *Manabasa Gurubara*. The narrative builds up on Goddess Laxmi's fearless denial of Lord Jagannatha, her husband and Lord Balabhadra, her brother-in-law, who barred her from crossing into the temple after she paid a visit to the home of Shriya, a woman who belongs to a disadvantaged class group, thus breaking the age-old social limitations. Lakshmi's non-compliance to undergo the said 'purification ceremony' before re-entering the temple amplifies female self-possessiveness and reflects her equalitarian belief, while her strategic decision of withholding prosperity from the gods until they acknowledge their moral failure illustrates feminist hostility against male hegemony. The oral transmission and religious celebration of the text, through decades of worshipping norms, by women during 'Thursday rituals' creates a categoric feminist discourse that empowers women and encourages autonomy; through the ritualistic recitation of the *Purana*, economic independence, themes of self-respect and the right to challenge oppressive norms are foregrounded.

Keywords: Oral tradition, feminism, casteism, rituals, patriarchal authority, sexism

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The *Laxmi Purana*, is an Odia scripture, written by fifteenth-century Odia poet Balaram Das (one amongst the Panchasakha group or the five great poets, during the Bhakti age, who had also infamously translated the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Ramayana* into Odia) offers a groundbreaking feminist plot that challenges marrow-deep patriarchal systems in the body of society; critiquing caste hierarchy through oral traditions and folklores. This paper attempts to examine how this classic oral folklore serves as a pathway to practice resistance against dominant gender norms and caste ideas while being handed down mainly through rituals held during the month of 'Margasira', known as *Manabasa Gurubara* in Odisha. The narrative centres on Goddess Lakshmi's act of defiance against her husband, Lord Jagannatha, and her brother-in-law, Lord Balabhadra. After visiting Shriya, a woman from a caste considered lower in society, the two brothers forbid Laxmi to enter the temple and ask her to go for the purification ritual, for the re-entry into the temple, which Goddess Laxmi strongly objected and stood firm in her decision, which directs to an assertion of female autonomy and equality. Followed by holding back prosperity from the deities for a long twelve years, until they recognise their wrongdoing towards Laxmi.

For ages, this oral recitation of the story, in the month of Margashira's every Thursday among the women, brings into being a shared space for feminist dialogues and collective sensitisation. Through these ritualistic performances of this Purana, the text foregrounds some philosophical premises, such as the right to stand against discriminatory structures, financial autonomy, and self-esteem to come to the forefront. Though the tale unravels within a system shaped by male authority, it fearlessly challenges restrictive conventions and openly interrogates both gender and caste stratifications by allocating a role to Goddess Laxmi, the divine figure but portraying her as a quintessential human figure who sternly opposes the social injustice. Balaram Das has portrayed Laxmi as the embodiment of feminist defiance to patriarchal authority. This particular composition, through its colloquial language and rhythmic structure, surpassed the upper-privileged literature and became embedded in the oral and performative traditions of ordinary people. Part of the Odia literature, but goes beyond the bounds of regional boundaries by advocating casteism and gender disparities that are deeply rooted in the medieval Indian religious and social orders. The whole divine setting *Laxmi Purana* hints at the subtle dispropotions that

are engraved on the societal orders by making it a powerful early expression of indigenous feminist thought within Indian literature.

The text initiates with the central female protagonist Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, who was highly pleased with the devotion and gratitude of an outcaste woman, Shriya and stepped out to bless her. After she returned, she faced a strict rejection from her beloved when she claimed that she had no intention to be purified and then Lord Jagannath declared the verdict that she had to leave her marital home, which is a symbolic denial of the social and religious forces that put women into subjection. By insisting on her independence, Laxmi not only interferes with the powers of her husband but the overall ideology, according to which women are subordinate. This rebellious gesture can be attributed to the feminist claim that gender equality is needed to destroy the systems of domination that strip women of agency.

The text is not merely a mythological tale confined to divine settings. It remains actively woven into Odia culture through regular rituals and oral traditions that keep its relevance alive. In Odia homes, especially on Thursdays during the month of 'Margasira', women partake in drawing sacred *Jhoti* (ritual art) patterns and reciting the *LaxmiPurana* as acts of devotion and gratitude to the goddess continues to live vibrantly in Odia households through ritualistic and oral performances that sustain its cultural significance even today. The narrative is not simply a myth set in celestial realms, but these rituals go beyond religious observance and represent unity, empowerment, and a sense of collective identity among women. By engaging in these practices, women continually reinterpret Laxmi's acts of defiance, symbolically aligning themselves with her pursuit of respect and equality.

It is the continuity of oral and ritualistic transmission of *Laxmi Purana* that it will be a living text that will be redefined by feminine voices and experiences of women of different generations. In this process, oral traditions are very important to spread the spark among women. They work to make literature a communal cultural memory, which has the capability of empowering women to oppose oppression and to define themselves. *Laxmi Purana* is an attempt to fill the gap between the sacred and the mundane, myth and social reality, by being conveyed orally and performed in action. It also enables women as not only the carriers of the tradition but also the decoders and reproducers of the meaning.

The *Laxmi Purana* challenges two deeply entrenched systems of sexism, oppression and casteism through a narrative that appears, at first glance, mythological and devotional. Feminist theory provides a critical framework for examining the text as a means of resistance that arises from within a patriarchal framework. Patriarchy, as interpreted in feminist discourse, is a system of social organisation in which men hold authority and power over women in religious, political, domestic and economic spheres. In the conventional Hindu society, male supremacy is strictly woven in every possible ways, women have no choice by own rather to follow them wholeheartedly in the name of *Pativrata Dharma*. Under which she has to do everything that flatters the husband, much without any further interrogation.

Within this cultural framework, Lakshmi's defiance becomes evidently radical. Her refusal to undertake purification and her refusal to abandon her marital home represent a symbolic rejection of the religious and social constraints placed upon women for generations. By insisting on her independence, Laxmi not only interferes with the powers of her husband but the overall ideology, according to which women are subordinate. This rebellious gesture can be attributed to the feminist claim that gender equality is needed to destroy the systems of domination that stripped women of agency.

Furthermore, the text can be interpreted as a critique of the casteist hierarchy that legitimised and authenticated discrimination-based exclusion in religious and social life. Laxmi's decision to visit a woman from a lower caste challenges the purity-pollution dichotomy that has historically diabolically marginalised certain communities. Laxmi upholds an egalitarian and spiritual vision that undermines the discriminatory foundations of ritual purity and the supreme duty of women. This egalitarianism, articulated through divine intervention, becomes a powerful statement on the social realities of the time and serves as an early articulation of caste and gender equality within an indigenous context.

In the context of Odia culture, *Laxmi Purana* assumes an even deeper significance. Odisha, known for its strong tradition of goddess worship and promotes shaktism, placing the feminine divine at the centre of religious life. However, society honours female deities, but in the real world, women are forced to be obedient and docile towards the family and society. But regardless of cultural respect for goddesses, actual

women have been placed in subservient positions in the patriarchal world. This is a conflict between the divine glorification and social misery of women; it is one of the main contradictions which *Laxmi Purana* reveals in its core.

By examining *Laxmi Purana* under the light of feminism, it is possible to articulate how the feminist consciousness that prevailed in pre-modern India existed way before the feminist movements were formally expressed in contemporary India. It can be associated with a regional type of feminism that arose within the cultural and spiritual structure of the Indian society, which did not originate in the West. This native feminism acknowledges the experienced lives of women within their socio-religious shapes and forms the experiences into resistance and resilience. The oral transmission of the Purana further enhances its feminist attributes. Oral storytelling has long enabled women to safeguard their histories and voices in societies where reading and writing were predominantly male domains. By reciting and passing down the Purana, women not only preserve but also shape collective wisdom. As such, the text becomes a shared platform where women's acts of worship, endurance, and challenge are recognised and affirmed.

In this sense, *Laxmi Purana* challenges the conventional dichotomy between feminism and religion. It demonstrates that religion, often perceived as an instrument of patriarchy, can also serve as a site of reinterpretation and resistance. Lakshmi's defiance is not a rebellion against faith but a redefinition of divine as well as justice. Her voice resonates with the voices of countless women who seek to reconcile spirituality and norms with equality. Thus, *Laxmi Purana* stands as both a political statement and a cultural artefact. It embodies the complexity of women's lives, their enduring quest for selfhood and their negotiation with power. It continues to inspire reinterpretations and feminist readings that posit it within broader discourses of caste, gender and social justice.

This paper undertakes a feminist analysis of *Laxmi Purana*, focusing on themes of oral traditions, women's agency, patriarchy and sexism. It seeks to answer critical questions such as how the text reflects indigenous forms of feminism, how it exposes traditional gender roles within a religious framework and how it documents the history of women's empowerment and oppression. By focusing on the ritual and oral dimensions of the text, this study demonstrates that oral traditions

are not merely preservers of culture but are also dynamic pathways of liberation. Viewed from a feminist perspective, *Laxmi Purana* stands as ongoing evidence of women's fortitude, endurance and ethical leadership. The text uncovers the early development of feminist thought within South Asian literary traditions, highlighting that efforts toward gender justice have been deeply rooted in India's own culture and spirituality. Beyond recounting the tale of a goddess who stood up against unfairness, it continually inspires women across generations to question and resist the boundaries placed upon them.

Balaram Das's *Laxmi Purana* occupies a unique space in the literary, societal and devotional landscape of Odisha, functioning simultaneously as a cultural artefact, religious text and a site of feminist critique. The narrative foregrounds a goddess who speaks her will, defies patriarchal authority and aligns herself with marginalised women, thereby subverting both gender and casteist hierarchies. A close textual reading reveals how the *Purana*'s events, characterisation and narrative strategies work in tandem to critique discrimination, patriarchy and sexism, while amplifying women's agency. When analysed through feminist and literary theoretical frameworks, the text emerges not only as a devotional narrative but also as a powerful assertion of social justice and gender equity.

At the heart of this *Purana* is the episode where Laxmi enters the home of Shriya, a woman considered untouchable. By stepping across established caste lines, Laxmi directly confronts the prevailing social and ritual conventions of that era. The disapproval expressed by Jagannatha and Balarama, who reject Shriya's purity and criticise Lakshmi, highlights the deep-seated patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies within traditional religious customs. Lakshmi's confrontation with Jagannatha directly critiques male authority and the gendered expectations imposed upon women: "Laxmi said to Jagannatha, 'You claim to uphold dharma, yet you deny the sanctity of women who labour and live with dignity. How can righteousness reside in such arrogance?'" (Das 24). This dialogue exemplifies how Laxmi challenges the patriarchal notion that women's virtue is conditional upon male permission and approval. By asserting her ethical judgment, she resists the expectation of wifely submission and obedience, highlighting the *Purana*'s critique of gender-based hierarchy and hegemony.

From a feminist lens, Lakshmi's defiance can be read through Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of culturally specific feminist agency. Mohanty emphasises that women's resistance must be understood within their socio-cultural contexts rather than universalised frameworks of oppression (Mohanty 65). Lakshmi's defiance does not reject tradition outright; rather, it reinterprets ethical and devotional norms from within, asserting justice over ritual orthodoxy. Her actions exemplify what Mohanty calls "radical agency within tradition," foregrounding the possibility of feminist resistance in deeply patriarchal contexts.

The narrative structure of *Laxmi Purana* also enhances its subversive potential. As an orally transmitted text, it allows for performance, interpretation and adaptation by women across generations. Oral narratives, as Ruth Finnegan observes, are inherently participatory and fluid, enabling marginalised voices to negotiate and reshape dominant discourses (Finnegan 47). Women in Odisha recite the Purana during Manabasa Gurubar rituals, blending devotion with critique. These performances transform domestic and communal spaces into sites of moral authority, wherein women symbolically assert their ethical and social agency.

Lakshmi's solidarity with Shriya introduces an intersectional dimension to the *Purana*'s critique of oppression. By aligning with an untouchable woman, Laxmi contests both gender and caste hierarchies, anticipating frameworks of intersectionality articulated by scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw. The text problematizes patriarchal definitions of purity and pollution: "Laxmi touched Shriya's hand without hesitation, and the house of Jagannatha grew cold and barren until he learned that true worth is not measured by birth but by action" (Das 28). Through this act, the *Purana* underscores that spiritual and moral authority is not the exclusive domain of higher castes or men. The narrative reconfigures power structures and societal norms by prioritising ethical conduct over hierarchical status, creating a space for women and marginalised groups to assert their value.

Simone de Beauvoir's notion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283) provides another interpretive framework. Laxmi actively constructs her identity, refusing the passive role traditionally assigned to women in both religious and domestic contexts. She demonstrates that womanhood is defined not by obedience

or subservience but by moral and autonomous action. The *Purana* foregrounds women's agency at the centre of social and ethical order, critiquing the patriarchal notion that women's worth is contingent upon their compliance with male authority.

The ethical tension between Jagannatha's authority and Lakshmi's defiance also illuminates the patriarchal logic underpinning religious and social hierarchies. Jagannatha's initial refusal to acknowledge Shriya's worth represents a moral blindness sanctioned by patriarchal norms. The ensuing deprivation in his household dramatises the consequences of excluding women and marginalised communities from moral recognition. This narrative moment critiques a system in which male authority is normalised, yet dependent upon female labour and ethical guidance: "The household of Jagannatha knew famine and despair, for the goddess's absence revealed that the prosperity of men is inseparable from the justice and presence of women" (Das 32).

The text's attention to domestic and ritual spaces further underscores its feminist potential. Women's engagement with the *Purana* through ritual performance transforms these spaces into sites of resistance. As Gloria Goodwin Raheja observes, women's oral performances frequently constitute "counter-discourses" that subvert dominant patriarchal ideologies while appearing to conform to them (79). By performing Lakshmi's narrative, women assert moral authority and question gendered hierarchies within their households and communities. The *Purana* exemplifies how oral tradition can function as a medium for feminist critique and empowerment, bridging narrative, ritual and social praxis.

The linguistic and stylistic strategies of *Laxmi Purana* further enhance its feminist resonance. The text employs a vernacular idiom accessible to women, who were historically excluded from Sanskritic education. Its lyrical and repetitive structure aids memorisation and performance, ensuring oral transmission across generations. This accessibility aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument that subaltern agency must operate within culturally intelligible frameworks (87). By using the vernacular, Balaram Das democratises sacred discourse, allowing women to appropriate religious narrative as a form of empowerment.

Several textual moments specifically critique sexism and the subordinate social position of women. For instance, Laxmi reproaches Jagannatha for restricting women's participation in ritual and domestic decision-making, "You call yourselves the lord of the house, yet every task, every fortune, every virtue is sustained by women's hands. How can you claim mastery when you deny them voice and choice?" (Das 30). This statement directly challenges patriarchal assumptions that men are the natural arbiters of household, social and spiritual authority. The narrative emphasises that male authority is contingent upon women's labour, loyalty and ethical action, revealing systemic gender inequalities that remain relevant in contemporary feminist critique.

The *Purana*'s portrayal of Shriya also highlights gendered oppression intersecting with caste discrimination. Her social marginalisation and the simultaneous undervaluation of her ethical and spiritual capacity illustrate the dual oppressions women face in patriarchal and casteist systems. Lakshmi's intervention validates Shriya's worth and demonstrates a proto-intersectional ethical framework: "The goddess proclaimed, 'A woman's birth does not define her value, nor her caste her virtue. It is action and heart that measure worth'" (Das 29). This pivotal scene within the text strengthens the *Purana*'s bold challenge to both gender and caste oppression. It places women's ethical strength above the hierarchical norms imposed by society, showing the story's nuanced awareness of how these issues intersect long before such ideas were formally named. Additionally, the Purana questions the widespread belief that women's subservience is justified by tradition or divine authority. Lakshmi's unwillingness to endure unfairness or conform to strictly patriarchal expectations reflects a form of feminist defiance rooted in local tradition. Through her resistance, the religious story becomes a means of social commentary, empowering women to confront injustice even as they participate in devotional rituals.

The textual analysis of *Laxmi Purana* also reveals how patriarchal oppression is embedded in language, ritual and social expectation. For example, the repeated emphasis on ritual purity and the denigration of untouchable households serve to enforce male-dominated moral authority. By subverting these norms, Laxmi exposes the arbitrariness and violence of patriarchal and caste hierarchies: "Purity is not in walls or water, but in deeds and conscience. Those who oppress and humiliate women and the lowly are impure in the eyes of dharma" (Das 31). This

proclamation aligns with feminist theory, illustrating that ethical and spiritual authority need not mirror social hierarchy. Women's moral and spiritual agency is presented as a corrective to male-dominated structures, demonstrating the *Purana*'s enduring relevance as a feminist text.

Examining the text through both textual analysis and feminist theory reveals its complex challenge to patriarchy, gender bias, and sexism. Lakshmi's rebellious stance, her ethical support for excluded women and the *Purana*'s oral transmission together suggest an ideal of social and gender fairness. The narrative confronts male dominance, questions established social structures, and affirms women's moral and spiritual autonomy, while still maintaining its importance as a devotional and cultural text. When considered alongside the perspectives of feminist thinkers like Mohanty, Beauvoir, and Spivak, *Laxmi Purana* stands out as a religious text with radical feminist dimensions, motivating women's empowerment and resistance in Odisha and beyond.

The *Laxmi Purana* of Balaram Das endures as one of the most radical and reformist compositions in Odia literature. While it originated as a devotional text centred on the goddess Lakshmi, it transcends its ritual context to become a profound commentary on women's agency, patriarchal domination and caste oppression. Through the lens of feminist criticism, the *Puranas'* oral and textual layers reveal how women in both myth and lived experience negotiate the boundaries of authority and redefine the ethics of justice, compassion and equality. In reinterpreting *Laxmi Purana* from a feminist perspective, this study has shown how the narrative constructs an alternative moral order that privileges ethical integrity over ritual purity, solidarity over hierarchy and justice over obedience.

At the heart of the *Purana*'s revolutionary and transformative message lies Lakshmi's act of defiance, her refusal to accept Jagannatha's patriarchal decree and her alliance with Shriya, an untouchable woman (referred to as 'chandaluni' in the folklore). This episode becomes emblematic of resistance not just to gender subordination but also to systemic caste discrimination. Lakshmi's assertion that "true devotion resides in righteousness, not caste" (Das 24) epitomises a vision of spirituality that unites ethics and equality. Her defiance rejects the theological justification of patriarchy, exposing it as a moral and social

construction rather than a divine truth. In doing so, the Purana reimagines divinity itself as inclusive and justice-oriented.

This progressive reimagining of female divinity contrasts sharply with the depiction of women in traditional Hindu epics. While revered figures such as Sita and Draupadi commonly symbolise endurance, purity, and moral suffering within male-dominated frameworks, Laxmi rejects passive suffering and silent acceptance. Rather, she boldly speaks out, takes decisive action, and reshapes the ethical landscape. Her assertiveness signifies a move from divine compliance to divine opposition. Consequently, the *Laxmi Purana* offers a new model in which female divinity is the source of ethical authority, turning submission into defiance and devotion into a form of moral activism.

The folk and oral tradition of *Laxmi Purana* plays an essential role in sustaining, propagating and amplifying this feminist consciousness. For centuries, Odia women have recited, participated and performed the *Purana* during Manabasa Gurubar rituals, embedding it within the rhythms of domestic and communal life. These recitations constitute acts of collective memory and cultural agency. As Ruth Finnegan notes, oral traditions allow marginalised voices to reframe dominant narratives (Finnegan 47). In the case of *Laxmi Purana*, women's oral recitations become both devotional and political acts, ritual performances that celebrate divine femininity while simultaneously questioning social hierarchies. Through repeated performance, women internalise Lakshmi's defiance as a moral ideal, transforming a religious ritual into a symbolic act of feminist empowerment.

Lakshmi's act of accepting Shriya emphasises the interconnected nature of oppression by breaking down barriers between the divine and mortal, the privileged and the marginalised, and the pure and impure. By offering her blessings across caste lines, Laxmi enacts what contemporary feminist scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw call intersectional resistance, acknowledging that gender issues are inseparable from class, caste, and social hierarchies. The story in the *Purana* illustrates that true liberation for women requires addressing the wider structures that shape societal life. Lakshmi's moral alliance with Shriya thus foresees a broad feminist awareness that crosses traditional divides of caste and class.

The Purana reveals the patriarchal systems woven into both religious and social orders. Jagannatha's role as both husband and deity symbolises male supremacy embedded within family and spiritual institutions. His demand for Lakshmi's submission portrays the patriarchal belief that a woman's value is tied to obedience. However, his eventual collapse, marked by hunger, suffering, and moral blindness, demonstrates the consequences of excluding women, both spiritually and materially. The renewal of wealth and well-being when Laxmi returns represents more than divine harmony; it signifies a fundamental shift in ethical priorities that affirms women's moral importance and calls for the dismantling of hierarchical oppression. This perspective aligns with feminist scholars like Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, who argue for reclaiming women's voices within religious conversations. Rajan views religion not merely as patriarchal but as a fertile ground for feminist reinterpretation. *Laxmi Purana* embodies this by not rejecting faith but by redefining it, turning acts of devotion into powerful critiques of inequality and presenting a vision of spiritual feminism centred on compassion for the marginalised.

The text's normative, linguistic and performative aspects further reinforce this feminist vision. Composed in Odia rather than Sanskrit, the Purana democratises religious knowledge and disrupts the monopoly of male priestly authority. Its vernacular idiom enables women, who were historically denied formal education, to recite, access and interpret the divine narrative. This accessibility, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, allows subaltern voices to "speak" within their cultural frameworks (87). Women's recitations of *Laxmi Purana* thus become acts of reclaiming both language and knowledge, ensuring that sacred authority is no longer the exclusive domain of men or elites.

In the broader context of Indian feminist thought, *Laxmi Purana* can be seen as an early articulation of indigenous feminism. Long before the advent of modern feminist theory, it presents a discourse that situates female autonomy within faith and moral action. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's notion of feminist agency within cultural tradition finds perfect resonance here: Lakshmi's rebellion operates within the language of dharma, not against it. Her defiance is not rejection but redefinition, an ethical reordering that transforms tradition into a medium of justice. The goddess thus becomes a cultural archetype of feminist resistance rooted in indigenous spirituality rather than Western secular frameworks.

The continuing relevance of *Laxmi Purana* lies in its capacity to challenge persistent sexism and patriarchy within contemporary contexts. In modern Odisha, women still invoke Laxmi during domestic rituals as a symbol of prosperity and virtue, but increasingly, she also represents moral independence and self-worth. The narrative has inspired folk songs, performances and reinterpretations that emphasise women's solidarity and ethical strength. Its message that devotion without justice is hollow resonates deeply in a society where gender and caste inequities endure under new forms.

From a literary standpoint, *Laxmi Purana* also demonstrates the power of oral literature as a repository of subaltern voices and drives home the very concept of equality. The text's transmission through storytelling and ritual ensures its evolution across generations, allowing new interpretations to emerge in response to changing social realities. This dynamic adaptability, characteristic of oral traditions, keeps the *Purana* alive as both a spiritual and political text. It reminds us, as Walter Ong observes, that orality fosters not static preservation but creative transformation (36). In each recitation, women reinterpret Lakshmi's defiance, reaffirming that ethical resistance remains a living, communal act.

In conclusion, *Laxmi Purana* stands as a timeless testament to the intersection of humanity, compassion, faith, feminism and social justice. Its critique of patriarchy and sexism, expressed through the divine narrative of Lakshmi's rebellion, transforms a ritual text into a moral manifesto. By integrating oral tradition with feminist ethics, the *Purana* constructs a theology of equality where devotion becomes indistinguishable from resistance. Lakshmi's voice is firm, compassionate and unyielding, embodying the essence of feminist spirituality: the assertion that justice is sacred and that divinity itself demands inclusivity. There is a dire need to bring back the true essence of feminine agency and the importance of equality, which can be drawn from the literary and sociological continuity that the *Purana* has to offer, beyond the boundaries of Odia literature, norms and tradition.

Essentially, the *Purana*'s power lies in its enduring relevance and foregrounding a sense of equality. In a world still shaped by patriarchal hierarchies, Lakshmi's act of crossing the boundaries of caste and gender serves as a metaphor for all struggles against exclusion and subordination. Her solidarity with Shriya reminds us that liberation is

collective, not individual; ethical, not ceremonial. The *Laxmi Purana* thus continues to inspire not only devotion but also dissent, urging readers, religious practitioners and listeners to envision a society where morality is measured not by obedience or purity but by humanity, compassion, equality and justice. Balaram Das actively sabotages the societal prohibitions and also destabilises gendered and caste-based hierarchies by delineating Goddess Laxmi as both a social and a divine reformer. Ultimately, the *Laxmi Purana* stands as a testimonial to indigenous feminism and reflects the richness of medieval Indian literature in addressing issues of sexism, casteism and patriarchal authority long before such notions ingrained prominence in modern feminist discourse.

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8.

Reimagining Partition through Feminist Posthuman Nomadic Subjectivity: A Study of Selected Stories from Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Woman*

**Rabeya Khatun*

Abstract: The continuous emplacement and dispossession of women through the ramifications of the Partition of India have reconfigured the issue of subjecthood. Feminist subjectivity has undergone an ever-evolving process in the posthuman and postfeminist eras. The emergence of "becoming-woman" through "lines of flight" has decentred the notion of the hegemonic framework of gender binaries. Lines of flight refer to the deconstruction of universal codes or norms. The present paper intends to reinterpret Partition through the analytical framework of Rosi Braidotti's "nomadic subjectivity" in select stories such as "An Unrestored Woman", "The Merchant's Mistress" and "The Lost Ribbon" from Shobha Rao's collection, *An Unrestored Woman* (2016). Nomadic Subjectivity is a posthuman feminist ethos that challenges unified subject and fixed identity. The construction of the self is a complex social process. The present article intends to explore the fluid nexus of selves through the vignette of the becoming-subjectivity of women affected by partition. Rao's female protagonists in these stories transcend the confining boundaries through the conceptual trajectories of "affirmative feminism", which challenges the notion of absolute femininity, and "relational autonomy", which rejects the vision of a unified agency in the redefinition of female selfhood. These women, further, de-territorialise the discourse surrounding the feminine and masculine qualities through the flight of contestation, resistance, negotiation and multiple sexual encounters. It also focuses on how the characters embark on the perilous journeys of constant movement in identity formation.

Keywords: becoming-woman, lines of flight, nomadic subjectivity, posthuman self, partition

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Introduction

The partition of India has not only displaced a large number of people from their original roots but also created communal tensions that culminated in abduction, rape and mutilation of women's bodies. Women exist on the threshold of otherness. The powerful social forces have unravelled their selves. But not all women succumb to this nationalistic vignette of honour. Some emerge from the ashes of violence and victimhood by exercising agency even though under constraint. They become posthuman figures as their subjectivity is not a unified sense of sublime self, but it is formed through constant transgressions, shifts and movements with non-human forces. The present paper reimagines the violent history of Partition through the representation of these emerging women who encompass the phenomenon of socio-cultural stasis. It reads the select partition stories from Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Woman* through the lens of Rosi Braidotti's posthuman feminist nomadic subjectivity. Braidotti, along with other posthuman thinkers, questions individual autonomy and subjectivity. Her idea of nomadic subjectivity questions the unified subjectivity and focuses on how subjecthood is constituted through complex interrelations of humans and non-humans. Depersonalization and decentralisation are at the heart of the posthuman feminist agenda. Angela McRobbie's postfeminist framework also questions essential femininity. The posthuman nomadic encounter of the dynamic intersection of subjectivity deconstructs the myth surrounding the cultural idea of women as metaphors of honour and motherland. No identity is constant and unique according to the posthuman ideologies. It becomes a new epoch to deconstruct the logocentric monolithic regime of humanity. The present paper intends to discuss these issues in the short stories such as "An Unrestored Woman", "The Merchant's Mistress" and "The Lost Ribbon" from Rao's collection. Neela in "An Unrestored Woman", Renu in "The Merchant's Mistress", and the unnamed pathetic mother in "The Lost Ribbon" are becoming women who have defied the rigid boundaries of social norms. Neela became a widow, believing the rumour that her husband died in the Partition massacre. She went to the refugee camp for women. There she developed a homosexual affair with Renu, another widow in the camp. Renu also challenged the codes of womanhood by making both homosexual and heterosexual encounters. The unnamed mother was abducted by a Muslim man. She suffered from a psychotic dilemma and killed her child to save the child from the abductor. This analysis explores the dynamic nomadic subjecthood of

women scarred by Partition through subversion, navigation, and disarticulation.

Posthuman Nomadic Selves of Victimised Women in Partition

Significantly, feminist criticism and posthumanism problematize the idea of a monolithic human self and subjectivity. According to Judith Butler, gender is performative. One becomes an identifiable subject through his or her performance. This identifiable subject cannot remain fixed but in the constant movement of becoming. This movement of becoming subject is a significant dimension of Braidotti's nomadic self. This can be seen as analogous to the idea of one of the most prominent feminist thinkers, Simone de Beauvoir, who argues that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273). Angela Balzano in her article, "Posthuman Glasses for Nomadic Subjectivities: A Comment on *Il postumanesimo filosoficoe le sue alterità* (*Philosophical Posthumanism and Its Others*), by Francesca Ferrando", also contends that "one is not born, but rather becomes, posthuman" (226). Both methodologies point out a consensus on the plurality of subjects. Braidotti makes a remarkable contribution to posthuman feminist thought and she emphasises that the feminist theoretical lens is a trailblazer to posthuman ideology. In chapter 2 of her book, *Posthuman Feminism*, she states, "Posthuman feminism is instead in favour of heterogeneous assemblages that embed the contemporary subject in an expansive web of vital but also gratuitous relations between humans and non-humans". It is through the confluence between human and non-human that subjectivity and agency are formed. Social, cultural and political forces operate as non-human agencies in the context of the Partition genocide that have formed the subjective nomadic selves of women. It is against the interaction of these forces that women articulate their agency**.** However, the idea of place also becomes important in the context of the formation of posthuman agency. Refugee camps for women are spaces that provide a porous node to the ethos of subjectivity. Rao's stories grant a posthuman ethos to refugee women displaced by partition.

Though women have been recovered by the Inter-Dominion treaty, they remain unrestored. They could never go back to their previous selves. They are metaphorically, symbolically and psychologically unrecovered. Neela in "An Unrestored Woman" is such a marginalised woman. She became a widow at the age of fifteen, as everyone thought that her husband had been murdered in the course of

the violence of the Partition. She went to the refugee camp for neglected women with the help of Lalla, a neighbour. There she regained a new self. The characters have no control over their own subjective process. They are becoming posthuman. The complex entanglement between women affected by partition with the non-human social forces shapes their selfhood. Her own home has now no meaning for her. She has a posthuman nomadic encounter in the refugee camp. It is the refugee camp that gives her new rays of hope with Renu. She has involved herself with Renu in a passionate love affair. As a wife, she always sought the love of her husband. But now she is feeling the best feeling in her life with Renu: "Neela closed her eyes. The warmth of Renu's neck, the scent of her body, left Neela aching. Hollow. It was a feeling she could not describe. Though she could describe what it was not: it was not lonely, it was not sad. It was keenly felt but it caused no pain" (Rao 11). Neela has exerted personal agency through this homosexual encounter with Renu, dissolving the stereotypical image of women in society. But this type of autonomy is operated under limitations, as she has acted within the liminal space of the camp. It is as if this camp has some agency in reconstructing her sexual self.

Along with posthumanism, post feminism questions individual autonomy and self-regulating femininity. Agency is always exercised under constraint, as humans act in a determined social arena. One of the significant torchbearers in the evolution of the concept of post feminism, Angela McRobbie, in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, draws on Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity for her post-feminist project. She reconceptualises this as an important shift within the context of performative agency. She adopts Braidotti's concept of affirmative feminism, which challenges "the female agency position advocated by the third wavers" of feminism (159). According to her:

> She argues for a departure from girlhood *per se*, suggesting that it is the task of feminism to create new kinds of female feminist subjects (maybe non-girls) who are minoritarian, who are not frightened by the idea of leaving traditional femininity. . . . Such a departure is not so unimaginable since lurking beneath the surface (of what I would call the 'post-feminist masquerade'). . . . Braidotti aims at liberating the subject from the prison cell of binary gender assignation. She does this by abandoning gender in favour of forces and flows, bodies and desires, and she focuses on the transformative potential which is also a feature of

> life itself, and which although capitalism is endlessly trying to capture and harness it. . . . (161)

Both of them critique the idea of free agents and decentre the logocentric notion of subjectivity and volition. Renu becomes the epitome of a free agent as she deconstructs the nationalistic metaphor of women as the symbol of honour. Her masculine subjectivity has confronted the whole idea of gendered discourse in the patriarchal system. Whereas most women abscond to live their life in fear of abduction, violence and rape, she breaks fixed norms by appropriating the continuing flux of her sexuality. She was also a victim of this riot as she ran from her house and "jumped into the stream, hidden as it was by a slight ravine, and watched as the figures of the men danced in the flames" (Rao 21). She is now a widow, as a partition riot has snatched away the life of her husband. Due to the orthodox norms of widowhood in society, she has a bald head. Instead of thinking about the growth of the hair on her bald head, she has refused to "let her hair grow out" (Rao 20). Like Neela, she has also exercised her agency within the boundaries of the camp. So, the non-human forces have played a significant role in the construction of her subjectivity.

The formation of the subject is a social process as it is "made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire" and "the entire process of becoming-subject is the will to-know, the desire to say, the desire to speak" (Braidotti 169). So, what emerges through this development is Braidotti's "nomadic subjectivity" (166). Her approach of nomadic subject is in confluence with the post-structuralist discourse of de-essentialized persona. There is always a continuous transformation of the subject, and it has no hierarchical system. This approach dismantles the prevalent humanistic vignette of a static form of subjecthood. Renu, Neela and the pathetic mother become the nomadic beings who form a resistance against the hegemonic power.

Unlike the other 800 widows in the camp, Renu wants to assert her agency by leaving it to lead her life according to her own accord. But this expression of independent will is restricted by hegemonic consent, as she has used her own body to become the beloved of a wealthy merchant, only to rob him. Neela's mother-in-law brought poison for both of them to end their lives but Neela refused to die. Women also assert their agency, though within the boundaries of society. In "The Lost Ribbon", the unnamed abducted victim of partition died

psychologically forty years ago when she was abducted and raped. She gave birth to a girl child. She was so traumatised that, to protect her own daughter from the cruelty of men, she killed her. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin also throw a critical lens on the condition of women. They emphasise the vulnerable conditions of these women who are converted. Even their children are considered impure, and their identities are "in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction" (Menon and Bhasin 98). Indeed, there were women who "became 'permanent refugees'" (Menon and Bhasin 229). As a result, a posthuman fractured subjectivity emerges.

Braidotti draws attention to the ramifications that give rise to this emergence of the complexities of the present dissolute condition. She has raised the question: What are the repercussions of the loss of an intact self-perception? According to the humanistic logic of rationality, autonomy has always been associated with masculinity or male power. This conviction has been challenged by feminist and posthumanist critics. So, the notion of subject has undergone a metamorphic process in the Posthuman era. The concept of individual autonomy is a political project as it is rooted in liberal humanistic philosophy of power and control. This type of autonomy has given rise to the oppression, marginalisation and subjugation of women. There is no such thing as a pure individual self. What exists is the "social self" and this self has no autonomy itself as it is "the socially determined" self (Barclay 53).

Becoming Woman, Subjectivity, and Partition

Braidotti's conception of "becoming-woman" aligns with Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's notion of becoming "molecular" woman, standing in contrast to the "molar or sedentary" formulation of woman, as constituted in phallocentric ideology (Braidotti 250). Molecular indicates small particles but molar indicates mass amounts. Symbolically, in a literary context, molecular represents divergence and molar represents fixity. Femininity is an abstract concept that, like molecules, is always in constant flux rather than an absolute idea of womanliness. So, it opposes sex and gender binaries. The cultural construction of women is frequently marked as the symbol of a subaltern or inferior other in contrast to the figure of the reasonable man. The idea of becoming-woman is the countering of this tendency. Woman, in this case, is not a traditional figure but "the marker of the general process of transformation" (Braidotti 250). French post-structuralist feminist

philosopher, Luce Irigaray, in her book *This Sex Which is Not One*, critiques the privileging notion of sexuality and focuses on the multiplicity of feminine sexuality. There is always the lacuna of inherent manhood or femalehood.

Renu becomes a molecular woman with multiple sexual selves. While journeying to Ahmedabad, leaving the refugee camp, a woman mistook her for a man. She felt "somehow lighter" (Rao 19) at the thought of her being recognised as a man. She does not adhere to any fixed sexuality. It is the situations that modify her inner being. She enjoyed a homosexual relationship with Neela in the camp and Memsahib in the merchant's house. She has nostalgia for the moments she shared with Neela. Though Neela left her, "there was still a sense that there was something, *something* that was missing" (Rao 24). She also remembers how Neela "played her fingers against the hollow" of her neck (Rao 24). Later, she enjoyed heterosexual love with the merchant: "They made love, then she filled his opium pipe and talked to him while he smoked – about her life, about the camp, once even about Neela . . ." (Rao 33). Her sense of self has always escaped fixed categories. Her female subjecthood has gone through trajectories of transformations or what Braidotti calls "lines of flight" (7). It refers to the breaking of universal structures of codes and the thwarting of socio-cultural-political frameworks. In *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Braidotti says:

> The point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories. The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the very terms of their specification and of our political interaction. (7)

She does not only think in terms of becoming and a moment of rupture but also focuses on the reconfiguration of non-replicable selfhood, sexual identities and discursive rules. Her nomadic subject is a new epistemic structure that undermines numerous divergences in sexual orientation, ethnicity and cultural ethos. Renu's personality traits reflect this type of nomadic diversity of subjectivity. Though she was getting involved with the merchant, thoughts of Neela persisted in her unconscious mind.

Again, she was deeply thinking about the merchant while she was leaving for South Africa in disguise, betraying the merchant whom "she had loved the most" (Rao 38) and she "wondered if she would ever love another as much as she had the diamond merchant" (Rao 39). At last, she fell in love with the "vast and unknowable continent" and this is "the fourth and final time" (Rao 40). This dialectical counterpart distorts the vision of distinctiveness. Braidotti deconstructs the social construction of absolute women. Rather, there are becoming women. Apart from Renu, the woman victim in "The Lost Ribbon" becomes a model of becoming a woman. While killing the daughter, the mother told her six-week-old daughter, "…It's not the world we have to withstand, my Noora, it is ourselves" (Rao 106). They had lost their selves. She did not know where she belonged and which was her house: "I no longer knew whether I belonged inside or outside the hut" (Rao 113). The child exists on the liminal position of society. When Indian Army officers came to restore her and take her back to India, they clearly stated that the child could not come as "she's a citizen of Pakistan", and a woman who came to rescue her said, "You have no choice" (Rao 118). She refused to abandon her child but she told herself that "if you don't kill her, he will" (Rao 106). So, her abductor would kill his own child. Finally, she killed her child: "And so I looked at you and I looked at you and I held you, and then I killed you. I killed you" (Rao 121). This is ambiguous whether a pathetic woman's agency resides in sacrificing her own daughter to protect her. The woman who had been revived by the birth of her girl child, Noora, after her abduction, finally decided to kill her. This moral ambiguity of subjectivity is a social compulsion. She said, "But it is all untrue, Noora: I am looking for you" (Rao 110). She has been searching for her daughter throughout her life.

Surprisingly, when Neela's husband came to take her as he was alive, she was not at all happy to go with her husband as she thought that "she would remain a fruit her husband didn't really want to reach" (Rao 12). Interestingly, she was concerned with her hunger rather than her husband when she heard of his death. Women "have almost always been powerless in the larger meaning of the word" and they are presumed to be outside history because they are outside the public and the political, where history is made" (Menon 3). Rao dismantles this representation of women by presenting the contingent possibilities of gender. The portrayal of the victim, like Renu, undermines the discourse of womanhood. Renu is not that stereotypical weak and frail woman but she destabilises the notion of women as "cultural signifier" (Menon 11).

Veena Das has also witnessed that there is an "alliance between the state and social work as a profession, which silences the voice of victims by an application of the 'best interest' doctrine" (73).

This doctrine exemplifies that the nation has a duty to recover those women but ironically, those victims have no choice. They had no choice when they were forcefully taken from their home by men of other communities. This type of dichotomy of existence radically breaks the notion of humans as self-constituting agents of their own subjectivities. Rather, it is social interactions between human beings and other non-human forces that construct the inner being and phenomenology of consciousness. Along with feminist critics like Jennifer Nedelsky, Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar have brought about a paradigm shift in the understanding of the concept of agency and the debates surrounding the self-governing human subject by introducing the idea of "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie and Stoljar 21). It refers to "the conviction that persons are socially embedded" and that the identities of agents are "formed within the context of social relationships" rather than "a single unified conception of autonomy" (4). There is no stagnant self and it is always evolving. Identity is formed within complex relational, social and political frameworks. The perception of the autonomous agency of humans has now become a myth. Every human being acts in the constrained periphery of the civilian structure. Agency is multifaceted as it is always in a state of flux.

According to Braidotti, this agency of nomadic subjectivity reclaims the feminist radicalism of breaking away from the monolithic category of women. It is through resistance, contradiction and negotiation that the evolution of becoming being is determined. There is the transgression of the fixed barriers. Deleuze's metaphor of rhizomatic non-linearity disavows the consistent political subject. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari focus on the fact that the heterogeneous interactions spread through the whole universe. It is for the basic need of survival or existence that the nomadic self emerges through the constant movement: "Nomadic consciousness rather consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent: the nomad is only passing through; he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help him to survive, but he never takes on fully the limits of one national, fixed identity" (Braidotti 64). Therefore, Renu, Neela, and the pathetic mother in these three stories have reconfigured their flux of nomadic subjectivities to survive in this meaningless world.

Fragmented Nomadic Female Body and the Impact of Partition Riots

There is always an urge to abscond the fixed self and "we do not know what a body is capable of" (Deleuze and Guattari 257). The human body transcends the boundaries of stable structure. The body is an inhibitor of any absolute authority. The identification of something adheres to the emergence of control and dominion. The renunciation of unified identity constrains the body and being from asserting dynamism. So, the body, in the poststructuralist paradigm, is a signifier without a transcendental signified. Contestation and confrontation of the prevalent notion of gender do not act upon an abstract notion of identity but on the "living body" (Basturk 29). For Braidotti, this body eludes essentialist identity. Thus, it becomes contingent, bringing forth innumerable possibilities of existence outside rigid norms. The fragmented bodies of victimised women represent fractured posthuman selves that transcend their present existence beyond the prevalent binaries of sexual codes and conduct.

The identity of the body is in question. The living body has become a contested site of multiple interactions through sexual encounters. What is it and what does it need above all? Rao's protagonists in these stories formed fluid identities in confrontation with dominant structures. They form homosexual bonding when they desire and also, they involve themselves in heterosexual relationships when the situation demands. They annihilate any rigid identity enforced by society. It is a cosmetic move with a cognitive shift to break the ensemble of practices. The violent tragedy of Partition has given them an abducted status. Despite that, these women do not succumb to the nationalistic ideologies of honour and patriarchal roles of gender. They mediate with powerful regimes of hierarchy. They become nomads and their nomadic selves are challenged to "destabilize dogmatic, hegemonic, exclusionary power structures at the very heart of the identity structures of the dominant subject through nomadic interventions" (Braidotti 181).

These women defy the social rigidity of assigned roles to a particular gender. While Neela's husband was taking her home by bus, "Neela could smell the clean, scrubbed scent of the old woman's skin, with only the slightest hint of sweat, almost pleasant, in the din of the bus" (Rao 12). When Neela's husband told her, "I'm glad I found you," she then "turned to look at him. *He was?* A sudden warmth flooded her" (Rao 14). The representation of the figure of Renu disrupts gender

stereotypes. Her body is fragmented in the sense that it has an urge for both female and male bodies. The communal revenge was played out upon the bodies of women during partition but here, Renu's personality traits have turned upside down this treatment of women. The miserable conditions of Renu, Neela and Unnamed abducted women have revealed the myth behind the rescue operation of the victimised women. There are only the displacement and emplacement of the bodies of women from one nation to another nation. Their beings are unrecoverable.

Rescue is more appropriate than the term recovery when it comes to the restoration of women, especially abducted women from their abductors' homes and widowed women in the refugee camps during Partition. The women activists, such as Mridula Sarabhai and Anis Kidwai, were appointed in the recovery operation of women during partition. But, ironically, they had to act under the nationalistic ideological framework, as it didn't consider the choices of those women. Anis Kidwai revealed that "the greatest difficulty was not to facilitate acceptance – instead, we found that most abducted girls didn't want to return" (149). It was very confusing what they actually needed at the peak of their lives. Ayesha Kidwai noted that "rescue was translated into forcible recovery and repatriation" and it became "a patriarchal ideology that bound national and community honour to women's bodies and control of their sexuality" (163-164). She analyses this historical condition from a feminist perspective and questions whether women are only women or can be regarded as citizens.

Neela and Renu have broken the silence surrounding the violence against women by rejecting traditional gender norms. Their bodies act as signs of protest by articulating masculine qualities and defying boundaries, whereas the violent massacre of partition comprised the bodies of women "as the mediating sign between the individual and society, and between the past and the present" (Das 184). These types of representations form a resistance to this agenda of the woman's body. The bodies of abducted women are fragmented as their body is "wounded, scarred, or mutilated in some way, symbolising a violent history of oppression" (June 10). The body is nomadic. Nomadic encounter creates an "existential condition" (Braidotti 22). From the posthuman standpoint, the nomads live in a hazardous situation. The meaninglessness of existence pervades each facet of the deterritorialized self. Uncertainty surrounding identity and the future dislocates women

from their own selves. This condition of exile is a concern of critical consensus in feminist ideology. Feminist figures, such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, have drawn attention to this matter. Virginia Woolf also focuses on this status of women, where women belong nowhere or they possess the entire universe. Their "nomadic body is a threshold of transformations" (Braidotti 25). The body becomes an epicentre of various multidimensional forces and "a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological" (Braidotti 25). There are no essentialist manifestations of body images of men and women. The phallocentric logics of masculine and feminine qualities are in a state of crisis. The radical notion of women as submissive and meek comes into conflict with the masculine qualities of women. It has relinquished the ethics of grief, loss, melancholy and discourse of moral integrity. The traditional sexual norms have collapsed.

During Partition, victimised women were becoming nomads. The general idea of nomad has its origin in the notion of migratory bodies. In this sense, nomads are people who have no fixed place. Nomads are vagabonds who resist any determined home, country or place. So, these women belong nowhere and their present existence in the refugee camp resists any kind of fixed existence. In this post-anthropocentric era, nomadism is much more than the idea of migration. It is a philosophical principle or an abstract idea within the present geopolitical context that makes room for multiple possibilities of existence and contestation. It disrupts the human and non-human binary of the Anthropocene. The materialistic move is now an emerging trend that breaks the epicentre of the humanistic notion of autonomy. It is through different experiences that a human subject exists. They exist in a relationship with the so-called other in discourse. The posthuman nomadic body has cooperated with the material agent to resolve the trauma of the mother in the refugee camp.

The pathetic mother's body has been fractured metaphorically through abduction. The mutilated body of a mother has borne intense pain. Even her own child doesn't belong to her, as the father is Muslim. Her entire existence is now centred around the ribbon of her daughter. This non-human object becomes the manifestation of her daughter's presence. Moreover, this ribbon is, to her, a replica of her daughter's body. It has stored the psychotic memories of a mother. This is the posthuman new materialistic agency of matter as "only the tiny yellow ribbon seemed capable still of speech, still upright, oblivious, delighted

by the fineness of your hair, by the life it would never lead" (Rao 106). A woman is asserting her survival through the integration with a non-human object. The material and human cooperate with each other and influence each other. The posthuman new materialist feminism puts emphasis on matter. The non-human objects become a plethora of living bodies for a woman who killed her child. The ribbon has the agency to relocate the mother's trauma and her connection with her child.

Conclusion

The posthuman feminist lens is intensified to explore the underlying phenomenon of shifting consciousness. The nomadic subjectivity of women has provided a new ethos to the reading of violent histories of partition. The representation of the becoming subjectivity of women by defying the myth of nationalist construction of the image of women marks a significant contribution to the partition studies in the 21st century, even after the seven decades of the event. Rao's image of an unrestored woman has turned upside down the patriarchal notion of gender bodies. The word in the title unrestored is itself the negation of any fixed status because it evokes an existential status of humans. It decentres every kind of agency and every identity is under an ongoing process.

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9.

Care, Memory, and Autonomy: Feminist and Postfeminist Intersections in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*

S. Farhad

Abstract: Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* (2020) is nominated for the Booker Prize and stands as one of the most disturbing and incisive revelations of the mother–daughter relationship. Chronicled by Antara, the novel shifts between testimony and vengeance as she remembers her mother, Tara's, neglect and she assumes reluctant responsibility for her care. This article explores *Burnt Sugar* as a narrative that portrays the dialectic between feminist critique and postfeminist sensibility. Drawing on feminist theorists (Beauvoir, Butler, Menon, Tharu & Sangari), postfeminist critics (Gill, McRobbie), and trauma theorists (Caruth), the novel offers no stable resolution between rage, care, and autonomy. Instead, it focuses on a protagonist who is shaped by the contradictions of feminist resistance and postfeminist selfhood in neoliberal India. It involves postfeminist themes of self-fashioning, emotional trauma, and the commodification of autonomy through Tara. Further, it spills the contradictions that are the outcomes of traditional feminist values and their intersection with contemporary postfeminist sensibilities. Moreover, the text's formal strategies, its fragmented narration, unreliable voice, and fragmentary structure mirror the return of trauma and postfeminist self-curation. By framing *Burnt Sugar* within the tradition of Indian feminist writing attentively resonating with postfeminist discourses, this article demonstrates how Doshi's novel contributes to a rethinking of agency that is neither purely emancipatory nor purely pathological, but anxious, ambivalent, and entangled.

Keywords: feminist theory, post feminism, care ethics, memory, autonomy, mother-daughter relationships, neoliberalism.

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Introduction

Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* (2020), published in India as *Girl in White Cotton*, emerges as a prevailing expression of the intense dynamics of maternal care, memory, and autonomy within the shifting paradigm of feminist and postfeminist theories. Set in contemporary Pune, the novel traces the story of Antara and her mother, Tara, whose relationship undulates between love and resentment, caregiving and revenge. Tara's descent into dementia forces Antara into the paradoxical position of tending to the very woman who neglected and traumatised her. Doshi's narrative, spare, elliptical, and unsettling, refuses liberation. Instead, it stages a confrontation with the limits of feminist ethics and the contradictions of postfeminist individualism. In many ways, *Burnt Sugar* reconfigures the mother-daughter relationship that has long been occupied in feminist theory. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that womanhood is a process of becoming rather than being. To the Indian feminist interventions of Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, the maternal bond has been read as a place of both oppression and resistance. Doshi complicates this genealogy by introducing the postfeminist subject, fragmented, self-reflexive, and complicit in neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and self-stylisation. Antara's conflicted voice, soaring between confession and accusation, demonstrates that what Rosalind Gill states as the "postfeminist sensibility" is an affective terrain where autonomy is commodified, and empowerment becomes a performance of choice.

At the same time, *Burnt Sugar* places this uncertainty within an Indian socio-cultural matrix that continues to valorise filial duty and motherhood as moral imperatives. Tara's past as a rebellious woman who abandons domestic convention collides with Antara's present, where caregiving becomes a reluctant act of compensation. This double transience, of rebellion and responsibility, in the narrative, offers a field of feminist conflict. The novel's fragmented and disintegrated prose reflects the structure of memory and trauma, suggesting what Cathy Caruth describes as the "belatedness" of traumatic memoir. In this sense, *Burnt Sugar* is not merely a story of maternal neglect or filial duty, but it is a meditation on the emotional economies of feminism in late modernity. It addresses 'care' as an ethical and coercive construct and 'autonomy' as both liberatory and isolating. It opens with the provocative confession: "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi 1). From this opening statement, the novel mobilises normative expectations of filial devotion and maternal piety. Dealing with feminist ethics of care and postfeminist notions of selfhood, this article examines how *Burnt Sugar* dramatises the complex interplay between gender, memory, and agency. Though it exposes the structural inequities of gender and the costs of maternal neglect, it also depicts Antara's subjectivity as anxious, curated, and shaped by neoliberal/postfeminist imperatives. Her voice is precise, ironic, and relentlessly self-conscious, echoing Gill's description of postfeminist subjectivity as "compulsorily self-reflexive" (Gill 163). In this aspect, this article argues that *Burnt Sugar* exceptionally intersects feminist and postfeminist discourses by

framing the daughter's narrative of care and revenge as a postfeminist text haunted by feminist obligations, ultimately portraying contemporary female agency not as liberation, but as a fraught and inescapable entanglement.

This article uses an interdisciplinary critical framework that draws on feminist theory, postfeminist critique, trauma studies, and Indian feminist scholarship.

1. Feminist Theory: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* offers the basic theme of woman as "Other," throwing light on the established position of women in the patriarchal hegemony. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* further emphasises this view by insisting on the performativity of gender and the subject's subjection to normative ideals. These ideologies are instrumental in analysing Tara's and Antara's complex negotiations of agency, selfhood, and resistance within patriarchal familial structures (Beauvoir; Butler).
2. Indian Feminist Scholarship: This article engages with Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist*, which critiques the limitations of liberal feminism's focus on individual rights and emphasises the need to account for structural and conventional hegemony. Moreover, Susie Tharu and Kumkum Sangari's *Women's Writing in India* state a critical paradigm in understanding how cultural narratives and historical situations shape the gendered hierarchy. These perspectives placed *Burnt Sugar* within the specific social, familial, and cultural dynamics of contemporary Indian womanhood (Menon, Tharu and Sangari).
3. Postfeminist Critique: The article adopts Rosalind Gill's conceptualisation of post feminism as a sensibility characterised by individualism, self-surveillance, and the rhetoric of choice. Angela McRobbie's critique of post-feminism as the incorporation and undoing of feminism within neoliberal culture further informs the reading of Antara's ambivalent autonomy and ironic detachment.
4. Trauma Studies: Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* frames trauma as an unassimilated event that returns belatedly through memoir and fragmented narrative. This relativity is useful in understanding Antara's fragmented recalls, repetitive narrative twists and the haunting presence of unresolved emotional wounds.

By integrating these intersecting theoretical perspectives, this article critiques normative ideals of care, destabilises memory as a site of truth, and interrogates the limits of female autonomy in a postfeminist and postcolonial context.

Caregiving as obligation vs. autonomy

1.1. Maternal Ambivalence

The novel's opening confession, "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi 1), establishes Antara's narrative as both testimony and revenge. Feminist critics stated that the personal harms of family life are political. Antara's narration presents these personal harms to visibility, the removal of binaries such as love and hate, care and cruelty, victim and aggressor. Moreover, it emphasises the mother–daughter relationship in a dynamic way within a spectrum of feminist ambivalence. As Nivedita Menon argues in *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), feminism in India must resist "the messy terrain of everyday contradictions." Antara's voice precisely includes this domain. Her honesty is a feminist act, but her pleasure resembles her in postfeminist self-fashioning, where her emotions are opened to resistance and self-display. As she begins to recollect her relationship with her mother, Antara is an adult woman living in Pune. Her mother is suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, and Antara has taken on the role of her guardian, "I owed her nothing. But here I am, looking after her" (Doshi 71). This reveals the tension between obligatory care and a woman's autonomy that is central to feminist debates on unpaid emotional labour.

The narrative row backs, when the once-neglectful mother is dependent on the daughter who had abandoned her during her childhood, "She could never decide if she wanted to be my mother or my child" (Doshi 94). It reveals the reversal of roles and care becomes cyclical, unstable, and negotiated rather than natural. Her mother's current suffering kindles memories of her own pain and desertion. With these feelings, the novel quickly moves into flashbacks that open Antara's traumatic childhood. Tara, once a restless and rebellious woman, abandoned her husband and later took her young daughter, Antara, to live in an ashram with a self-proclaimed guru named Baba. This dislocation transformed Tara's life and consequently affected Antara's childhood. Tara found a place to vent her stress and experienced psychological emancipation when she emotionally and sexually got involved with the guru. But this act subsequently left Antara to grow up largely neglected. The child was left to wander, perplexed and desolated, while Tara pursued divinity and sexual pleasures. Antara vividly remembered, "She left me in the ashram, hungry and afraid, while she went to dance and paint" (Doshi 22). Tara's past in pursuit of emotional and physical liberation, her escape from her marriage, and her embracing the ashram show her transgression of the patriarchal system. Antara proves this with resentment, "My mother had been many things: lover, muse, convert, artist. A mother was not one of them" (Doshi 35). This maternal neglect, under the light of freedom, deeply hurts Antara. She grows up indignant and psychologically disturbed.

Thus, when the adult Antara is forced to look after Tara, who is now losing her memory, the power dynamics invert:

- The dependent child becomes the caretaker.
- The autonomous mother becomes the helpless one.
- The daughter finally has control over the body and life of the mother, who once denied her care.

This disclosure, “I need space from her, even as she needs more of me” (Doshi 111), proves as a postfeminist assertion of autonomy. The daughter attempts to reclaim individuality against suffocating emotional inheritance. Antara's statement assumes its full significance in this situation. This reversal of dependency, the sinister delight of witnessing the once-strong mother become vulnerable, is the source of her "pleasure." The act of caring for someone who has been emotionally damaged is the main paradoxes that drive *Burnt Sugar*.

1.2. Physical Neglect and Ambivalence

The complex and destructive relationship between Tara and the guru, Baba, is central to understanding Tara's neglect of Antara and the trauma that defines the novel. Antara vividly recalls being undernourished and neglected as a child in her confession, "Dripping with milk, she would disappear every day, leaving me unfed" (Doshi 18). This striking picture emphasises Tara's rejection of the selfless role of a mother and represents a deep denial of both physical and emotional nourishment. The image is visceral on a literal level as Tara's breasts are "dripping with milk," but she doesn't feed her baby daughter. (Rosalind Gill’s conceptualisation of post feminism). Although fertile, Tara's motherly body lacks nurturing qualities. This illustrates the oppressive nature of her conventional responsibilities. It also emphasises the dichotomy of womanhood within patriarchal frameworks and the post-feminist attitude of self-care.

Early in their time at the ashram, a conversation establishes the dynamic. When the young Antara complains or needs attention, Baba dismisses her and supports Tara's abandonment of her maternal role. Tara is often represented as being in a blissful, trance-like state with Baba, dancing or painting. While Antara is left unfed and unattended, Baba actively encourages Tara to prioritise her spiritual "freedom" and her connection to him over her duties as a mother. He frames domesticity and motherhood as chains from which she has been liberated. In one instance, he tells Tara, "The child is safe in the universe's hands. Your journey is with me now"(Doshi 67). This conversation (or the ideology behind it) gives Tara a spiritual justification for her neglect. This relationship is the primal wound. It perfectly captures the clash between feminist and postfeminist values. Tara's actions can be read through a feminist lens as a rejection of patriarchal norms, but they are simultaneously a brutal enactment of a postfeminist, neoliberal "choice" that disregards relational responsibility, with traumatic consequences that ripple across generations.

Their relationship is portrayed as a performance, less about genuine enlightenment and more about power, rebellion, and sensuality. There are incidents where Baba and Tara are at the centre of the ashram's activities; he is playing the role of the enlightened leader, and she is his devoted muse or chief disciple. Their conversations in these public forums are likely filled with spiritual platitudes that mask the more chaotic and neglectful reality of their private lives. This performance shows Tara participating in creating a narrative of liberation

that directly conflicts with the reality of her daughter being neglected and left to suffer. The relationship eventually sours, revealing its exploitative core. Gradually, Baba's interest wanes, and he moves on to other women in the ashram. A crucial moment is when Tara is publicly shamed or sidelined. She has a desperate conversation with Baba where he coldly dismisses her, revealing that her "liberation" was contingent on his favour. This rejection is a devastating blow. It demonstrates that the autonomy Tara thought she had found was an illusion. She was merely exchanging one form of dependency (patriarchal marriage) for another (a patriarchal guru).

After being cast out of Baba's intimate circle, Tara's life becomes distressed. She is left with nothing, no spiritual community, no support, and a deeply traumatised daughter. There are no fond reminiscences of Baba in her later years. Instead, the memory is a source of bitterness and failure. Her conversations with Antara about this period are likely defensive and evasive, filled with justifications or a refusal to acknowledge the damage done. When Antara confronts her, Tara's response is not one of remorse but of self-justification, echoing Baba's rhetoric, "I was finding myself. There's nothing wrong with thinking about oneself" (Doshi 72). Consequently, when Antara grows, she develops varied feelings for her mother. "I need space from her, even as she needs more of me" (Doshi 132), a postfeminist assertion of independence. The daughter attempts to reclaim individuality against suffocating emotional inheritance. As she shares, "I'm tired of being defined by what she did or didn't do" (Doshi 145), this confession of postfeminist articulation reveals selfhood that seeks freedom from inherited identity scripts. However, her daughter's suffering is the foundation of her liberation. Pain is always entwined with memory, care, and milk in the *Burnt Sugar* economy. The daughter's eventual sway turns into her own kind of brutality, while the mother's physical liberty turns into her emotional hunger. Thus, Doshi turns the concept of physical neglect into a metaphor for the moral quandaries of caregiving, the cost of freedom, the eerie endurance of maternal memory, and feminist and postfeminist ambivalence.

Further, Tara obstinately defends her decision to leave her daughter for her Guru, "There's nothing wrong with thinking about oneself" (Doshi 72). Within the structure of Indian feminist theories, the character of Tara resonates deeply with individuals who challenge the constraints of domesticity. From a postfeminist perspective, Tara's principle of self-prioritisation and the tendency to consider oneself superficially links with the neoliberal philosophy of self-care and autonomy.

1.3. The Burden of Testimony

This physical neglect built the burden of memories as a testimony to Antara. As Tara's memory fails due to dementia, Antara is burdened with being the only keeper of their painful past. She laments, "My mother is forgetting, and there is nothing I can do about it. There is no way to make her remember the things she

has done in the past, no way to baste her in guilt" (Doshi 67), arresting Antara's poignant realisation that memory is no longer a mutual bond but an individual weight. Her mother's amnesia not only obliterates the traces of emotional anguish but also strips Antara of the justice that acknowledgement could have bestowed. In this poignant moment, Antara's voice transforms into a feminist declaration, fervently demanding the expression of female sorrow in a society that frequently renders it invisible. She expresses, "The past is never past with her. Even when she can't remember it, I can" (Doshi 157). This testimony reveals how daughters carry what mothers forget or suppress. Her sorrow reveals how the struggles of women, especially within the realms of home and motherhood, are often left undocumented or dismissed as mere emotional overflow. Thus, dementia evolves into a powerful symbol of patriarchal erasure. This persists as the obliteration of women's emotional narratives and the refusal of recognition to their trauma. However, rather than freeing her, Antara's memory turns into a carceral of remembrance. She is the only one who is aware of past mistakes and is unable to excuse or ignore them. Her incapacity "to make her remember" reflects her earlier helplessness as a child, when she was unable to force her mother to care for or shield her. Because the past persists through repetition rather than reconciliation, this cyclical helplessness highlights the intergenerational continuity of trauma. (Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* frames trauma as an unassimilated event that returns belatedly through memoir and fragmented narrative).

1.4. Breaking or Repeating the Cycle

The burden of her memories leaves Antara fearing she will imitate her mother's actions, especially now that she is a mother herself. She confidently admits, "I am tired of this baby" (Doshi 201), a declaration of mixed feelings about motherhood resembling her mother's experience and challenges, which idealised expectations of motherhood. The idea of an uninterrupted cycle fills her with apprehension, and she contemplates "How do I stop myself from making the same mistake? How do I protect this little girl from the same burden?" (Doshi 203). It is not a statement of cruelty but of emotional exhaustion. This moment recalls her mother Tara's earlier indifference, when she "would disappear every day, dripping with milk, leaving me unfed" (Doshi 18). The connection between these two narratives displays how trauma clearly continues through generations despite conscious resistance. Drawing from the theories of Adrienne Rich and Sara Ruddick, the novel presents motherhood as an emotionally complex and socially constructed institution rather than a purely selfless or natural responsibility. Antara's admission, "I am tired of this baby," (Doshi 201). Antara's profound uncertainty about motherhood exemplifies the immense pressures of contemporary selfhood. In a neoliberal concept, which champions the individual as a self-managing enterprise, identity becomes a project to be carefully curated through control, productivity, and autonomy. Antara has internalised these ideals, constructing a self-reliant identity as an artist and an independent woman. The baby does not solely represent a new emotional

relationship. Still, it functions as a constant, visceral reminder of the very things her neoliberal conditioning teaches her to avoid: dependency, the sacrifice of personal productivity, and the loss of autonomous freedom. Central to the postfeminist sensibility is the notion that femininity is a bodily property. It is about a 'style of the flesh'. It is also defined by a shift from objectification to subjectification. This involves a "self-policing narcissistic gaze" (Gill 163). Antara's "carefully constructed identity" is an outcome of this self-policing gaze. Her empowerment is conceived of as a personal quality or a property of the self, rather than a collective political achievement." (Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture" 149). Antara sees her autonomy and control as personal achievements. In this sense, Avni Doshi positions Antara at the intersection of two competing frameworks, feminist empathy and postfeminist individualism.

1.5. Art as Testimony and Reclamation

Later, with these consequences, Antara turns to art to process her trauma and testimony. Her major project, a series of drawings that progressively distort a photograph, serves as a metaphor for her struggle with memory and her attempt to create her own testimony. She explains that "Each drawing is further from the original, until there is nothing left of the photograph at all" (Doshi 147). In creating these drawings, Antara changes art into feminist testimony. Avni Doshi uses Antara's art to externalise her inner conflict. She annihilates the original image as she cannot live with the idealised or imposed versions of the past. Her drawings and installations, particularly the series based on her mother's photograph, become a symbolic exercise in reclaiming authorship over her own memory. She observes, "I draw the outlines of her face from memory, but they never stay the same" (Doshi 223). Each deformation emphasises an attempt to reconfigure the mother's image, and, by expansion, her own identity, outside inherited narratives of femininity and care. From a postfeminist perspective, Antara's art can also be read as self-fashioning. While neo-liberalism and post-feminism celebrate self-expression as empowerment, Doshi complicates this notion that Antara's art is not about visibility or validation but about survival through self-fashioning.

III. Intergenerational Trauma and Resentment

The line "She could never decide if she wanted to be my mother or my child" (Doshi 94) captures the collapse of maternal hierarchy. Antara experienced Tara oscillating between immature dependence and performative motherhood, forcing Antara into premature emotional labour. This role reversal produces resentment rooted not only in neglect but also in confusion; Antara grows up without a stable template of what care, protection, or maternal responsibility should look like. Antara's memories, neglect, hunger and abandonment, linger as emotional residues that structure her adult psyche. This is a crucial concept. Antara doesn't just *remember* the trauma, but she continually acts it out. She presents her inability to forgive. By holding onto her rage, she keeps the wound

fresh. She wants Tara to be held accountable, to feel the guilt that her dementia is now erasing. This desire for vindication is a performance of her need for justice. She indulges in small reactive cruelties, **a**cts like feeding Tara food, but she dislikes it. This comes as a live re-enactment of their power struggle. There are more reasons in this context, rather than created moments where Antara performs the resentment she has carried since childhood, actively making her mother feel a fraction of the powerlessness she once felt. This "performance" means the traumatic relationship is not in the past, but it is the ongoing, daily reality of their present. The caregiving is not healing; rather, it's a new stage on which the old drama is performed. Caregiving becomes an emotional burden and a covert act of resistance. Antara's small cruelties, like feeding her mother disliked foods, function as muted revenge: "When she winces, I feel a satisfaction I can't admit to anyone else" (Doshi 154). Care becomes a battleground where love, resentment, duty, anger, and exhaustion collide. The feminist ethic of care (Gilligan, Tronto) emphasises relational interdependence, but Doshi shows its darker underbelly: caring for someone who wounded you destabilises identity.

Antara recognises that her emotional inheritance is already shaping her behaviour, thoughts, and anxieties. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists such as Nancy Chodorow and Marianne Hirsch argue that mother–daughter trauma is often transmitted not through overt acts of violence but through affective patterns, silences, and repetitions. Doshi dramatises this idea that Antara's inability to forgive her mother, her fixation on making Tara remember, and her subtle retaliatory cruelties (ignoring Tara, withholding warmth, asserting control) demonstrate that trauma is enacted as much as it is remembered. Thus, Doshi presents trauma as intergenerational, not because daughters replicate the exact circumstances of their mothers' suffering, but because they inherit the emotional vocabularies shaped by those circumstances. Antara's harshness, her compulsive need for recognition, and her ambivalent attachment to her mother reveal how deeply the past inhabits the present. Trauma becomes a script that Antara simultaneously resists and repeats, showing how feminist narratives of the mother–daughter bond are often structured by both longing and resentment.

III. Memory Loss and Relational Trauma

In the later part of Antara's life, memory and trauma become integrated so that one is the shadow of the other. Recollecting her past, Antara says, "I would be lying if I said my mother's memory loss didn't affect me" (Doshi 23). This is crucial and highlights how memory is relational and gendered as mother–daughter care becomes a site of emotional trauma. Moreover, Doshi repeatedly counts on the instability of memory. Antara admits, "I remember things one way, she remembers them another. Sometimes I wonder if either of us is right" (Doshi 48). Memory becomes a contested act, and Antara's voice is a combination of resentment, guilt, and doubt. It is the unreliability flavoured with trauma that is the product of inevitability.

This is very evident in Antara's conflicting memories of Tara's behaviour. In one moment, she recalls her mother as wholly indifferent, someone who offered no care, comfort, or attention. Yet only a few pages later, she remembers Tara brushing her hair with surprising gentleness or holding her closely at night. These tender gestures contradict her earlier claims of absolute neglect. This oscillation between extremes demonstrates Antara's unreliability: her memories shift according to emotional need, resentment, and retrospective reinterpretation, revealing how trauma produces a fractured, inconsistent sense of the past. Her inconsistencies, shifts in tone, contradictions in memory, and the blurred line between fact and perception demonstrate how trauma destabilises narrative authority. Antara recalls waiting outside her school, feeling exposed and embarrassed as the other children were collected by their parents while she remained alone. She initially frames this as a clear incident of Tara forgetting her. Yet later in her narration, she complicates the memory: she admits she is no longer certain whether Tara had forgotten, whether she had been delayed, or whether Antara herself misunderstood the time she was supposed to be picked up. The shame of waiting remains vivid, but the factual details have become unstable. Thus, when Antara assumes the role of witness to her mother's cruelty, the instability of her memory forces readers to question whether her version of the past is trustworthy or shaped by her need for control, punishment, and recognition. The facts (why Tara was late) are blurred, contradictory, and filled with uncertainty. This captures how Antara's narration is shaped by impression rather than precision, signifying that her unreliability is not deceit but a psychological survival mechanism. Likewise, Antara's recollection of the guru illustrates how her memories are shaped as much by later interpretation as by the original experience. As a child, she remembers sensing that the guru was a threatening or interfering presence, someone who absorbed her mother's attention and affection. However, as she narrates the memory in adulthood, she begins to question whether her childhood self truly perceived him as dangerous, or whether this fear emerged only later, after she heard others comment on his behaviour and reputation. This uncertainty exposes a key feature of Antara's narrative voice. Her memories are not static truths, but reconstructions affected by hindsight, emotion, and external narratives. Thus, the guru memory demonstrates that Antara's perception of the past is filtered through layers of trauma, resentment, and adult reflection, rather than through unmediated childhood truth

Memory becomes inseparable as it works as both a narrative device and a feminist metaphor. It binds Antara and Tara. As Tara's Alzheimer's progresses, memory becomes a one-sided burden: "My mother is forgetting…and there is no way to make her remember the things she has done in the past" (Doshi 67). Tara's Alzheimer's erases history, but Antara's fragmented recollections construct it through trauma. Doshi writes, "Memory is a creature that forages for meaning but feeds on lies" (p. 112). Alzheimer's complicates the metaphor further.

Tara forgets; Antara cannot. *Burnt sugar* stir up something forever altered, like memories that have passed through fire:

- Tara's memory is dissolving.
- Antara's memory is intensified.

Here, memory becomes a postfeminist battleground, a space where Antara resists both her mother's erasure and societal narratives that define women through self-sacrifice. Antara's recollections of her mother's neglect, therefore, are less about factual accuracy than about reconstructing an exhausted sense of self. In narrating these fragments, Antara performs what trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub describe as belated witnessing, speaking from within the fractures of experience rather than beyond them. Antara articulates this tension poignantly when she admits, "Every recollection feels like a betrayal, but forgetting her feels worse" (Doshi 189). This confession captures the novel's paradox at its heart. It reveals the impossibility of self-definition without confronting the maternal wound. Through this dialectic of remembering and forgetting, Doshi situates Antara's fragmented consciousness within a postfeminist crisis of identity. Moreover, Antara's adulthood is marked by an anxious pursuit of autonomy shaped by her mother's failures. She admits, "I have built a life that does not need her, but she is inside every thought" (Doshi 211). The assertion that feminism is generally associated with autonomy and liberation, post-feminism believes in emotional negotiation within a framework of dependency. Antara's claim, "I have built a life that does not need her, but she is inside every thought" (p. 211), perfectly points this paradox. Her life may appear autonomous, yet her psyche remains haunted by maternal imprint. This conflict vents what feminist theorist Angela McRobbie (2009**)** calls reflexive agency, a form of agency that operates within social and emotional constraints rather than in opposition to them. Antara's nurturing, therefore, becomes a moral negotiation rather than a simple moral act. She tends to her mother not out of love or duty, but from a self-reflective awareness of shared vulnerability. "I take her hand. I don't know if this is the end of us or a beginning. I don't know if we are healing or breaking. I put my fingers on her wrist and feel the blood moving there, the life still left in her, the life she gave me" (Doshi, p. 278). Antara cannot escape the fundamental biological fact of their connection. Tara's life force is literally the source of Antara's own. This highlights the primal, inescapable nature of their bond, which persists beyond reason, forgiveness, or trauma

Conclusion

Burnt Sugar ultimately reveals a mother–daughter dyad shaped by the unresolved tensions between feminist ethics and postfeminist sensibilities, where care becomes a site of coercion, memory a mechanism of both preservation and injury, and autonomy an ambivalent pursuit. By foregrounding Antara's fractured narration, Doshi exposes how trauma, testimonial burden, and affective labour persist within the everyday negotiations of contemporary Indian womanhood. This article has argued that the novel resists linear narratives of

empowerment by dramatising agency as relational, contingent, and deeply entangled in intergenerational wounds. Bringing together feminist theory, postfeminist critique, Indian feminist scholarship, and trauma studies, the analysis demonstrates how *Burnt Sugar* expands the field of feminist literary studies by presenting a protagonist whose selfhood is neither wholly emancipatory nor purely damaged, but shaped by the contradictions of neoliberal autonomy, cultural duty, and emotional inheritance. In doing so, the novel concludes with a significant contribution to understanding how contemporary Indian literature negotiates the shifting terrain between feminist accountability and postfeminist self-fashioning, revealing a new paradigm of female agency defined by ambivalence, anxiety, and ethical complexity.

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10.

‘Writing the Self in a Foreign Tongue’: Meena Kandasamy’s Strategic Use of English in *The Gypsy Goddess*

**M. Sandra Carmel Sophia*

Abstract: This scholarly article investigates Meena Kandasamy's tactical deployment of the English language, a linguistic medium historically used as an instrument of colonial imposition, as a conscious vehicle for the construction and assertion of her Dalit-feminist identity in *The Gypsy Goddess*. By composing in English, Kandasamy deftly navigates the inherent contradiction of expressing a subaltern identity through a "foreign" language, thereby transmuting a vehicle of domination into an arena of resistance and self-articulation. By engaging with postcolonial, feminist, and linguistic theoretical frameworks, this research scrutinises how Kandasamy’s choice of English not only empowers her to challenge the dual oppressions of ‘caste’ and ‘gender’ but also situates her narrative within a transnational discourse that elevates marginalised voices beyond regional boundaries. The examination underscores Kandasamy's capacity to infuse English with local idiomatic expressions, assertive tones, and innovative poetic structures to undermine its colonial heritage and to carve out a space for the identities of the oppressed. This paper contends that Kandasamy's literary endeavours exemplify the potential for a historically foreign language to be appropriated and reimagined as a formidable instrument for self-representation, communal solidarity, and liberation.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, English language, self-representation, Dalit feminism, postcolonial identity, linguistic appropriation, subaltern agency.

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Introduction

The endeavour to articulate experiences of marginalised populations is invariably a non-neutral act; it consistently represents a manifestation of agency, an exercise of resistance, and a vehicle for self-construction. Meena Kandasamy's idea of 'writing' as an outstanding Tamil poet and activist is a 'political' engagement and a 'personal' reclamation of her voice. In her seminal work, *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), Kandasamy revisits the harrowing 1968 Kilvenmani massacre of Dalit agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu, intertwining elements of fact and fiction, history and imagination, as well as protest and poetic expression. The significance of her narrative is accentuated by her deliberate choice to compose in English, a language imbued with colonial implications yet endowed with extensive global influence and reach. Kandasamy's dexterity as an author emerges from her personal life as a Dalit and feminist, which has subsequently influenced her to focus on themes of silence and erasure. As noted by Sharmila Rege, "Dalit women's testimonies are not mere stories of individual pain but narratives of collective resistance" (Writing Caste/Writing Gender, 2006).

Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* exemplifies this concept, presenting a narrative that confronts caste oppression while emphasising a distinctly feminist outrage against patriarchy and systemic injustice. Her prose is imbued with an indomitable spirit, which is expressed in the opening lines of the novel: "You call this a story. But it is not. It is a condemnation" (*The Gypsy Goddess*, p. 1).

Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) is a radical and genre-defying retelling of a forgotten massacre- the 1968 Kilvenmani tragedy in Tamil Nadu, where forty-four Dalit agricultural labourers were burned alive by caste-Hindu landlords. Breaking the patterns of traditional storytelling, Kandasamy lays bare how history is disintegrated, silenced, and rewritten by power structures. The narrative opens self-reflexively: "This is no ordinary story, and this is no ordinary village." Kandasamy's narrator disrupts convention, confronting the reader with the impossibility of narrating atrocity within traditional literary forms. The book fluctuates between lyrical invocation, historical documents, Marxist criticism, and surreal commentary, echoing the innovations of writers such as Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie, but with a clear, biting political objective. Kilvenmani becomes both a real and a symbolic landscape — "a small village burning on the map of a new nation." The

novel's polyphonic structure amplifies silenced voices, particularly those of Dalit women, who "work from sunrise to starlight" and embody the endurance of the oppressed. By employing a violent and provocative prose, Kandasamy vindicates the dictatorial landlords and the post-imperial state that is riddled with caste violence.

The narrator's voice often turns accusatory, implicating the reader in historical amnesia: "You, reader, are also part of this crime if you turn away." This rhetorical strategy transforms the act of reading into moral engagement, making *The Gypsy Goddess* both a novel and an ethical confrontation. Meena Kandasamy retrieves the language of resistance by combining Tamil idioms, Marxist vocabulary, and feminist anger. The wilful disruptive style- "This is not magic realism; this is tragic realism"- underscores Kandasamy's denial of poetic agony. Ultimately, *The Gypsy Goddess* is a literary requiem and a political manifesto. It dismantles the sanitized narratives of postcolonial progress, asserting that "revolution is not an event, it is a memory that refuses to die." Through its defiant form and incendiary language, Kandasamy resurrects the ghosts of Kilvenmani to demand justice, remembrance, and rebellion.

Kandasamy's Use of English Language

Kandasamy's use of the English language as a tool for projecting her 'self' signifies an accurate and counterproductive. Hence, Kandasamy's employing English symbolises contemporary empowerment. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o asserts in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), language is "both a means of communication and a carrier of culture." While Thiong'o champions the use of indigenous languages to counter cultural imperialism, Kandasamy skilfully uses English to expose local forms of oppression to a broader global audience. She spices her prose with the rhythms of Tamil speech and regional expressions that challenge its colonial decorum. For instance, the narrative voice employed by Kandasamy in *The Gypsy Goddess* frequently subverts the reader's anticipations of "literary" English: "Why don't you go find yourself a nice, clean, comforting novel? This one is going to scar you. This one is going to make you bleed." (p. 7). Kandasamy exploits the English language not merely as a narrative tool but as an instrument to challenge the reader, transforming the colonial language into a conduit for discomfort and dissent.

Feminist Perspective in The Gypsy Goddess

Kandasamy's feminist critique intersects with her linguistic approach. Resonating with Bell Hooks's assertion that "marginality…is a site of resistance" (Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, 1990), Kandasamy articulates her perspective from the periphery, occupying and disrupting the dominant centre. This discourse posits that Kandasamy's intentional employment of English in the novel facilitates her expression of a Dalit-feminist identity that defies silencing, appropriates a colonial language, and metamorphoses it into a medium for self-representation and communal memory.

The present study raises the following question: 1. How does Meena Kandasamy navigate the inherent dichotomy between English as a colonial, "foreign" language and as a vehicle for expressing her Dalit-feminist identity in *The Gypsy Goddess*? 2. In what manner does Kandasamy appropriate and stylistically and thematically transform English to elucidate marginalised voices and contest prevailing narratives? 3. How does Kandasamy's deliberate utilisation of English interrogate both local caste–patriarchal oppression and the exigencies imposed by the global literary marketplace? 4. What is the importance of her linguistic selections in the context of comprehending self-representation, resistance, and solidarity within contemporary Dalit-feminist literature?

In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Meena Kandasamy deliberately appropriates the English language, historically characterized as a colonial and elitist medium, using it as a vehicle for self-representation and resistance, thereby transforming it into a formidable instrument for articulating her Dalit-feminist identity. By infusing the English language with subversive nuances, regional idioms, and confrontational narrative techniques, Kandasamy effectively contests both the language's colonial heritage and the socio-political hierarchies it has frequently perpetuated. Kandasamy's use of English serves as a fine example of how a "foreign" language can be restored and regenerated as a springboard for autonomy, assisting disempowered voices in declaring their agency, combating subjugation, and participating globally while perpetuating their affinities with regional challenges.

Reinvention of the Kilvenmani massacre

Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) is a reinvention of the Kilvenmani massacre of the Dalit labourers. To project this central motif, Meena Kandasamy considers English as an appropriate medium, though it is associated with colonialism and socio-economic elitism, to express her Dalit-feminist identity. The literature review examines the prevailing scholarship on Kandasamy's corpus of the political dimensions of Dalit literature, as well as scholarly discussions of language and self-advocacy in postcolonial and subaltern frameworks. The treatment of her specifically radical Dalit-feminist ideologies and innovative stylistic approaches has been considered for serious research. Kandasamy's poetry anthologies, Touch (2006) and Ms Militancy (2010), are known for their vehement critique of caste and patriarchy, as well as their reclamation of the female corporeal form and voice (Anand, 2011; Rege, 2013).

Kandasamy's prose in *The Gypsy Goddess* has captured the attention of critics owing to its composite style of narration, where elements of fiction, reporting, and sarcasm intersect to question accepted literary and social conventions (Chandra, 2017). Scholars such as Satpathy (2018) contend that Kandasamy's narrative "transgresses the conventions of literary decorum to emphasise the brutality of history." These inquiries radiate her feminist indignation and narrative subversion, yet many scholars have rigorously scrutinised her planned use of English as a challenging and a strengthening mechanism for self-representation. By appropriating the English language while also challenging its established standards, Kandasamy seems to manage these ambiguities. Mukherjee (2015) states that Kandasamy's use of language is indicated as "English stripped of its imperial politeness," hidden by features of sarcasm, fragmentation, and crudity that endure adherence to colonial propriety and multiculturalism. This viewpoint is consistent with Bell Hooks' (1990) assertion that "marginality as a site of resistance" means using a language that upsets rather than calms.

In the 1960s, Dalit literature reached its peak in India, and Dalit writers made significant strides by writing across genres. Dalit writings are marked by varied, authentic experiences of the authors rather than by traditional literary craftsmanship, and by the interspersing of local languages to sustain a realistic flavour of the downtrodden. The creative use of English by Dalit authors has been regarded with a degree of ambivalence, although it facilitates access to a global audience and enhances visibility. Consequently, the foreign language created many

problems for writers, particularly the risk of native detachment from their oral and vernacular heritage. This is an example of what Rege (2006) calls the "testimonio" mode, a form of literature that expresses the voice of a group rather than that of a single person. Through her use of English, she engages an international readership while simultaneously embedding her prose with Tamil idiomatic expressions and lexicon specific to caste, thereby exemplifying what Rege (2006) delineates as the “testimonio” mode of literature that articulates the voice of a collective rather than that of an individual alone.

Linguistic framework- A Potent tool of Resistance and Self-Representation

Meena Kandasamy's use of English in *The Gypsy Goddess* is a striking example of how a seemingly "alien" linguistic framework can become a powerful site of resistance and self-representation. The book critiques the colonial legacy connected with the English language and embraces it to disclose oppression, anger, and solemnise collective trauma. By scrutinising her stylistic and thematic innovations, her localisation of the linguistic medium, her forceful and indignant tone, and her poetic subversions of traditional narrative forms, the ensuing analysis delves into her meticulous engagement with the English language. For a writer from the Dalit group, the English language represents a complicated interaction between elite privilege and colonial oppression in the Indian setting. In an interview, she described English as "a language that the oppressor understands and therefore must hear used against him”.

Kandasamy’s choice of English empowers her to indict both upper-caste transgressors and apathetic global audiences, thereby establishing a nexus between the localised adversities Dalits confront and the overarching discourse on human rights. This phenomenon aligns with Salman Rushdie's (1991) concept of “the post-colonial gift,” in which English is perceived as “the common tongue of a world that is no longer wholly theirs.” Kandasamy endeavours to reclaim the English language from its colonial legacy and from the elite Indian custodians, thus metamorphosing it into a vehicle of dissent. This phenomenon resonates with Salman Rushdie's (1991) notion of “the post-colonial gift,” wherein English serves as “the common tongue of a world that is no longer wholly theirs.” Kandasamy endeavours to reclaim English from its colonial heritage and from the elite Indian guardians, thereby transforming it into an instrument of dissent.

Distortion of Narrative Framework

Kandasamy repudiates traditional chronological narrative frameworks and adopts a blended, fragmented, and self-reflexive approach that combines reportage, polemic discourse, oral testimony, poetry, and satire. This stylistic fusion explores the disjointed realities of marginalised communities and challenges the typical "acceptable" literary forms. Her themes focus on the significant issues of caste discrimination, violence, gender oppression, and historical erasure, and to achieve her target, Kandasamy critically examines the process of storytelling. The opening of the novel: "You call this a story. Nevertheless, it is not. It is a condemnation." This rejection of the conventional "story" underscores the primacy of political engagement over aesthetic gratification, thereby positioning Kandasamy within the category of 'testimonial' literature, a universal feature of Dalit narratives.

Kandasamy succeeds in localising English by integrating Tamil sentences, idioms, and cultural references. Through this, Kandasamy engages in the process of "Indianization," which helps deconstruct the imperial language policy to represent linguistic and cultural assimilation, a trait of postcolonial India. Lexical terms like "panchayat," "thottam," and "dalit" are offered without translation, demonstrating her purposeful decision not to dilute or exoticise these realities for a worldwide audience. In accordance with Chinua Achebe's (1965) advice, she manipulates the English language "to suit [her] purpose," endowing it with the profound meaning of Tamil historical and cultural settings. The insertion of vernacular expressions into English questions the reader's anticipations of linguistic purity and forces them to participate in her narratives completely. Another striking feature of Kandasamy's literary style is her expression of fury and righteous anger, as seen in her refusal to conform to civility and politeness. Her narration oscillates between sarcasm, bitterness, and fury, challenging the agents of violence and the aristocracy's apathy.

Kandasamy's identity as a Poet

Kandasamy's identity as a poet significantly shapes the lyrical and experimental qualities of her prose. She distorts traditional narrative patterns by considering repetition and intertextuality. This is intentionally done to transform specific parts of the novel into poetic chants of anger and memory. This feature challenges the reader's

accepted notions of a traditional "novel" and places her work in the mode of 'protest' literature. For example, in her depiction of the victims of the Kilvenmani massacre, she used a rhythmic litany that combines individual identities into a continuous collective remembrance, mirroring both Tamil oral traditions and modernist poetry by strategically implementing these techniques to appropriate foreign words by localizing their usage and subverting standard writing norms, thus packing them with words of indignation, to reconfigure English into a domain of resistance and testimony. Kandasamy embodies the power of articulating the self in an alien language, which functions as a critique of linguistic imperialism and a means of empowerment.

Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* elucidates the extremities of caste violence in Tamil Nadu by locating it within a broader spectrum of oppression and resistance. Her strategic use of English transcends regional boundaries and appeals to global readers. This is an example of Kandasamy's fight for human rights. For instance, her depiction of the Kilvenmani massacre with forty-four Dalit labourers immolated as a compensation for equitable wages is symbolic of the Indians who are aware of caste hierarchies. Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* serves as a salient illustration of resistance, creativity, and reclamation. Kandasamy employs English, a language historically intertwined with colonial domination and elite privilege in India, and meticulously adapts it to convey the realities of caste violence, feminist indignation, and collective defiance.

Kandasamy's selection of English constitutes her skill and diplomacy as a writer. Hailing from Tamil Nadu and domiciled as a Dalit, Kandasamy struggles with the contradictions of articulating localized violence and memory through a global linguistic framework. She intentionally adopts it to amplify the voices of the disempowered, distract local caste hierarchies, and engage an international audience that might otherwise disregard the lived realities of caste. She deliberately distances herself from the idea as a storyteller or entertainer but positions her narrative as a political act, a testimony to injustice.

Anger constitutes a pivotal element within Kandasamy's strategic framework. Drawing on bell hooks's (1990) assertion that speaking in a defiant idiom disrupts dominant power structures, Kandasamy enacts this strategy by confronting both her oppressors and her readers through a voice marked by irony and censure. This is evident

when she directly challenges readerly expectations, remarking that those who approach the text anticipating another familiar narrative of rural violence exemplify the very audience that consumes suffering as spectacle. This sharp critique implicates the reader in the very systems of violence she describes, undermining any sense of comfortable distance.

This research has investigated how Meena Kandasamy deliberately uses English as a foreign and contentious language to articulate the 'self' and depict the 'collective trauma' experienced by 'Dalits' in her literary work, *The Gypsy Goddess.* Kandasamy transmutes English into a hybridised, revolutionary dialect adept at encapsulating the complexities of Dalit and feminist advocacy. Her body of work underscores the ability of postcolonial authors not merely to scrutinise the oppressive discourses embedded in dominant languages but also to reconstitute those languages as vehicles for self-representation and liberation. By adapting English to serve her personal objectives, Kandasamy personifies the potential for a vigorous, innovative, and unapologetic form of writing back in the language of the oppressor.

Kandasamy elucidates that language does not necessarily imply a severance from one's cultural roots. Instead, her employment of English manifests as a hybridised and subversive linguistic construct that articulates her Dalit-feminist identity within spheres capable of challenging dominant narratives, both locally and globally. *The Gypsy Goddess* projects how self-representation in a foreign language navigates the dichotomy between belonging and alienation, local particularity and global comprehensibility, oppression and resistance. Kandasamy's oeuvre reconceptualizes English not as an obstruction but as a battleground. In this domain, marginalized voices can not only articulate their narratives but also engage in dialogue that challenges the status quo.

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11.

Male Poets, Female Personae: A Comparative Study of Selected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel and Susheel Kumar Sharma

**Satyam Singh*

Abstract: This study examines how male poets Nissim Ezekiel and Susheel Kumar Sharma authentically inhabit and articulate female consciousness in selected poems, exploring Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion," "On Bellasis Road," and "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." alongside Sharma's "A Lament," "Me, A Black Doxy," and "Bubli Poems." Grounded in feminist literary theory, it investigates how these poems convey women's moral, emotional, and existential experiences while advancing the feminist ideal of equivalence. Central to this analysis is the Indian aesthetic concept of sādhāraṇīkaraṇa or madhumati-bhumika, which universalises individual emotion and fosters empathetic communion with female subjectivity, aligning philosophically with John Keats's concept of Negative Capability, wherein the poet suspends selfhood and judgement to fully immerse in another's consciousness (Keats 21). Through this cross-cultural lens, Ezekiel and Sharma transform intimate experiences of maternal suffering, social marginalisation, physical labour, and the pursuit of autonomy into emotionally resonant, universal narratives. Despite their male positionality, both poets achieve profound empathetic depth, effectively bridging Indian aesthetic thought and Western poetic sensibility to produce nuanced and authentic portrayals of female personae in contemporary Indian English poetry. This study highlights how their works contribute meaningfully to feminist poetics by challenging gendered boundaries and elevating women's voices in a traditionally male-dominated literary landscape.

Keywords: Female consciousness, Maternal suffering, Female subjectivity

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1. The Ethics of Representation and Feminist Equivalence

The idea that an author can transcend the boundaries of personal identity—of caste, creed, or gender—to inhabit the consciousness of another has been central to the philosophy of art and authorship. The creative imagination, by its nature, aspires towards universality. When a poet writes of love, grief, or alienation, the experience becomes human rather than individual. The capacity that enables such a transformation was described by John Keats as Negative Capability, the poet's ability "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 21). It is precisely this quality that allows an author to feel and express the sensibility of a subject that may lie outside personal experience. Shakespeare's understanding of Ophelia's anguish or Dryden's Cleopatra's dignity does not diminish because of their gender; rather, their imaginative sympathy transforms the experience into a universal expression of human struggle. This very possibility of empathetic authorship forms the basis of the present study: whether male poets can, through imaginative and ethical sensitivity, voice the inner world of the feminine consciousness. The focus shifts from the identity of the author to the authenticity and ethics of representation. If feminism seeks equality in life and thought, then literary representation must also be judged by its fidelity to the principle of equivalence. The poet, as moral and imaginative agent, is expected not merely to portray but to understand the woman's experience, to participate in her being without appropriation or dominance.

The early foundations of feminist thought are not restricted to female voices. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) converge on a single moral insight: intellectual and moral equality are not contingent upon gender. Wollstonecraft asserts that "the mind has no sex" (42), while Mill calls subjugation "wrong in itself" and injurious to the progress of society (45). Together, these texts create a moral bridge connecting male and female advocacy for equality, establishing a philosophical foundation on which both genders can participate in feminist reasoning. The shared goal is not inversion of hierarchy but restoration of balance—the principle of equivalence. This idea becomes essential in judging whether a poet, irrespective of sex, succeeds in writing from a space of equality and empathy.

With the twentieth century came the interrogation of gender as a constructed and performative category. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, formulated the idea that "one is not born, but rather becomes,

a woman" (267), exposing how social norms and structures produce gendered subordination. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* complements this idea by defining existence as freedom and responsibility, where identity forms through conscious choice (Sartre 87). Read together, these ideas suggest that the poet's act of representation must acknowledge both structure and freedom—structure in understanding the social conditions shaping women's lives, and freedom in portraying women as conscious agents capable of self-definition. The poet's responsibility, therefore, is not to imagine women as symbols of virtue or suffering but as subjects negotiating freedom within constraint.

Subsequent waves of feminist theory refine these ethical expectations further. First-wave feminism, rooted in legal and moral equality, laid the groundwork for humanist reasoning. Second-wave feminism, influenced by thinkers such as Betty Friedan and Kate Millett, expanded the critique to cultural, domestic, and psychological domains, demonstrating how ideology and language encode gendered hierarchies (Friedan 15; Millett 11). Third-wave and poststructuralist feminists, including Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, examined language, desire, and identity, emphasising multiplicity and difference as constitutive elements of experience (Kristeva 136; Irigaray 89; Cixous 881). Meanwhile, postcolonial feminist critics such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warned against the universalisation of Western feminist discourse and emphasised the situatedness of women's voices (Mohanty 338; Spivak 83). Taken together, these trajectories of thought produce not merely a historical narrative but a set of evaluative principles for authorship. A poet becomes feminist not by identity but by attitude—through an ethical openness to otherness, through recognition of structure and struggle, and through the capacity to translate emotion into shared human understanding. Representation, in this sense, becomes an act of justice. When the poet allows the female persona to think, to feel, and to question, the poem participates in the feminist project of equivalence.

Feminist criticism itself has consistently raised questions about who speaks for whom, and how voice and agency are mediated through literature. The central tension lies between representation and appropriation. Does a male author who writes from a female perspective illuminate her condition, or does he risk silencing her by speaking on her behalf? Poststructuralist theory helps answer this question by suggesting that meaning is not fixed but dialogic. The female persona in a male-authored poem can become a site of dialogue rather than possession—a space where gendered consciousness is explored rather than defined. The poet's ethical responsibility is thus to allow multiplicity, ambiguity,

and agency to emerge within the text, aligning with the feminist demand for voice and subjectivity. The framework that arises from these converging traditions can thus be articulated in simple yet profound terms: authorship must be measured by ethical imagination, awareness of structural inequality, and respect for autonomy. When these are present, representation transcends gender. The poet's sensibility—his or her capacity to feel deeply and justly—becomes the true measure of feminist consciousness. As Keats's negative capability implies, the poet's self dissolves into the subject not to dominate but to understand. Mill's moral reasoning, Beauvoir's existential ethics, and the poststructuralist celebration of difference converge to affirm that literature achieves feminist value not through identity politics, but through empathetic universality.

Therefore, the theoretical foundation of this study rests on the principle that poetic imagination can serve as a moral and feminist act when guided by ethical awareness. The male poet who writes of the feminine condition does not violate the boundary of experience if he does so with humility, insight, and authenticity. Feminist theory, in its varied forms, has supplied both the questions and the criteria: How is voice constructed? How is agency represented? Does the text reproduce subordination or restore subjectivity? The answers to these questions form the evaluative core of this research. The poet's gender is incidental; what remains essential is whether the poetry upholds the feminist principle of equivalence—the recognition that human experience, though diverse in form, is shared in its dignity and worth.

2. **Comparative Analysis**

2.1. Representation of Maternal Suffering: "Night of the Scorpion" and "A Lament"

Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" and Susheel Kumar Sharma's "A Lament" unfold as poetic meditations on endurance, sacrifice, and the intricate interdependence of womanhood and human sensibility. Both poets, though male, transcend biological identity to engage deeply with the emotional and existential terrain traditionally associated with the feminine. They represent, as Simone de Beauvoir suggests, not a "sexed consciousness," but a shared existential condition through which pain and care acquire universal significance (Beauvoir 301). Their poetic voices participate in the humanistic ideal that John Stuart Mill framed in *The Subjection of Women* (1869): the ethical equality of human beings grounded in the ability to feel and reason beyond the barriers of gender.

Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" demonstrates a community's collective consciousness as it converges around a mother's agony. The speaker recollects with almost cinematic clarity:

> I remember the night my mother
> was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
> of steady rain had driven him
> to crawl beneath a sack of rice.
> ("Night of the Scorpion" lines 1–4)

The poem opens with an atmosphere of foreboding that situates the mother's suffering within both natural and moral orders. The villagers' arrival—"The peasants came like swarms of flies / and buzzed the Name of God a hundred times / to paralyse the Evil One" (Ezekiel, "Night of the Scorpion" lines 5–7)—introduces a chorus of ritualistic empathy. Here, superstition becomes a communal mode of response to suffering, reflecting a patriarchal cultural framework in which women's bodies are sites of spiritual testing. Each line of prayer—"May the sins of your previous birth / be burned away tonight, they said" (Ezekiel, "Night of the Scorpion" lines 8–9)—transforms the mother's body into an arena of cosmic balance, echoing the cyclical burden of pain assigned to women within traditional societies.

Ezekiel's genius lies in his restraint; he refrains from overt moralisation, allowing irony and observation to expose the quiet heroism of his mother. As the peasants invoke divine justice, the father's rationality intervenes: "My father, sceptic, rationalist, / trying every curse and blessing, / powder, mixture, herb and hybrid" (Ezekiel, "Night of the Scorpion" lines 10–12). The juxtaposition between blind faith and scientific scepticism mirrors India's transitional ethos between tradition and modernity. Yet, amidst these conflicting masculinities, the woman remains central—silent, enduring, and luminous in her moral strength. After twenty hours of torment, she utters only one line, a crystallisation of motherhood itself: "Thank God the scorpion picked on me / and spared my children" (Ezekiel, "Night of the Scorpion" lines 45–46). In feminist terms, Ezekiel's mother embodies what Adrienne Rich calls "the politics of motherhood," wherein suffering is not submission but an act of profound ethical consciousness (Rich 113). She neither protests nor resigns; she transforms affliction into affirmation. The poet's perspective is one of reverent empathy, not pity. His portrayal moves beyond sentimentality to a moral recognition of the woman's strength. The scorpion, rain, fire, and darkness become metaphors for human endurance. The poem's moral centre rests not in the ritual, the father's science, or even the poet's narration, but in the woman's brief, redemptive speech—a triumph of spirit over circumstance.

In Sushil Kumar Sharma's "A Lament," the register of suffering shifts from physical to psychological, from communal superstition to existential inquiry. The poem opens with the immediacy of loss and maternal anguish:

> It was not so easy to give you birth, O child!
> Today I saw you jumping from the Yamuna Bridge
> To end your life which you felt was loathsome.
> ("A Lament" lines 1–3)

The contrast between the labour of birth and the act of self-destruction creates a wrenching dialectic between creation and negation, hope and despair. The mother's voice—intimate, retrospective, and accusatory—unfolds through a long monologue that traces the emotional geography of motherhood. She recounts her bodily suffering, "Moving from one doctor to another, from clinic to clinic / Weathering all seasons, consuming all those nauseating pills" (Sharma, "A Lament" lines 4–5), not as complaint but as testimony to endurance. Unlike Ezekiel's mother, whose pain is mediated by others, Sharma's mother narrates her own ordeal, reclaiming voice and agency in the very act of lamentation.

The psychological depth of "A Lament" situates it closer to existential and poststructural feminist thought. When the mother asks, "Why didn't you hear that baby before escalating / Those wires and crossing the railing? / Why had I to live and you to die?" (Sharma, "A Lament" lines 8–10), she confronts the absurdity of freedom that Jean-Paul Sartre defines as "a being condemned to be free" (Sartre 28). The mother's anguish thus becomes an existential reflection on freedom, choice, and responsibility—her child's freedom to die, her compulsion to live. Sharma's poetic empathy is not built on sentimental sympathy but embodies what Beauvoir calls "the transcendence of subjectivity"—the ability to inhabit the Other's condition without appropriating it (Beauvoir 319). In its structure and diction, "A Lament" mirrors the fragmentation of grief. Memory, faith, and despair intertwine as the mother revisits her own near-suicidal past:

> I had gone to the Ganges once in December
> And had sat down on its banks in the wee hours
> And then moved into it when was unable
> To think of anything beyond.
> ("A Lament" lines 15–18)

This confession reframes suffering as cyclical and inherited—a mother's past pain re-emerging in her child's despair. While Ezekiel's poem culminates in the purification of maternal sacrifice, Sharma's poem resists closure, leaving grief suspended between memory and meaning. Yet the repetition of "Life was precious for me / You were precious for

me, O child" (Sharma, "A Lament" lines 19–20) reclaims the sanctity of existence as an act of moral defiance.

2.2 . Portrayal of Female Subjectivity: "On Bellasis Road" and "Me, A Black Doxy"

Nissim Ezekiel's "On Bellasis Road" reveals a rare moment where the male poetic consciousness perceives the woman not as a static symbol of sensuality but as a dynamic subject resisting stereotypical containment. The poem opens with the simple act of seeing:

> I see her first
> as colour only,
> poised against the faded
> red of a post-box.
> ("On Bellasis Road" lines 1–4)

The male gaze initially fragments the woman into colours: "purple sari, yellow blouse, / green bangles, orange/flowers in her hair" ("On Bellasis Road" lines 5–7). Yet Ezekiel's sensibility moves beyond sensory fascination, sensing "her as a woman, / bare as her feet / beneath the shimmer" ("On Bellasis Road" lines 8–10), enacting a moral awakening and inward empathy akin to Keats's negative capability—the capacity "to remain in uncertainties, / Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 1817). The moment of seeing allegorizes modern alienation and classed femininity: the woman on Bellasis Road, a prostitute, embodies invisibility and resilience. The poet's consciousness oscillates between proximity and estrangement:

> Then I look at her …
> the colour disappears,
> she's short, thin and dark
> without a cage to her name.
> ("On Bellasis Road" lines 15–18)

The absent "cage" metaphor evokes vulnerability and autonomy; she owns nothing, not even social protection. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" resonates—her condition is socioeconomically constructed (Beauvoir 295). Ezekiel's restraint, aware of her "as low as she can go" ("On Bellasis Road" line 19), translates suffering into moral visibility without pity. His refusal to moralise—

> I see her image now
> as through a telescope,
> without a single
> desperate moral

to keep it in focus—

("On Bellasis Road" lines 20–24)

—expresses ethical humility, acknowledging representation's limits, echoing John Stuart Mill's humility that men "cannot know what women are or what they could be" (Mill 80). The poem's final lines—"Of what use then to see and think? / I cannot even say I care or do not care, / perhaps it is a kind of despair" ("On Bellasis Road" lines 25–27)—express an existential awareness akin to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*: consciousness recognizes its failure to fully coincide with the Other. Ezekiel dramatizes male self-reflexivity confronting empathy's limits, neither claiming to speak for the woman nor silencing her, but feeling with her and accepting ethical asymmetry.

Susheel Kumar Sharma's "Me, A Black Doxy" extends this empathy more dialogically. Adopting the prostitute's voice, the poem collapses speaker-subject hierarchy, embodying Mill's granting of voice and moral agency. It opens with a biblical echo:

Ain't it prophesied in the Holy Book:

'None eye pitied thee … but thou wast cast out in the open field'

(Ezekiel 16:5)

("Me, A Black Doxy" lines 1–5)

The scriptural invocation ironizes patriarchal religion, situating the speaker within rejection and redemption theology. Colloquial grammar—"Ain't me alone in this world / Wonders me every day and every night?" ("Me, A Black Doxy" lines 6–7)—asserts authentic marginalised selfhood. Where Ezekiel hesitates near pity, Sharma indicts exploitation:

He 'ven bites my teats;

Leaves me bruised with hickeys …

Me ain't paid the agreed amount;

`Is my money black?"

("Me, A Black Doxy" lines 10–13)

This questioning destabilises binaries—sin/purity, black/white, man/woman—making "black" a metaphor for racial, economic, and moral othering. Yet Sharma's persona reclaims moral authority:

My skin is black

My soul ain't black

My money ain't black

Their acts is black

("Me, A Black Doxy" lines 14–17)

This inversion embodies Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism," embracing fixed identity to resist hegemonic narratives (Spivak). Sharma's poetics realise what Ezekiel gestures toward—transcending

gendered boundaries through imaginative sympathy. His male authorship affirms Keats's negative capability, dwelling in the woman's pain without reduction to spectacle. The speaker's closing affirmation—"Me is the Lord's faithful bride / And, thou art the man" ("Me, A Black Doxy" lines 52–53)—shifts biblical accusation from God to man, re-centering divinity in her subjectivity. Echoing Nathan's rebuke to David ("Thou art the man," 2 Sam. 12:7), Sharma's prophetic empathy challenges patriarchal guilt in feminist theology.

Juxtaposing Ezekiel and Sharma reveal diachronic evolution in male poetic responses to female suffering. Ezekiel, mid-century Bombay poet, internalises modernist perception crisis—observing, reflecting, despairing. His woman marginally shapes moral awareness. Sharma, postcolonial and postfeminist, crosses the margin, speaking through the woman, using her idiom to indict systemic inequities. Both fulfil feminist sensibility criteria differently: Ezekiel through humility and ethical doubt; Sharma via imaginative embodiment and radical empathy. Their poetics satisfy feminist equivalence by articulating shared humanity without erasing difference, demonstrating male poets' creative self-effacement in articulating women's truths. Ezekiel's despairing detachment and Sharma's assertive identification together illustrate the philosophical trajectory from Mill's liberal humanism to Beauvoir's existential feminism.

2.3. Portrayal of Contrasting Female Identities: "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." and "Bubli Poems"

Nissim Ezekiel's "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." and Susheel Kumar Sharma's "Bubli Poems" offer contrasting portrayals of women, reflecting different societal contexts and ideological concerns. Ezekiel's poem presents Pushpa through the fragmented, digressive narration of a male speaker, whose admiration blends humour and irony. Pushpa is depicted as an embodiment of sweetness and agreeability: "Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling / even for no reason // but simply because she is feeling" ("Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." lines 1–2). Her charm is both external and internal, emphasised as a socially desirable quality: "Coming back to Miss Pushpa / she is most popular lady // with men also and ladies also" ("Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." lines 3–5). Social admiration frames Pushpa's character, though her agency remains limited as her identity is largely defined by others' perceptions. The humour arises from the narrator's digressions, such as the memory of a visit to Surat:

Surat? Ah, yes,
once only I stayed in Surat

with family members
of my uncle's very old friend,
his wife was cooking nicely . . . that was long time ago
("Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." lines 45–49)

Through these digressions, the poem situates Pushpa within the male gaze, reducing her presence to comedic storytelling.

Pushpa's compliance further reinforces traditional gender expectations. Whenever she is asked to do anything, she responds affirmatively: "Pushpa Miss is never saying no. / Whatever I or anybody is asking // she is always saying yes" ("Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." lines 12–14). This portrayal reflects patriarchal values in which women's worth is measured by their ability to accommodate and conform, rather than by their own desires or achievements (Moi 21). Feminist theory characterises this as the "male gaze," where women are positioned as objects to be observed rather than as autonomous subjects (Mulvey 837). The poem's humour and irony do not subvert this construction but underscore it. In contrast, Sharma's "Bubli Poems" represent a female protagonist with agency, self-awareness, and the capacity to challenge social constraints. From the outset, Bubli is depicted as dynamic and self-reflexive:

Her name is Bubli.
Though she does not know
What she is bubbling with
Yet the village lad knows.
("Bubli Poems" lines 1–4)

Bubli navigates her environment with curiosity and intentionality, negotiating social, cultural, and personal constraints. Sharma foregrounds her interiority, highlighting her struggles with societal expectations and the pursuit of autonomy. She is aware of her desires and consequences, thus a subject rather than an object. Bubli's feminist perspective is evident in her questioning of gender norms and experimentation with dress:

One day Bubli was standing before the mirror
Putting on a jeans and jacket and shaking her hips
She was trying to be a local Katrina.
("Bubli Poems" lines 20–22)

Her mother enforces conformity, quoting scripture:

"The woman shall not wear that
which pertaineth unto a man,
neither shall a man put on a woman's garment:
for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God."
("Bubli Poems" lines 23–26)

Bubli's critical response questions such dogma:

> If she were wrong; after all they award degrees
> That are so important; does it matter if she wears
> A jeans; so many girls, even Christians, put it on
> Are they all wrong? Are they all going to Hell?
> ("Bubli Poems" lines 27–30)

Sharma portrays Bubli's resistance to authority, foregrounding rationality, autonomy, and equality—the core of feminist discourse. Bubli's struggle extends to sports, where institutional norms limit her:

> She could be nominated to represent the district;
> But her dress was a problem; she was playing wearing a // Salwar and kurta; she needed a skirt.
> ("Bubli Poems" lines 35–37)

This sharply contrasts with Pushpa's social compliance, illustrating feminist assertions of autonomy and self-realisation as articulated by bell hooks (hooks 45). Bubli also questions systemic patriarchy and gender hierarchy:

> Why should a wife bow down to her husband?
> When will this discrimination stop?
> Is male soul different from the female one?
> ("Bubli Poems" lines 38–40)

This awareness aligns with feminist existentialism's calls for self-definition in oppressive systems. Bubli's life is a complex negotiation of social expectation, desire, and spiritual aspiration:

> She moves from one shrine to another
> She changes her tracks like a train //
> Or like a soul changes its dress.
> ("Bubli Poems" lines 45–48)

Her internal conflicts, striving for freedom and responsibility, further complicate her subjectivity:

> Every time she looks for sweet water
> She finds herself gulping seawater;
> She has been waiting for the moment
> When the zenith comes into her life
> And she becomes the guiding star
> And the eyesore and the bright star.
> ("Bubli Poems" lines 50–55)

Together, these poems explore the spectrum of female representation in Indian English poetry—from Pushpa as socially admired yet constrained to Bubli as actively autonomous. Sharma's feminist ethical engagement foregrounds interiority and resistance, while Ezekiel's poem highlights external observation and patriarchal compliance.

3. Postcolonial Fractures: Indianness, Poetic Styles, and the Symbolism of Marginalised Bodies in Nissim Ezekiel and Susheel Kumar Sharma

Looking closely at 'Indianness' in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and Susheel Kumar Sharma reveals a postcolonial identity marked by hybridity, ambivalence, and resistance—entangled in the colonial inheritance of English as both a tool of subjugation and self-expression. Ezekiel, a foundational voice in modern Indian English poetry, often employs ironic, understated diction to mimic the cadences of Indian English, blending urban detachment with rural echoes to critique cultural stasis. In contrast, Sharma's 21st-century free verse adopts a raw, creolised idiom—infused with Hindi rhythms, Biblical allusions, and street vernacular—to voice visceral urgency, transforming personal lament into collective indictment. This comparison looks at how they handle sidelined people—like the hurting villager, the sex worker, and the woman climbing social ladders—through postcolonial eyes. Their images and symbols mirror splits between old ways and new ones, local faith and Western logic, male control and women's growing power.

In Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" and Sharma's "A Lament", postcolonial Indianness emerges as a fractured identity, entangled in the interplay of ancient traditions and modern rationalism, articulated through the colonial legacy of English. Ezekiel's poem, framed as a child's wide-eyed recollection, employs flat, ironic diction mimicking Indian English to depict a rural scorpion sting as a microcosm of cultural paralysis: peasants invoke karmic philosophy -"May the sins of your previous birth / Be burned away tonight" (Ezikiel, lines 18-19), while the rationalist father resorts to futile experiments, blending superstition and science in tragicomic futility. The scorpion symbolises diabolical forces merging Hindu and Christian motifs, underscoring the postcolonial tension between indigenous belief and Western scepticism—a stylistic choice that Ezekiel's detached irony amplifies, rendering the scene a wry tableau of unresolved hybridity. Sharma's urban lament, by contrast, shifts to individual despair in fragmented free verse echoing Hindi vilāp through repetitive questions -"Why did you have to die?"*(A Lament, lines 38, 41, 45, 47)* and sacred geography—Vindhyachal, Ganges—framing maternal pilgrimages and the son's Yamuna suicide as reversals of self-sacrifice. Modernity's high-rises amplify isolation through stark, imagistic contrasts (towering concrete against flowing rivers), yet karma's shadow persists as a symbol of enduring guilt, transforming collective ritual into personal torment. Stylistically, Sharma's emotive repetition and vernacular fusion contrast Ezekiel's clinical observation, yet both reveal postcolonial Indianness as an unresolved wound:

Ezekiel's irony critiques rural stasis, while Sharma's raw urgency indicts urban disintegration, with shared symbols of natural toxins (scorpion, polluted waters) evoking the poison of colonial disruption.

In Ezekiel's "On Bellasis Road" and Sharma's "Me, A Black Doxy" the figure of the Bombay prostitute becomes a stark embodiment of postcolonial abjection, marginality, and defiant self-assertion, articulated in the coloniser's tongue yet refracted through contrasting poetic styles. Ezekiel's speaker first perceives the woman as pure chromatic spectacle—"purple sari, yellow blouse, green bangles, orange flowers" (On Bellasis Road, lines 5-6)—a vivid postcolonial collage against the "faded red" postbox, only for color to dissolve into socio-racial judgment: "short, thin and dark without a cage to her name" (On Bellasis Road, lines 14-15). The gaze, mediated "through a telescope," remains affectively numb, a stylistic device of ironic distancing that produces ethical paralysis characteristic of urban modernity's detachment; the prostitute symbolises hyper-visible erasure, her body a canvas of commodified exoticism under the male, colonial eye. Sharma radically re-voices this figure in creolised, Bible-inflected Black English that fuses Ezekiel 16:5 with street dialect and feminist reclamation, contrasting Ezekiel's polished restraint with explosive, rhythmic repetition ("Me not alone," "Me ain't alone") and rhetorical questions that transform victimhood into collective indictment. Imagery of the bruised body—teats, hickeys, belly dance—shifts from spectacle to site of labour, while symbols of inverted morality (the "whiteness" of her soul and money against clients' "black" acts) culminate in prophetic reversal: "thou art the man" (Me, A Black Doxy, line 61). Both poems thus expose the prostitute as the ultimate postcolonial subject: hyper-visible yet erased, commodified in English, and condemned or redeemed through the very language that marginalises her. Ezekiel's chromatic symbolism underscores detached voyeurism, whereas Sharma's corporeal motifs demand empathetic reckoning, highlighting Indianness as a battleground of racialised desire and gendered resistance.

In Ezekiel's "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." and Sharma's multi-part "Bubli Poems", the figure of the upwardly mobile Indian woman is satirically dissected through the fractured lens of postcolonial English, exposing the persistent collision between performative modernity and entrenched patriarchy—a tension amplified by their divergent styles. Ezekiel's mock-eulogy, delivered in deliberately mangled Indian English-"You are all knowing, friends, what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa" (Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S, lines 8-4)- celebrates the "internal sweetness" and unquestioning acquiescence of the "most popular lady" who "is never saying no" (Ezekiel lines 38, 39).

The speaker's rambling digressions and syntactic dislocations ironically unmask a male gaze that reduces female agency to obliging smiles and "good spirit," rendering Pushpa an object of affectionate yet patronising farewell as she departs "for foreign" to "improve her prospect"; symbolically, her "sweetness" evokes colonial-era stereotypes of the docile native, trapped in linguistic mimicry. Sharma's Bubli sequence extends and radicalises this critique across seven sections, employing a fragmented, accumulative free verse that traces a rural girl's metamorphosis into urban commodity and pseudo-feminist icon—contrasting Ezekiel's concise satire with expansive, narrative layering. Beginning with innocent bubbling "She does not know / What she is bubbling with" ("Bubli Poems" lines 2-3) Bubli's trajectory—from village bhajan-singer to college victim of sexual gossip, bar dancer, cheerleader, tennis champion in ever-shorter skirts, and finally temple-questioner—maps the violent commodification of female bodies under neoliberal "empowerment" through vivid, escalating imagery (flowing saris to micro-skirts). Repetitive refrains "Bubli is bubbling" morph from naïveté to hollow performative joy, while intertextual symbols from Deuteronomy and Trupti Desai underscore the hypocrisy of imported freedoms that merely re-inscribe patriarchal control in modern attire. Where Ezekiel's irony remains affectionately detached, Sharma's accusatory tone—punctuated by abrupt shifts and interrogative bursts—indicts a society that grants "rights" only to consume women differently. Together, both poems reveal postcolonial femininity as a site of perpetual mis-translation: sweetly compliant in Indian English or explosively "liberated" in globalese, yet still trapped within the same male script, with shared symbols of effervescent "bubbling" signifying both vitality and entrapment in the postcolonial marketplace.

4. Conclusion

The comparative study of Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion," "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.," and "On Bellasis Road," alongside Susheel Kumar Sharma's "A Lament," "Bubli Poems," and "Me, a Black Doxy," demonstrates a sustained male engagement with feminist sensibilities, articulated through ethical reflection, empathetic observation, and nuanced attention to women's interiority. Across these works, both poets raise fundamental questions about women's agency, moral and emotional autonomy, and the social structures shaping their lives. Ezekiel interrogates the ways women navigate tradition, social expectation, and communal norms, whereas Sharma explores their capacity for self-definition, resilience, and moral assertion. These inquiries serve as the guiding framework through which the poets

examine female experience and offer literary interventions into gendered social dynamics. Both authors address these questions through complementary strategies. Ezekiel emphasises ethical recognition and empathetic observation, portraying women as subjects of moral and emotional significance within societal frameworks. Sharma foregrounds women's active negotiation of social and personal constraints, highlighting their capacity for ethical and existential autonomy. These strategies allow the poems to articulate feminist principles without reducing women to symbols or moral exemplars, permitting their lived experiences to emerge with complexity and integrity. The literary execution of these strategies exhibits a high degree of mādhumatī, the Indian aesthetic principle that allows the poet to immerse in multiple emotions and perspectives without imposing personal judgment or forcing resolution. Ezekiel situates women within communal and ethical dynamics, while Sharma emphasises their interior reasoning and existential agency. This aesthetic approach reinforces the criteria of feminist equivalence, demonstrating that empathy, moral recognition, and narrative openness are central to a literary engagement with gender equality.

Regarding effectiveness, Ezekiel's feminist sensibility manifests primarily through ethical portrayal and moral observation, cultivating awareness of women's endurance and dignity in socially constrained contexts. Sharma extends this further by granting female figures narrative voice, reasoning, and existential agency, aligning with contemporary feminist discourse on autonomy and equality. Together, these works illustrate a continuum of male feminist engagement in Indian English poetry, where moral insight, empathetic immersion, and narrative mādhumatī converge to interrogate and reimagine social and gender hierarchies. Ultimately, these six poems affirm that male authors can engage meaningfully with feminist thought by raising critical questions of agency, morality, and equality, and responding through ethically invested narrative techniques. By articulating women's vulnerabilities and strengths, and situating them as moral and existential agents, Ezekiel and Sharma realise the potential of mādhumatī as a mode of literary empathy, confirming the possibility of a gender-conscious poetics that recognises, respects, and amplifies the complexity of women's experiences in contemporary society.

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12.

Maternal Dissonance and the Crisis of Choice: Postfeminist Negotiations of Motherhood in Percival Everett's *Cutting Lisa*

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&

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Abstract: Percival Everett's *Cutting Lisa* (1986) interrogates the contradictions of postfeminist discourse by staging a moral and emotional crisis around reproduction, agency, and care. Through the Livesey family's domestic space, the novel exposes how postfeminist "choice" operates as both empowerment and constraint. Drawing on Angela McRobbie's critique of postfeminist autonomy, Adrienne Rich's theorisation of the institution of motherhood, and Lisa Baraitser's concept of maternal dissonance, this paper argues that Everett reframes reproductive choice not as freedom but as a site of anxiety in which patriarchal care masks coercion. Lisa's silence and erasure dramatise the postfeminist tension between autonomy and regulation, while Dr John Livesey embodies a paternal authority that conflates protection with possession. Lisa's muted subjectivity embodies the postfeminist condition of self-surveillance: she internalises the neoliberal demand to choose while being denied emotional or social validation for that choice. As a writer often situated beyond the traditional boundaries of African American Literature, Everett brings a post-Civil Rights sensibility to gender politics, blending the moral, the bodily, and the existential. By integrating maternal ethics from Sara Ruddick and Nel Noddings, the paper reveals how the novel transforms care into a mode of disciplinary power. Through this analysis, *Cutting Lisa* emerges as a critical intervention into postfeminist narratives, highlighting the fragility of agency within structures that conflate moral responsibility with patriarchal control.

Keywords: Postfeminism; Motherhood; Neoliberal Choice; Patriarchal Care; Maternal Dissonance

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Introduction

Percival Everett's early novel *Cutting Lisa* situates reproductive politics at the intersection of moral psychology, domestic space, and postfeminist discourse. Set in the 1980s, an era marked by heightened cultural anxiety around gender roles, the narrative follows Dr. John Livesey, a widowed and retired obstetrician, who travels west to rekindle ties with his son Elgin and daughter-in-law Lisa, only to become obsessed with what he perceives as Lisa's moral corruption. The novel culminates in a shocking act when Dr. Livesey decides to perform an abortion on Lisa above the kitchen table, without consent, rendering the domestic space a site of clinical control and patriarchal violence. In this context, Dr. Livesey's assertion of control over Lisa's body can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to reassert paternal power. Yet Everett complicates this crisis in the narrative. Dr. Livesey's masculinity is not traditionally heroic or virile; it is fragile, melancholic, and self-reflective. His moral collapse stems not from ignorance but from the internalization of patriarchal logic as moral duty. While the novel is often read as an exploration of paternal authority and moral breakdown, it also anticipates postfeminist debates about freedom, responsibility, and self-regulation. This paper interrogates the question of how does *Cutting Lisa* expose the contradictions of postfeminist choice and reveal the fragility of maternal subjectivity within patriarchal systems of care? The answer is- Everett reveals reproductive agency as an affective and ethical crisis rather than a stable marker of autonomy. Through theories of postfeminism (McRobbie), the institution of motherhood (Rich), maternal dissonance (Baraitser), and maternal ethics (Ruddick; Noddings), the novel dramatizes how care transforms into control and how women's silence becomes the condition for patriarchal action. The novel reflects a world where a woman's freedom of choice is both praised and closely controlled, where motherhood is idealised and commercialised, and where men continue to hold authority over women's reproductive decisions. The following sections restructure these ideas to present a coherent argument that foregrounds *Cutting Lisa* as a critique of neoliberal femininity and paternal violence.

Postfeminist Choice and Neoliberal Autonomy

Postfeminism frames choice as the ultimate marker of female empowerment, yet this autonomy is circumscribed by expectations of emotional composure, domestic responsibility, and self-surveillance.

Angela McRobbie's theorisation of postfeminism as an "undoing of feminism" (11) provides the conceptual foundation for understanding Everett's exploration of reproductive autonomy. She argues that postfeminism presents itself as a progressive celebration of female autonomy and empowerment, yet it subtly reinstates patriarchal values by demanding that women self-regulate through ideals of choice, confidence and personal responsibility: "there is also an undoing or dismantling of feminism, not in favour of re-traditionalisation, women are not being pushed back into home, but instead there is a process which says that feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something that young women can do without" (8). Rosalind Gill similarly argues that postfeminist discourse privatises political pressures by transforming them into matters of personal responsibility: "Intimately related to the stress upon personal choice is the new emphasis on self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline in postfeminist media culture" (158). Within this framework, freedom appears abundant while its conditions are tightly regulated.

Cutting Lisa dramatises these contradictions through Lisa's pregnancy, which is met with discomfort rather than celebration. Her muted responses and constrained emotional space mark the paradox of postfeminist agency: she possesses autonomy in theory, yet the narrative denies her voice, interiority, and validation. When Dr Livesey discovers that Elgin's vasectomy renders the pregnancy illegitimate within the marriage, Everett exposes what McRobbie identifies as the "new sexual contract": "the new sexual contract requires compromise in work as well as within the home. Despite the rhetoric of heroism in the combining of primary responsibility for children with maintaining a career,… entails the scaling down of ambition in favour of a discourse of managing following the onset of motherhood" (80). It is a conditional autonomy that women must navigate through self-discipline and affective management. She argues that postfeminism offers women conditional autonomy: they may pursue education, sexuality, or pleasure, but only if they remain compliant with traditional respectability and emotional decorum. Lisa's affair transgresses this contract; her desire becomes illegible within the moral grammar of domestic virtue. Lisa's act does exactly that—it refuses to perform guilt or restraint. Dr Livesey's outrage thus reinstates patriarchal order not through punishment but through pity; his moral injury allows him to reclaim authority as caregiver and judge. As McRobbie writes in "Post-feminism and Popular Culture" "The new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent,

to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom" (260). Therefore, in a culture that equates choice with empowerment yet demands emotional propriety, Lisa's silence becomes a precondition for patriarchal correction. Everett's novel thus challenges the ideological coherence of postfeminist choice, revealing it as a fragile construct easily overridden by paternal care.

McRobbie extends this argument through her concept of the "double entanglement" (13) wherein women are invited to experience empowerment through choice, sexuality, and domestic success, even as they are disciplined by constant self-surveillance internalising patriarchal norms of beauty, domesticity and moral conduct. The consequence is a new form of gendered power in which freedom and regulation coexist: the rhetoric of choice conceals the persistence of control. Everett dramatises this entanglement through the figure of Lisa, whose pregnancy, ostensibly a private act of autonomy, is surrounded by discomfort, judgment, and silence. Her body becomes a contested site where freedom and control intersect. Through Dr Livesey's paternalistic intrusion, Everett dramatises McRobbie's "undoing" of feminist agency where care is weaponised as control. When Dr Livesey looks at his son's wife and says, "Lisa, you're still beautiful" (Everett 12). Everett condenses the entire moral pathology of *Cutting Lisa* into one line. What sounds like tenderness is in fact an aestheticisation of empathy, a gesture that transforms moral responsibility into visual reassurance.

Motherhood as Institution vs Experience: Adrienne Rich

Having traced the ideological framework of postfeminism, the study now turns to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), who defined the "institution of motherhood" (42) as distinct from the lived experience of mothering—a site of both love and oppression. Rich draws a powerful distinction between motherhood as experience—a potentially empowering, bodily, and emotional act of nurturing—and motherhood as institution—a patriarchal mechanism that disciplines women's reproductive and emotional lives. She observes that "institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realisation, relation to others

rather than the creation of self" (42), thereby converting care into an ideology of submission.

In *Cutting Lisa*, the rhetoric of choice is turned inside out. Lisa's pregnancy is surrounded by silence: her desires, ambivalence, or consent are absent from the narrative. The novel denies her the subject position that postfeminism promises, showing instead how her body becomes the site of other people's moral performances—her husband's passivity, her father-in-law's self-righteousness, and the reader's uneasy complicity. The domestic setting amplifies this institutional control; the home, sterilised and orderly, resembles a clinic more than a dwelling where reproductive decisions become matters of moral order rather than personal choice. When Everett describes Lisa "sitting at the kitchen table" (79), offering polite greetings while Dr Livesey withdraws, the scene reveals the asymmetry of emotional labour. Lisa performs sociability while Livesey enacts detachment, embodying the patriarchal expectation that women sustain relational warmth even in hostile conditions. Rich's insight that "the loss of the daughter to the institution of motherhood is the essential female tragedy" (240) resonates deeply here. Lisa's potential subjectivity is absorbed into patriarchal scripts of guilt, obligation, and silence. The institution of motherhood demands that she embody maternal virtue even when her pregnancy results from transgression.

Sharon Hays's concept of "intensive mothering" (97) deepens the reading of Lisa's position within the domestic and ideological pressures of *Cutting Lisa*. Hays describes intensive motherhood as a powerful cultural script that demands that women be primary caregivers, morally selfless, emotionally available, and constantly attentive, regardless of their own desires or circumstances. This script insists that good motherhood requires total devotion, even as it leaves little room for women's ambivalence or agency. Lisa's pregnancy becomes a site where these expectations crystallise: she is silently positioned as the moral centre of the family, yet she is afforded no narrative space to express uncertainty or discontent. Hays's theory helps explain why Lisa's ambivalence cannot be voiced within the novel's world—the institution of motherhood demands self-sacrifice and compliance, and any deviation from this ideal becomes grounds for patriarchal intervention. Through this lens, Everett exposes how cultural ideals of motherhood mask systems of control that silence women even before violence occurs.

Maternal Dissonance and the Ethics of Care

Dr Livesey's eruption of hatred—his mind "wandering to Lisa and the life developing inside her" (107) and his longing "for a place to direct it"—marks the psychic breakdown of what Lisa Baraitser calls the "ethics of care" (22). In *Maternal Encounters*, Baraitser suggests that genuine care demands a tolerance of interruption: the willingness to have one's sense of order unsettled by another's need or difference. Dr. Livesey's hatred is born precisely from his inability to endure that interruption. Hatred becomes the inverse of care—the moment where the affective labour of sustaining others collapses into the desire to annihilate difference. In Everett's narrative, this dissonance is displaced onto Dr. Livesey, who embodies a distorted version of care that fuses tenderness with violence.

Cutting Lisa thus extends Baraitser's insights into a broader ethical critique, suggesting that dissonance is not only the maternal condition but also the psychic residue of a culture where care and control are fatally entwined. Dr Livesey and Lisa's brief exchange: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him paint the moon. Of course, you can, Lisa said" (57). For Baraitser, the maternal relation is defined by the capacity to be interrupted by another, by the willingness to let one's certainty be unsettled. Dr. Livesey's distorted proverb expresses his resistance to such interruption: he values order and predictability, seeing imagination as futile or absurd. His voice carries the authority of reason—the belief that care must follow logic. Lisa's soft contradiction, "Of course you can," enacts the very dissonance Baraitser describes. Her response is not argumentative but imaginative; it breaks through the rational frame with a flash of creative possibility. This is the maternal voice as ethical interruption—brief, gentle, but destabilising. Scenes such as the exchange—"Am I the only one excited about this child?" (56) and Lisa's quiet plea, "Please listen to me"—reveal a clash between paternal certainty and maternal hesitation. Baraitser's "interruption" becomes visible in Lisa's attempts to articulate ambivalence, yet her interruptions are systematically ignored. Instead, Livesey's rational, clinical disposition frames his violent act as an ethical duty.

The novel's ending refuses catharsis. There is no punishment, no revelation, only an unsettling calm. This absence of narrative justice is not moral indifference; it is a formal critique of the very structures that

demand resolution. By withholding closure, Everett resists the sentimental logic that often redeems patriarchal violence through guilt or redemption. The title itself, "Cutting Lisa", encapsulates the novel's dual register of violence and intimacy. "Cutting" signifies both surgical precision and emotional rupture; it is an act of dissection that reveals the anatomy of power relations. The possessive structure of the title (Lisa as object) foregrounds how the female body becomes the text upon which masculine ethics inscribe themselves. Everett thus enacts what Baraitser calls the temporal dissonance of motherhood—the way maternal experiences unfold across conflicting temporalities of continuity and rupture, life and loss. When Everett writes, "Lisa was trying to gain her legs. She held her hand to her head and tried to take a step. Dr. Livesey rushed forward and caught her, let her down onto the sofa. 'Okay?' he said. 'Okay.' He switched on the overhead light in the kitchen and cleared the table" (147), he transforms the language of care into a performance of control. Lisa Baraitser's theory of care's ambivalence—that caring acts can conceal domination—illuminates this subtle shift. Dr. Livesey's gesture appears protective, but it immediately transitions into the preparation of a space for intervention, as if care must culminate in order, cleanliness, and authority. Baraitser insists that care can become violent when it refuses interruption, when it transforms the other into an object of maintenance. Dr. Livesey's care operates precisely through this refusal: he will not tolerate Lisa's frailty as an interruption to his moral system. Instead, he restores coherence through action. Everett's minimal narration exposes this collapse of intimacy into ritual; care becomes a method of restoring moral symmetry rather than responding to suffering. Lisa's quiet "Okay" signals resignation, not comfort. This brief domestic moment, tender on the surface, thus inaugurates the novel's most chilling truth: that care, stripped of reciprocity, is indistinguishable from violence. In *Cutting Lisa*, this dissonance manifests not in a mother's psyche but in the narrative itself, which oscillates between tenderness and horror, intimacy and alienation. The result is a postfeminist tragedy without resolution.

Narrative Silence, Patriarchal Control, and Domestic Space

Lisa's near-total absence from the novel's interior narrative constitutes both an ethical void and a critical statement. Everett's decision to withhold her voice dramatises how women's reproductive subjectivity is continually displaced by masculine narration. Within postfeminist culture, female silence often masquerades as "choice"—a woman who

does not speak is presumed to consent, to prefer privacy, to exercise agency through passivity. Everett subverts this trope by showing how Lisa's silence becomes the condition for violence. When Livesey performs the abortion, Lisa is unconscious. Her silence literalizes the postfeminist paradox: the rhetoric of "choice" culminates in the obliteration of the chooser. The act collapses motherhood and death into one gesture, producing what this paper calls maternal dissonance at the level of narrative form. The reader is forced to confront the moral abyss of a world where reproductive decisions are made for, rather than by, women. Moreover, Lisa's erasure challenges the reader's interpretive complicity. Everett structures the text as a confession without resolution. Dr Livesey's calm tone, his paternal guilt, and the domestic setting of the final act, the kitchen table, the sleeping child, generate a false sense of intimacy. The reader, positioned within his consciousness, experiences the same moral sedation that precedes the violence. Everett thus transforms the reader into a witness who must navigate the same ethical contradictions that structure postfeminist discourse. Sara Ruddick's article "Maternal Thinking" offers another way to understand the moral collapse in *Cutting Lisa*. Ruddick defines "maternal thinking" (347) as a disciplined and reflective mode of reasoning that arises from the daily practice of caring, a way of knowing grounded in attention, preservation, and nonviolence. In contrast to patriarchal rationality, which seeks mastery and order, maternal thinking values responsiveness and humility. Everett's novel dramatises the destruction of this maternal epistemology. Dr John Livesey's medical rationality displaces the ethical intelligence that Ruddick associates with care; his logic of protection converts reflection into moral procedure. Lisa's silence, often read as passivity, can thus be reinterpreted as the suppression of maternal thought — an unarticulated awareness that resists Dr Livesey's instrumental morality. In this light, *Cutting Lisa* becomes not only a critique of patriarchal ethics but of the epistemic hierarchy that privileges masculine knowledge over maternal understanding, exposing how violence is sustained by the denial of care as a form of thought.

One major but often overlooked feature of postfeminism is its dependence on constant surveillance, where women's lives are monitored, assessed, and disciplined under the guise of empowerment. Anita Harris argues that contemporary postfeminist culture constructs young women as "at-risk subjects" (14) who must continually regulate their behaviour, sexuality, and choices to maintain respectability. This surveillance is not only social but internalised; women learn to watch

themselves as if from the outside, performing an ever-corrected version of femininity. *Cutting Lisa* exposes this postfeminist regulatory gaze through Dr Livesey, who assumes the right to evaluate Lisa's morality, sexuality, and reproductive choices. Lisa's failure to narrate her choice, perform remorse, or conform to expected emotional scripts places her outside this regulatory ideal. Her silence becomes read as deviance—not because of what she says, but because of how she fails to embody the surveilled norms of the ideal postfeminist woman: articulate, controlled, morally legible. This angle reframes *Cutting Lisa* not only as a crisis of choice but as a critique of the postfeminist culture of monitoring, where women's bodies and decisions are disciplined through judgment, visibility, and the male gaze disguised as moral protection.

The domestic space in *Cutting Lisa* mirrors the contradictions of postfeminist domesticity: the home as both haven and site of control. The setting—a comfortable Oregon house, complete with kitchen rituals and family games—appears to fulfil the ideal of balanced, self-regulating domestic life. Yet Everett subtly infuses this space with unease: under the surface civility lies repression, boredom, and moral decay. Ruth Spencer, the young woman with whom Livesey has an affair, functions as a counterpoint to Lisa. Where Lisa is silent and reproductive, Ruth is vocal and sexual. Yet both women are subjected to Livesey's interpretive control. His affair with Ruth momentarily reanimates his sense of agency, but it is also driven by his desire to assert mastery over the feminine. Ruth's independence threatens his authority; Lisa's pregnancy provokes his moral panic. The two women thus represent the bifurcated female subjectivity of postfeminist culture—the sexually autonomous woman and the maternal caretaker—neither of whom escapes patriarchal discipline. The "ethics of care" (xiii), as theorised by Nel Noddings, rests on relationality and empathy. Everett's novel perverts this ethic by revealing how care can be weaponised. Dr Livesey's self-appointed role as moral caretaker transforms empathy into coercion. In performing the abortion, he enacts a grotesque parody of care: he cleans, medicates, sutures—all in the service of erasure. This perverse logic of protection—protecting the family's honour, his son's fragility, the unborn child's "purity"—exposes the dark underside of postfeminist domestic ethics. Everett frames Dr Livesey's narration in the voice of rational expertise. As a retired obstetrician, he sees himself as the ultimate arbiter of birth and death, equating medical authority with moral legitimacy. Yvonne Tasker's analysis of postfeminist "makeover" culture (10) introduces a crucial angle for understanding how *Cutting*

Lisa critiques the discipline of the female body. Tasker argues that postfeminist narratives frequently centre on the "transformation, the yearning to achieve perfection in one's physical self and/ or domestic environment" (10). Within this framework, women's bodies become projects to be corrected, perfected, or morally purified through regimes of discipline. Everett's representation of Lisa exposes the violence underlying such transformation narratives: instead of a voluntary makeover sanctioned by postfeminist culture, Lisa undergoes an involuntary and brutal "correction" at the hands of Dr Livesey, who assumes the authority to reshape her reproductive identity. His surgical violation functions as the dark inversion of postfeminist self-improvement rhetoric, revealing how the pressure to conform to ideal femininity can be enforced not only through cultural messaging but through literal bodily intervention. Tasker's framework underscores how postfeminism repackages patriarchal regulation as empowerment, and Everett exposes this contradiction by showing that the promise of transformation becomes a justification for control. Through Tasker's lens, *Cutting Lisa* critiques the cultural obsession with the optimised female body, revealing how the discourse of improvement can easily mask coercion, punishment, and patriarchal possession.

The Prologue, in which Mr Thompson performs an unauthorised C-section on his wife, Gertrude Thompson, foreshadows Livesey's own act. The scene becomes an allegory of masculine intrusion into the reproductive body under the guise of love and protection as he simply explains that: "I wanted to bring my child into the world. It's as simple as that" (5). Everett deliberately constructs a mirrored structure: the first unauthorised operation horrifies Livesey, while the second, his own, appears to him as justice. The fact that Dr John Livesey was "finding Thompson's action somehow beautiful" (7), reveals the self-deception at the heart of patriarchal moralism. Livesey's professional background grants him the authority to transgress bodily boundaries. He invokes medical precision to rationalise his act, yet Everett's clinical language gradually turns gothic—needles, threads, blood, silence—underscoring the violence of medical paternalism. In this sense, *Cutting Lisa* exposes the undercurrents of postfeminist discourse: the way care, protection, and medical rationality mask systems of control.

Conclusion

Through its unsettling portrayal of paternal care, narrative silence, and reproductive violence, *Cutting Lisa* exposes the inherent contradictions of postfeminist discourse. Everett demonstrates that the rhetoric of choice—central to neoliberal femininity—collapses when confronted with patriarchal interpretations of care and responsibility. By reading the novel through McRobbie's postfeminism, Rich's institution of motherhood, Baraitser's maternal dissonance, and maternal ethics from Ruddick and Noddings et al., this paper finds that Everett reframes reproduction as a moral crisis shaped by gendered power. Lisa's erasure reveals how agency becomes fragile within systems that conflate protection with possession. *Cutting Lisa* ultimately challenges readers to reconsider the ethics of care and autonomy within structures where violence is easily rationalised under the guise of responsibility. The silence that concludes the novel stands as an indictment of postfeminist promises—exposing choice as meaningful only when accompanied by justice, recognition, and genuine relational care. By situating *Cutting Lisa* at the crossroads of postfeminist ethics, Everett broadens the landscape of African American fiction beyond racial discourse alone.

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13.

Life of a Blind Woman: An Intersectional Study of Disability, Gender and Race in Elizabeth Kata's Novel *A Patch of Blue*

**Sourav Patra*

Abstract: It is worth noting that persons with disabilities experience various notions of disability in their everyday lives in many ways. In the case of women with disabilities, the experience becomes an increased risk for emotional, physical and sexual abuse. This problem is argued through the Social Model of Disability Studies. Though written on the backdrop of the growing civil rights movement and campaign going on from 1954 to 1968 in the United States, Australian Writer Elizabeth Kata, in her 1965 novel *A Patch of Blue*, has portrayed daily-based experiences of a visually impaired girl named Sleena D'Arcey who was accidentally blinded by her prostitute mother at the age of five. She knows only one colour, i.e. Blue, from her early childhood when she could see. So, the paper will focus on the intersection of disability with other aspects of subjectivity, like gender and race, based on the everyday experiences of Sleena as a visually impaired girl. And how the colour-blindness of Sleena is used as a strategy to overcome the racism will be another focus of the paper. In a way, these focuses also intend to examine the novel from a feminist perspective to argue that the intersection of gender and disability becomes a position of compounded vulnerability for women with disabilities to be doubly oppressed. Thus, the textual analysis of the novel would address some critical issues such as the idea of seeing, the importance of exterior entities for blind people, the idea of care-giving and care-seeking, dominant ideology, special abilities of blind people, power, identity politics, corporeality, institution, racism, stereotypes of blindness and the like.

Keywords: Disability, gender, colour, racism, identity.

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Introduction

> In modernity, the everyday becomes the setting for a dynamic process: for making the unfamiliar familiar; for getting accustomed to the disruption of custom; for struggling to incorporate the new; for adjusting to different ways of living. The everyday marks the success and failure of this process. It witnesses the absorption of the most revolutionary of inventions into the landscape of the mundane. (Highmore 02)

To define the concept of everyday life, it suggests a process of living life exploring the heterogeneous interplay between the macro-level domains of daily work, challenges and non-work obligations on one hand and the micro-level of pondering daily activities and the ordinariness of life, of being on the other. Like habits, ordinary events occur repeatedly in our everyday lives, whether we are at work, in our leisure time, asleep, awake, on the street, or in our personal lives. In this process of repetitive occurrences, a person is continually being reshaped or recreated every day through the externalisation and internalisation of different subjects. In a way, everyday life constitutes a person's normal existence, showing how does he/she typically act, think and feel daily. Within the everyday practices of life, we can see numerous possibilities, including interplays of power, questions of dominance, hegemony, and ideology. For a person with disability, this everyday practice of life is quite different. The disabled role within the context of everyday life is defined by those who consider themselves normal in society. If we think closely, we will see that disability is a part of everyone's life. None is perfect in all fields. Physically or psychologically, we are fragile and disabled in some way or another. But, the binaries like normal/abnormal, perfect/imperfect and beauty/ugly that are ingrained in our mind perpetuate 'disability' by making it a 'problem' for the person living with it. It is worth noting that persons with disabilities have experienced various challenges in their everyday lives in many ways. But, in the case of women with disabilities, these challenges sometimes put them at greater risk for physical, emotional and sexual abuse. In Disability Studies, these kinds of issues are addressed in the social

model, which includes discrimination, oppression, and stereotyping in society.

Elizabeth Colina Katayama (1912-1998), known by the pseudonym Elizabeth Kata, is an Australian Writer who wrote the novel *A Patch of Blue* (originally published as *Be Ready with Bells and Drums* in 1961) in 1959 against the backdrop of the growing Civil Rights Movement and campaign going on from 1954 to 1968 in the United States. It was time to annihilate racial discrimination, segregation, and disenfranchisement in the United States. Though the novel depicts especially the love relationship between a white girl and a young black man, it also portrays the categories of disability, class and gender in society. And, the Disability Rights Movement was greatly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement during that second half of the 20th century, and it created the ground for its emergence as a new perspective challenging the traditional ableist understanding of normal people on physical impairment or disability. In a way, this novel approaches an intersectional link between the themes of disability and racism. As Shelley Tremain in her introduction to *Foucault and the Government of Disability* observes, "Academics who conduct their work under the rubric of disability studies have begun to problematize the foundational assumptions of many disciplines and fields of inquiry, as well as the methodologies that they employ, the criteria of evaluation to which they appeal, and the epistemological and social positioning of the researchers and theorists invested in them" (Tremain 02).

Though the academic engagement with disability is rather recent, the roots of neglect and discrimination against persons with disabilities can be historically traced. While many consider disability to be only physical or mental in a clinical manner, it impacts individuals and groups in multiple ways. The Social Model of Disability points out that "persons are impaired for several reasons, but that it is only by society that they are disabled" (Bolt 530). In a way, it is important to study the life of individuals who identify themselves as having a disability and being a woman to inquire how their multiple identities

lead to possible injustice and oppression. And various nuances, notably the ideology of ability, long-standing association of stigma with bodily difference, having extraordinary senses, patterns of behaviours, use of artefacts such as black glasses and the like, play an important role in the everyday life of a blind woman. So, the lack of visual ability of a woman is corporeal in sense because it not only suggests "the physicality of the body" but also gives an idea of "a complex composition of physiological, intellectual and emotional aspects of human beings.... Meanings of corporeality depend on the standards that are established. Standardising is a way in which knowledge about the world is produced and acted upon certain cultural contexts", which "are primarily dominated by normative ideas that contain binaries such as health/ill-health, whole/part, good/evil and so on" (Anand 262). Thus, Elizabeth Kata, in her novel *A Patch of Blue*, has portrayed daily-based experiences of a visually impaired girl named Sleena D'Arcey who is blinded accidentally by her prostitute mother at the age of five. Here, her disability is gendered and she is nullified, abused and discriminated against not only by strangers but also by her immediate family. Later on, she falls in love with a black young man named Gordon Ralfe, who served in the Navy at one time. So, this paper will argue not only the nuanced view on impairment of blindness but also focus on the intersection of disability with other aspects of subjectivity, like race and gender, based on the everyday experiences of Sleena as a visually impaired girl.

Disabled Female Body as 'Other'

The novel opens with Sleena informing the readers how she became blind. When she was five years old, one day her father came back unexpectedly from the war and found that her mother Rose-ann was in a relationship with her friend. They started arguing with themselves and, in a fit of rage, her mother threw acid at her father but it missed, consequently making Sleena blind. In the meantime, her father killed Rose-ann's friend and was taken to jail for the murder. Sleena remembers the last colour which she was familiar with, which is red—the colour of the dead man's blood. And, the three colours—blue,

black, and white were known to her beforehand. After becoming blind, she starts hating ‘everything black’ and believing ‘bad-hearted’ people as black and ‘good-hearted’ as blue. After her husband went to prison, Rose-ann along with Sleena had spent the next 13 years living with her alcoholic father Ole Pa in a small city apartment. Rose-ann and Ole Pa work in the same building, respectively as room attendants for ladies and gents. Besides, Rose-ann works as a prostitute. She is abusive and always hurts her blind daughter, Sleena, who is compelled to do all the household works, like cooking and cleaning. Sleena has no friends, rarely goes outside the apartment, and has never received any education. No one shows interest in taking her to the nearby street and park outside the home. She recalls the last time when she was nine years old and Ole Pa took her out of the apartment. She says, “It was strange to be out of the room. I had been out of it so few times since I had been made blind” (Kata 02). Being a blind girl, she is represented throughout the text as the ‘other’ because her disability causes fears and anxieties concerning ‘able-bodied’ mortality, and she very easily presents herself as the ‘other’. Such strict segregation of herself from the public sphere, as represented in the beginning chapters, gives an idea of ideological distinction between the ‘public/private’ and the ‘bahir/ghar’ (world/home) that leads to the specification of social roles by gender and disability. According to Nandini Ghosh, “The bahir was seen as the domain of practical considerations and dominated by the profane activities of the material world, while the home was posited as the representation of one’s true identity, one’s spiritual self; and women became the representation and repository of this inner/spiritual domain” (202-03). In a way, for Sleena, being a blind woman, home that is ‘ghar’ represents her inner normal-self, whereas the outside world that is ‘bahir’ represents her outer abnormal-self as ‘the domain of practical considerations’. However, later on, one day when she was with her grandpa outside the street, she met a girl named Pearl, and made a friendship with her, but she didn’t know that Pearl was a nigger black girl. After that, with the influence of Ole Pa’s abominable attitude towards the nigger girl Pearl, she discarded her as a friend because she hated the colour ‘black’.

In the novel, Elizabeth Kata has used the method of intersectionality between race, gender and disability studies. This intersectional method is a conceptual framework that actually makes us recognise the multiple social identities and the oppression arising as a result of these identities. It is not simply about bringing together these identity markers in one thread, but to consider how each support or deals with the constitution of one another to decentre the centre and bring marginalised identities to the centre. So, the 18-year-old girl, Sleena is doubly marginalised for being a female gender and having visual impairment. She was sexually assaulted by one of prostitute Rose-ann's customers. Since then, Rose-ann has been treating her badly. She says to her lover Gordon, "My life was disgusting. I'd even been raped by a casual customer of my mother's" (Kata 92). Here, the female disabled body of Sleena is represented as the ground of oppression and sexual politics. According to Nadia Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon, "Feminist scholars have argued that the body is both socially shaped and colonised. The politics of the body, different from the body politic, argues that the body itself is politically inscribed and is shaped by practices of containment and control" (01). Patriarchal society always views women as inferior to men, which creates the ideology that the body of women is something to be abused, used, objectified and controlled by superior powers. As a victim of sexual violence like rape, Sleena experiences the humiliation that the blind woman's worth and dignity depend on her mere bodily functions, seen especially as a commodity for the business of providing male sexual satisfaction. This intersection of the subjugated identity of the female gender and disability results in a qualitatively different experience for her. As offered by Mr Faber, she does a job of stringing beads— a kind of typical job assigned for someone who is blind. She can't even spend the money earned from her labour; it further goes to her mom Rose-ann. It is also true that, unlike Sleena, women with visual impairment face many problems in case of getting an education and earning money for themselves. Such an exclusion and abuse of a female disabled body can be understood through Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's idea of the 'normate' as she defines it as "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can

step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (08). Therefore, in the novel, the unusual treatment of Sleena by her family prescribes the body's engagement with disability as 'special', 'extraordinary' or 'abnormal'— an imposed identity.

However, such forcing of Sleena into sex work and confining her in the home by her own mother debunks again the scholar Nandini Ghosh's idea of 'bhalo meye', i.e. 'good woman' who "is both a morally upright woman as well as a woman with all functional capacities required for taking on familial and marital responsibilities" (Ghosh 113). As she says in her article "Experiencing the body: Femininity, Sexuality and Disabled Women in India", "Norms of appropriate behaviour, however, are used to curb the freedom of disabled girls, with threats of loss of reputation as a 'good girl'. Disabled girls experiencing their bodies as restrictive in sexual relations, find their freedom further restrained in terms of protecting their reputation as a morally upright woman" (114). So, it is the patriarchal ideas that enable Rose-ann to doubt the sexuality of her own blind daughter, whether she is capable of taking all responsibilities as an ideal 'good girl' usually performs in terms of reproduction, childbearing, rearing, and nurturing. She uses the disabled body of her daughter like an object for sex business, and after that, we have seen in the text that she has rented a separate room to conduct her liaisons or sex work. In repeating the words of French Revolutionary writer Simone de Beauvoir that is "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 273), we may also say that Sleena is not born, but rather becomes a woman with disability by us. All her personal desires, fantasies and pleasures are dominated by the matter of patriarchal discourse and 'governmentality' which establishes norms and rules in the society. To point out the predicament of women in patriarchal society, Beauvoir states that, "Sometimes the 'feminine world' is contrasted with the masculine universe, but we must insist again that women have never constituted a closed and independent society; they form an integral part of the group, which is governed by males and in which they have a subordinate place" (567). Such nullification for being visually impaired and an incomplete physical body, therefore, creates a process of

‘alterity’ or ‘otherness’ which not only puts Sleena at a disadvantage but also prevents her family cum society from directly experiencing and internalising her life. Neither Rose-ann nor Ole Pa shows proper empathy for her. A profound misfortune is uttered by her when Ole Pa asks how she can do the work of threading beads in the darkness of night at the park. She answers, “He can never realise that dark and light don’t exist for the blind—only dark” (Kata 32). In a way, she locates herself in the class of blind people. At a psychological level, such perceived differences lead her to accept her visually impaired body as devalued in comparison with other able-bodied women. Her visual impairment has left her seeing only one colour, i.e. black and thereby, she despises everything black. She considers this darkness as an enemy and hates black colour in many forms, even for humans, as we have seen in the case of a nigger girl named Pearl at the beginning of the novel. But she was not familiar with the idea of racism at that early age of nine. Such colour blindness of Sleena becomes a metaphor in the novel. Through this metaphor, on one hand, Elizabeth Kata shows how a disabled woman like Sleena can prove her functional capacities by successfully making a heterosexual relationship. And, on the other hand, through the representation of colour blindness, which makes it possible for White Sleena to love Black Gordon, Kata overcomes the problem of racism and tries to give the message of ‘equality, fraternity and liberty’.

Importance of a Caretaker for a Blind Woman

In the nearby park where the blind Sleena often passes the time by threading beads, one day her bead box falls into the grass and she can’t find all those beads lost in the grass. When she starts crying, Gordon comes to help her find the beads. From then on, they became good friends and gradually started loving each other. But Sleena didn’t know that Gordon, like Pearl, was also a ‘nigger’. Gordon plays the important role of a caretaker for Sleena because Caring matters most for a disabled body. Upali Chakravarti in her article “Ethics and Practice of Care: A Focus on Disability” says, “Care, it is said by many care ethicists, is a good thing because it meets the needs of others. Put

that way, it is easy to see how it plays into the individualised model of care...In particular, it assumes a norm for bodies, and disabled bodies are those departing from this norm, and so requiring care which can bring them back to the norm" (159). After falling in love with Gordon, Sleena transforms into an understanding and mature being. She is going to develop into a tolerant individual. Gordon asks Sleena to be considerate towards people of colour as well. He arranges for her to attend a special school for the blind and helps her meet another blind girl named Alice Braddon so that she can gain more confidence in life. Such admission of Sleena to a special school for the blind gives an idea of institutionalisation, which Disability Studies Scholars addressed as an 'active process'. According to Licia Carlson, "the various calls either to institutionalize people with disabilities (thereby removing them from mainstream society) or else to deinstitutionalize them (with the aims of normalization and integration) reflect complex social goals" (312). But Gordon's choice of a special institute, not the ordinary or normal school for Sleena's education, situates her in the customary idea of exclusion or marginalisation as a disabled 'other' from the mainstream society. However, to Sleena, who is oppressed, marginalised and not cared for being blind, Gordon is the only hope for freedom. She can live independently outside her patriarchal family after meeting him. He gives her a newfound identity. So, to some extent, all the cares from the side of Gordon create a kind of 'norm' for the disabled body of Sleena to live within the society happily, out of all identity politics.

Metaphor of the Colour 'black' –Representing Both Racial Skin and Visual Darkness

Being a black person, Gordon is also represented as a racial other. Here, his character exposes the stereotyping of dominant whites towards black men in the 1960s, which addresses the negative effects of white supremacy and how systematic racism marginalises African Americans from the mainstream of American society. It is not only Sleena's white racist family that disapproves her love for Gordon but also Gordon's brother Paul too, who supports 'dominant ideology' of racism and

repeatedly points out the failure or impossibility of their love relationship which becomes morally superior than society's racism and ableism—the question is how can Gordon being an ableist 'racial other' dare to love with a white visually impaired girl. Here, the problem is more with skin colour than with disability of Sleena. However, when Gordon takes Sleena for the second time to his apartment, Paul rebukes Gordon by saying, "Have you got rocks in your head? Bringing that girl here again? … I can't imagine how you let yourself become involved with a business like this. A blind girl to boot! Gordon, I think she comes from a trash heap" (Kata 114). Paul's words here indicate both the 'others' being racial and disabled identities. However, on the other hand, Sleena couldn't even know that Gordon himself is a black man until her mother and her mother's friend Sadie make fun of her for loving a black man by using the racist term 'nigger' at the end of the novel. In a way, the discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes based on racism are partially maintained by the dissemination of ideology through words, images and behaviour. To some extent, it is the white racist family of Sleena that works as an institution to idealise her thoughts on the black people or niggers. Living in or aware of a racialised society, innocent Sleena sustained a stereotypical contemptuous attitude toward black people in her mind. She believes that niggers are not human in nature. They are dirty, rogue and untouchable. However, when Gordon tries to change her false idea towards niggers, she replies, "Ole Pa says they are apes from Africa. Ole Pa says they stink, "No stink like the bad smell of a dinge," that's what Ole Pa says and it's true. A nigger ever touched my hand; I'd cut it off—no kidding" (Kata 128). Here, such fear of the loss of sexual purity by the touch of a black person makes Sleena a 'Colonial/Imperial Woman' through unfolding the idea of 'racism'— a sociocultural concept which justifies the humiliation of people of colour through the process of dehumanisation and the dominant constructions of gender, sexuality and class.

At the end of chapter twenty-nine, when Gordon is rescuing fallen Sleena from the rose garden, she screams out in pain. Yanek Faber, the son of Mr Faber, who is present in that park, hears the sound

and shouts for help, telling Gordon to leave Sleena alone: "Leave her be. Leave Sleena be. You Goddam nigger" (Kata 136). At that time, after listening to Yanek's use of the word 'nigger', Sleena gets shocked, thinking that there is an unknown black man who is touching her, which she never expected in her life before. She immediately commands that unknown nigger person to get his hands off of her and she starts combating with him. And this unknown nigger person is none other than Gordon himself. In a way, a misunderstanding has crept between them. Observing their quarrel and fight, some people gather there and try to duel with Gordon for teasing a blind white girl. Gordon is humiliated in public. But here, since Sleena had been blind from the tender age of five, she wouldn't have properly understood how someone could be racist over the colour of one's skin. Later, she realises that Gordon is the same black man to whom she had misbehaved and starts weeping for her intolerance. So, this prolonged negation and insult towards Gordon refers to the colonial conflict between the whites and the native blacks, where one develops only in contrast with the other. For whites, the blacks are always the negative, primitive 'other'. They cunningly make the blacks put on, in Fanon's phrase, 'white masks', which creates an identity crisis for blacks. In a way, both Sleena and Gordon undergo a crisis of cultural identity—the latter is for disability and the former is for racism. In chapter thirty, this crisis is worth noticing when on one hand, Gordon becomes hopeless by saying that Sleena is 'destroying' him, and on the other, repenting on this last word of Gordon, Sleena also says "he had been wrong" (Kata 140), it was she who has destroyed herself because she would never hear or be with him again in future. The tiny ray of hope that had lightened her darkness is now erased. She comes to know the politics of identity and says, "How strange it was. How very strange. All my life I'd hated black, hated it so much and yet—beautiful people in my life had been coloured…" (Kata 141). Then, she remembers the words of Gordon that he had been unable to master on something called 'tolerance'. But it makes her happy to think that she can master the art of 'tolerance' by considering blackness as something positive and beautiful in her life, which Gordon has always tried to teach her from the beginning. And, as her only childhood friend was a Black girl, she

repents apologising to Pearl, saying that she loves her, and tries to prove to be a real tolerant individual. It suggests that, in her mind, psychologically, Gordon's outside status of 'blackness' positions him closer to her own outsider status as a 'woman with disability'. Here, the disability encompasses two forms: one physical and the other cultural. From the perspective of culture, it could be told that both Sleena and Gordon experience a form of 'cultural imperialism' which, the prominent scholar Anita Ghai in her book *(Dis) Embodied Form: Issues of Disabled Women* opines, "connects those who have and who continue to be discriminated against based on race, disability, national or ethnic identity; it means to experience how the dominant meanings of society render the particular perspective of one's group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as other" (40).

Hence, colour plays an important role in the novel. After meeting with Gordon, Sleena shares a memory with him that blue is the only colour she remembers from her childhood when she could see. And this memory of blue stands out against the black-and-white conflict. She refers to good people as 'blue-hearted'. In her childhood, she was looking at the sky through the window all the time. She says, "Forever looking up at the sky. I never got tired of looking at it. So high and clean, way up there. I will never forget blue. That's for sure" (Kata 06). Here lies the significance of the title "*A Patch of Blue*". The reference of 'Blue' in relation to the 'Sky' indicates equality and oneness. We are all living under a broad, colourless sky which receives us with open arms, irrespective of race, religion, or caste. There is no discrimination like disability and racism. So, if the whole sky or the universe is colourless and equal for all, then why do we, the humans, discriminate with each other based on our ability or skin colour in such a small planet called Earth?. Here, a patch of Blue for Sleena becomes a colour of emancipation, not only from her disability but also from the racial conflict between white people and black people. Moreover, as said by Simon Dickel, "this conflict is negotiated through the trope of blindness: Sleena is depicted as the only white character with an ability to perceive Gordon's humanity beyond his Blackness because she is blind and does

not see the colour of his skin" (124). Thus, this metaphor of colour-blindness is used as a strategy to overcome racism in the text. It makes us understand so clearly what Pearl S. Buck said in his memoir *The Child She Never Grew* that "all people are equal in their humanity and that all have the same human rights" (52). This racism would come to an end only when we stop acknowledging racial differences.

Representation of Special Abilities of a Visually Impaired Woman

In this way, dealing with colours, Elizabeth Kata also develops a type of knowledge production that depicts the limitations and abilities of being a blind woman. However, despite her visual impairment, Sleena has a deep sense of hearing and understanding. In *Book II* of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke says that "the sources of all knowledge are based firstly on, 'sense experience' through organs like the red colour of a rose, the ringing sound of a bell, the taste of salt, and so on and, secondly on 'reflection' that is one's awareness that one is thinking, that one is happy or sad, that one is having a certain sensation, and so on" (88). So, unlike a normal person with visuality, a person lacking sight is primarily isolated from the knowledge of ideas about colour and light and is "subsequently dependent on secondary qualities of descriptors – words and touch" (Michalko 220). In the same way, Sleena's dependence on the sense of hearing and touch is emphasised in the text. She can realise everything like the fallen leaf, a faraway striking sound of a clock and the secret conversation of Gordon and his brother through the deep sense of her hearing and touch. Her power of hearing is so sharp that she can make sense of the beauty of nature in the park by hearing its various sounds. She says, "Owing to the fact that I'm blind, I can't see. Owing to the fact that I'm blind, I can hear much clearer than seeing folk... Perhaps being blind, because it takes away the sense of seeing, perhaps it gives another sense in its place—A sense of knowing things, of being aware" (Kata 114;79). Actually, Sleena uses her other senses of perception in a perfect manner, which substitutes the mode of seeing. It extends the idea of seeing with the denial of disability that not only visuality can make us see, but also other sensory senses like hearing, touching, smelling, and

the power of understanding can enable us to see with perfect imagination. Like her, one can perform the activity of seeing through another mode with the power of hearing, touch and perception. So, a specific kind of ability besides Sleena's blindness is prevalent throughout the novel.

Materialistic Approaches Connected to the Blind Personality

Despite this intersectional position taken within disability studies, people with visual impairment, particularly under the materialist approaches, continue to inhabit the margins of society. The attitudes, patterns of behaviour and artefacts that characterise blind people are not inherent in their position but socially created. For example, as we have noted in the text, Gordon has gifted 'a pair of dark glasses' to Sleena to use for looking more beautiful. Actually, here, Sleena's use of these dark glasses does not strengthen their love relationship; rather, it is used to shield the disclosure of blind people's eyes from the visually ableist normal public of our society. The social marginalisation of a disabled body leads Sleena to hide her blind eyes. In a way, disability structures the everyday lived experiences of blind women, in terms of beauty and appearance and in the expected roles of productive and reproductive responsibilities like a 'good woman'. Then, the reference of 'bells' and 'drums', which sounds for a pure-hearted girl but not for blind, ignorant Sleena as she cannot recognise real Gordon, recognises his skin colour at the end, suggests that ableist discourse in society creates a kind of corporeal criterion which introduces the norm of normative and perpetuates the ableist ideal at the same time. In this respect, the observation of Shilpaa Anand is worth quoting: "the way societies respond to sightless people is likely to be determined by the ways in which that society composes knowledge about being sightless and goes about being sightless" (262).

Conclusion

To sum up, the experiences of disability that Sleena, as a blind girl, realises in her everyday life robustly present a disability centric 'episteme' that foregrounds disabled women, especially in the sense

that they are not being identified as differently abled in our society. Unlike Sleena, the insignificance of the impaired female body in all domains of life ensures that disabled women are not liberated and are pushed into the margins of society. In spite of the limited possibilities of representing inter-racial romance, this novel, *A Patch of Blue,* becomes successful in positively depicting the love between Sleena and Gordon. Figuratively, this love of a blind girl with an able-bodied man also represents 'disability' without the bracket written as a 'lack' or 'limitation'. At the beginning of the novel, Sleena is portrayed as a non-normative category of other. The intersection of gender and disability appears as a compounded vulnerability in her life. But at the end of the novel, it is again her visual impairment that makes her a tolerant individual, and through love and affection, she successfully overcomes the racial discrimination where the ableist society surrenders itself. In a way, from the 'disabled other', she transforms into an 'abled subject'. Although the end of the novel remains incomplete, Sleena's forgetting of the beads in Gordon's apartment, as mentioned in chapter twenty-nine, suggests that the two lovers will meet again, get a chance to overcome society's obstacles, and might even have a chance for a shared and happy future. So, the principle of love and hope drifts from a blind woman who never let her disability interrupt her way of life. Anita Ghai's book *Rethinking Disability in India* aptly echoes this thought,

> Systems of inequality based on caste, race, ethnicity, and gender seem to rely on dichotomies, such as 'Us' versus 'Them', 'Self' versus 'Other' or 'one' versus 'other', meaning not only difference and opposition but also superiority and inferiority...It is not difficult to pinpoint ideologies that permit us to think of ourselves as 'normal,' good, or worthy, and to think of others we perceive to be not like us in some way — physically, mentally, educationally — as disabled, and therefore not normal, not good, or not worthy. Then, we assign qualities to variable human individuals based on their inclusion in this constructed alterity (299-300).

Hence, the earth is a delightful place to live in, and if any flaw is there, one needs to correct the world with love and hope, as the novel seems to convey to us.

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14.

Echoes of Madness: The Intersection of Literature and Women's Realities

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&

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Abstract: Historically and cross-culturally, women exhibiting profound emotion, challenging societal norms, or opposing confinement have frequently been deemed insane, a trend that has historically undermined their experiences and perpetuated gender norms. In this context, madness is redefined as a form of resistance, a coded language of dissent, or a symbolic expression of repressed pain, rather than as a mental illness. This paper analyses the term hysteria, originating from the Greek word hystera ("uterus") and historically employed to pathologise female distress as a reproductive disorder, which subsequently became a pivotal framework for interpreting women's madness in English literature. This article presents a succinct transcultural genealogy of "female madness" from pre-colonial India to contemporary global literature, situated at the convergence of medical history, literary studies, and feminist theory. It examines the evolution of diagnoses regarding women's perceived deviance, ranging from the doshic unmāda in Ayurvedic texts and spirit possession in folk traditions to the colonial introduction of European hysteria and its enduring presence in both domestic and psychiatric contexts. These diagnoses have served more as instruments for regulating gendered, caste, and racial transgressions than as legitimate medical classifications. The paper illustrates how bhakti poet-saints such as Meerabai and Akka Mahadevi initially redefined madness as ecstatic liberation, foreshadowing subsequent literary subversions. This analysis encompasses American, British/postcolonial British, Indian English, and Odia traditions, illustrating that the "madwoman" archetype consistently functions as a feminist critique of patriarchal, colonial, and caste-based conceptions of sanity. The article differentiates clinical disorders from socially constructed madness while elucidating their historical connections

Keywords: Madness, Identity, Hysteria, Agency, Recognition

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Introduction: Historical, Social and Clinical Perspectives of Madness

The roots of female insanity in India predate colonialism, embedded in old medical texts and folk practices that, while seemingly gender-neutral, were employed in distinctly gendered contexts. The Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita characterise unmāda as a disturbance of the three doshas (vata, pitta, kapha), perhaps triggered by emotional extremes or supernatural influences, without particular gender differentiation (Sharma 2: 289–94). However, the flexibility of this framework led to cultural interpretations that unfairly punished women, which shows how anxious males were about women being free. In folklore, a woman who broke sacred rules, like going to a temple while on her period, getting married again as a widow, or looking for love outside of her caste, was often thought to be possessed by a bhoot-pret (ghost) or chudail (witch-ghost). Her "symptoms" were seen as signs of divine or supernatural punishment. This not only made her seem unwell, but it also let society off the hook by presenting her sorrow as a supernatural problem instead than a reaction to tyranny from outside forces.

Bhakti poetry, which began as a religious movement between the 6th and 17th centuries, interprets lunacy as ecstatic transcendence rather than transgression. Meerabai (1498–1546), a Rajput princess who left her royal marriage to devote herself to Krishna, was labelled mad by her in-laws for acting in a way that was not customary. Her poem turns the allegation on its head by saying that she is crazy because God is crazy: "The world calls me crazy; I call the world crazy—only Giridhar is mine" (Hawley 128). This line analytically underscores a radical critique: societal norms represent the authentic sickness, while her unmāda (devotional excess) functions as a means to escape from patriarchal restraints. Similarly, Akka Mahadevi, a 12th-century Lingayat saint, defied the norms of female modesty by walking around naked as a "sky-clad" follower. Her poetry describes this as madness for Shiva, a conscious decision to accept unmāda that contradicts the regulation of women's bodies and appetites (Ramaswamy 87).

The rise of colonial psychiatry in the late 18th century introduced the European notion of hysteria, originating from the ancient Greek term for a "wandering womb." This idea was subsequently integrated with indigenous frameworks, creating a formidable tool for imperial and patriarchal control. British-established asylums, beginning with Calcutta

in 1787, Madras in 1794, and Bombay in 1799, introduced the uterine theory and posited that hysteria was a neurological illness associated with reproductive failure or sexual deprivation (Ernst 142–45). This diagnosis was designed to play on colonial fears: it was said that European ladies ("memsahibs") suffered from "tropical hysteria" because of the heat, idleness, and cultural dislocation of the subcontinent. This reinforced racial hierarchy by portraying white women as weak victims of the colonial environment. Hysteria became a catch-all term for Indian women, especially upper-caste Hindus and Muslims who were only allowed to leave the zenana (women's quarters), who were against child marriage, purdah (veiling and seclusion), or widowhood conventions. This effectively made indigenous gender roles seem sick while also making them seem like they were following Western medical authority.

This amalgamation is obvious in records from the Ranchi European Lunatic Asylum, where memsahibs were sent for "refusing to return to England with their husbands" while Indian women were sent for "obstinate silence" or self-starvation after their husbands died. People thought these actions were emotional symptoms instead of objections (Ernst 145). James Wise, a civil surgeon in Dhaka, observed in 1880 that Bengali women were "peculiarly liable to hysteria" because they married young and were confined in prison. He said they should marry an older man or stay in an asylum until the "fit" went away (Ernst 145). From an analytical perspective, these practices exemplify hysteria's role as a colonial tool: it medicalised dissent by conflating Ayurvedic doshic imbalance with Western biology to legitimise the regulation of women's bodies under the guise of therapeutic intervention, thereby reinforcing both imperial and patriarchal authority.

The open colonial asylum went away after 1947, but the methods of controlling individuals stayed the same. They transitioned to family and private psychiatry, while hysteria continued to fulfil its social function under new diagnostic classifications. A woman who is unhappy with her sex life, wants a divorce, or is depressed after having a miscarriage is no longer put in a mental institution; instead, she is called pagli (madwoman) in the marital home, kept alone, and given medication by psychiatrists who often rely on family stories. Sarah Pinto's ethnographic research in northern India highlights this continuity, depicting psychiatric wards as “temporary holding cells” for women whose behaviours threaten family izzat, with diagnoses such as hysterical conversion disorder or acute psychotic reaction serving as

modern equivalents to colonial hysteria (Pinto 102). From an analytical perspective, these practices underscore the enduring intersectionality of gender, class, and caste: lower-caste or impoverished women face community stigma and exorcism, while upper-caste women undergo medicalised confinement, both of which perpetuate the belief that female distress is pathological rather than reflective of systemic inequalities such as dowry violence or reproductive coercion.

This shift from public to private management represents postcolonial adaptation: the family evolves as a new sanctuary, merging colonial medical paradigms with indigenous frameworks of respect and kinship. Pinto's observations demonstrate that physicians perceive women's madness as linked to failures in "love," including lost love, misguided love, or excessive attachment, which echoes the uterine origins of hysteria without directly naming it, thus perpetuating the biologization of social issues (Pinto 89–92). In this way, psychiatry after independence keeps the colonial hybrid alive by using diagnostic neutrality to hide gender bias and make sure that women follow patriarchal rules.

The roots of female insanity in India predate colonialism, embedded in old medical texts and folk practices that, while seemingly gender-neutral, were employed in distinctly gendered contexts. The Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita characterise unmāda as a disturbance of the three doshas (vata, pitta, kapha), perhaps triggered by emotional extremes or supernatural influences, without particular gender differentiation (Sharma 2: 289–94). However, the flexibility of this framework led to cultural interpretations that unfairly punished women, which shows how anxious males were about women being free. In folklore, a woman who broke sacred rules, like going to a temple while on her period, getting married again as a widow, or looking for love outside of her caste, was often thought to be possessed by a bhoot-pret (ghost) or chudail (witch-ghost). Her "symptoms" were seen as signs of divine or supernatural punishment. This not only made her seem unwell, but it also let society off the hook by presenting her sorrow as a supernatural problem instead of a reaction to tyranny from outside forces.

Defining Differences: Clinical Madness vs. Social Madness

In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Michel Foucault asserts that socially created lunacy is distinct from mental disease, serving varied functions in different historical settings (Foucault 1965). This study will examine "madness" as a social and cultural construct rather than a clinically diagnosed condition. To comprehend mental health, it is crucial to distinguish between clinical lunacy and social madness, particularly regarding the lives of contemporary women. Clinical madness is when someone has a recognised mental health problem, including depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia, that makes it hard for them to live their everyday life and often needs medical care, therapy, or medication. Social craziness, on the other hand, originates from the constraints and expectations of society that make women feel horrible when they strive to conform to tight gender norms and unattainable standards of achievement. This kind of crazy can make women feel like they aren't good enough, anxious, and hopeless, especially when they try to manage their professional and home life in a society that doesn't value what they do enough.

I think it's vital to talk about the difference between clinical craziness and social madness so that we may better understand mental health, especially how societal pressures affect people. Realising that not obeying societal rules doesn't mean you're crazy helps us embrace new experiences instead of branding them abnormal. We need to set clear limits on how we understand women's experiences. We need to remember that not fitting in with social norms doesn't mean someone is "mad" or "other." By breaking down the idea of normal versus abnormal, we can help different identities and emotional realities come to light, which will help us understand women's lives better and more honestly.

In India, women's mental illness is frequently understood through culturally ingrained tales of spirit possession, curses, or karmic retribution, which not only obscure psychiatric realities but also exacerbate women's feelings of abandonment and shame. For example, in many rural areas, a lady who is having hallucinations or is very depressed may be transported to an exorcist instead of a clinic, which makes people think that her suffering is caused by something otherworldly. But with rapid urbanisation and Westernisation, the way people show their distress has changed. Women in rural areas often have psychosomatic symptoms like headaches, body pain, and paralysis. Women in cities, on the other hand, are more likely to have anxiety, panic attacks, and clinical depression. This is because they are more

aware of their symptoms and because modern, gender-stratified environments put more psychological pressure on them. Scholars such as Sarah Pinto observe that psychiatric wards in India frequently transform into intimate, ambiguous environments where women contend with the emotional instability engendered by love, marriage, and dependency. For instance, women admitted for "hysteria" or suicide attempts often articulate experiences of neglect, domestic violence, or unmet romantic aspirations, thereby illustrating how the perceived madness reflects societal shortcomings in affording women agency. This Indian experience echoes colonial and literary histories, where English accounts of female hysteria converge with local realities. The character of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, a Creole woman imprisoned and labelled as "mad" for transgressing imperial standards of femininity, exemplifies the racialization and moralization of lunacy. These notions were disseminated to British India, where European women who opposed domestic roles, consumed alcohol, or pursued autonomy were classified as hysterical and confined in colonial asylums. Colonial psychiatry created a mixed diagnostic culture by combining Western medical terms with native ways of expressing pain. This led to a framework that was based on race and gender and still affects how mental illness in women is seen and treated in modern India.

Unravelling the Misconceptions of Emotional Pain

My Story by Kamala Das explains how being rejected by family and culture may hurt your mental health. Das (1973) says, "I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with." This shows how feeling worthless may make you mentally unstable. Patriarchal norms make working-class women feel like they are a burden even more. Being alone might make you "mad," which is a weak mental state. To get better, it's crucial to encourage acceptance and give people access to mental health services. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* is a retelling of the narrative of Draupadi from the Mahabharata. It looks at family ties and mental health issues: "Parents want their daughter to be happy and marry the right man." But not every daughter marries a good man. And even if that happens, there's no way to know for sure that she'll be pleased. Why did I tell them I was upset if my parents couldn't do anything about it? (Ray 1991). The phrase makes it obvious how hard it is for many women to meet society's and their families' expectations about marriage and happiness. These stresses might make women feel like they are all alone and not stable emotionally. It also highlights how

wrong it is to presume that a woman's worth is exclusively based on her spouse and her marital status, and not on her own objectives and pleasure. It is necessary to question these old assumptions and allow women the power to choose their own definitions of happiness. They should know that true happiness comes from being independent and loving themselves instead of attempting to fit in with what society believes is right.

When you think about what women go through now, it's clear that the problems shown in books are still very real. Many women have to deal with the constant pressures of work and family, and they often feel the pressure of cultural expectations that tell them what to do. This can make them feel very alone because they have to deal with their emotions without enough assistance. The pressure to act like you're happy and competent can make you feel even worse about yourself, and it can make many people not want to talk about their real problems. The stigma around mental health makes their situation worse because it makes it hard for them to get help or talk about their problems.

Discussion

At one time, doctors believed that a woman's womb could move around her body like a restless animal, strangling reason wherever it found it. For more than two thousand years, female dissent, desire, sorrow, intellect, and anger were amalgamated into a singular diagnosis: the uterus was deemed to be insane. This etymological scar still pulses beneath every subsequent label—“melancholia,” “neurasthenia,” “schizophrenia,” “borderline”—reminding us that when a woman refuses the allotted script, the first reflex of power is to relocate the disturbance inside her reproductive organs, then inside her brain chemistry, anywhere but in the social order that produced the wound. Modern English-language literatures—American, British, Indian, and Odia—take this heritage and make it bigger. The crazy woman is no longer a wandering womb; she is the return of everything that patriarchy tried to bury alive. In American fiction, the bell jar takes the role of the wandering uterus, but the way it works is the same. Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* feels the air turn to glass as soon as she realizes that every treasure of girlhood was a trap: "I felt very still and very empty, like the eye of a tornado must feel" (Plath 3). The suffocation is classified as depression, but it is quite social because it happens right after she declines to get married and have children. Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's narrator in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" makes the old hysterical script literal: she's locked up for "nervous condition" and can't write, so she watches the woman in the wallpaper shake the pattern until the bars shatter. When she ultimately crawls over her husband's body, saying, "I've got out at last" (Gilman 36), her victory is seen as a sign of her final psychotic breakdown. She has done the original hysterectomy of the mind by tearing down the boundaries of patriarchal expectation and claiming the chamber as her own. British and postcolonial British fiction transposes hysteria into a colonial framework. Antoinette Cosway, the Creole heiress in Jean Rhys's *The Wide Sargasso Sea,* feels like her happiness is wrong because colonial law and English marriage have taught her that joy given to a woman of color may always be taken away. "I am not used to happiness," she says, "it makes me afraid" (Rhys 92). Rochester's choice to call her Bertha and keep her in the attic does not protect her from lunacy; it is the oldest treatment for hysteria: keep the mother still by keeping the womb still. Virginia Woolf, who lived in the middle of the empire, knows just how it works. Septimus Warren Smith might jump out of the window, but Clarissa Dalloway feels the same bell jar come down anytime she thinks that real feelings will be seen as disease by people like Sir William Bradshaw. In Indian English and vernacular traditions, the roaming uterus is substituted by the roaming widow, the menstrual outcast, and the lady who loves across caste boundaries. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi Mejhen is gang-raped by the Indian state's paramilitary, but when they tell her to cover her naked, wounded body, she says, "What more can you do to me? " (Devi 40). The officers label her crazy, but Devi says that the real hysteria comes from a country that uses colonial aggression in the name of law and order. Arundhati Roy's Ammu is officially declared crazy by her Syrian Christian family because she loves Velutha, a Paravan. Her nightly visits to the river aren't nymphomania; they're the only place where the wandering womb of caste-patriarchy can't follow. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* gives Draupadi a voice again from the hush of the Mahabharata. The original hysterical moment was when a woman took off her clothes in the Kaurava court. Her body was the stage for masculine honour, and her anger was seen as feminine hysteria. Ray's Draupadi will not forgive since she will not accept the diagnosis. Odia literature also talks about the awful things that happen in little towns and villages. Sarojini Sahu's Gambhiri Ghara (The Dark Abode) is about a young widow named Kuni who is put in a mental hospital when she refuses to live a life of austerity and sexual death like a sati. The asylum is like the old suttee pyre, where society burns the lady who won't burn herself. Kuni's so-called lunacy is her clear demand for sexual and

financial freedom in a feudal system that doesn't give widows either. The roaming uterus has been replaced by the wandering widow's libido, and the prescription stays the same: medications, stillness, and confinement. In all four of these literary worlds, American, British, Indian, and Odia, the madwoman does the same archaeological work. She finds the old diagnosis of hysteria and throws it back at the civilisation that came up with it. Her laughing, being naked, and not saying the right things about guilt or appreciation are not signs of a sick womb or brain. They are the sound of the oldest medical falsehood coming apart. The word's history shows that the craziness was never in her body. The world needed her body to be the problem.

Independent Women Balancing Work and Home

Women who work and take care of their homes frequently have very difficult lives that might make them feel like they're going crazy. This delicate balancing act—juggling the never-ending demands of work with the many responsibilities of family life—creates a pressure cooker setting where emotional instability is common. Plath's portrayal of psychological distress as a substantial burden reflects the current realities faced by women managing the compounded pressures of unemployment, health challenges, and domestic responsibilities during and after the epidemic. "I was supposed to be having the time of my life, but it felt like a great weight was pulling me down" (Plath 1971). This shows how a modern working-class woman feels when her problems are hidden by her outward surroundings. This stunning juxtaposition highlights the expectations imposed on individuals, particularly women, to project an appearance of prosperity and joy, even when they are enduring significant emotional distress. The word "supposed to be" shows how society expects things to be, which makes it clear that the main character's happiness is based on what other people think rather than how she really feels. On the other hand, the metaphor of a "great weight" says that she has an overwhelming amount of anxiety, melancholy, or disillusionment that doesn't match her outside circumstances. This comment really speaks to the experiences of many current working-class women who feel the same way. People often feel alone and misunderstood when their lives don't match up with the concept that success means always being happy. This gap shows how important it is to recognise the emotional problems that are hidden behind the surface. We can have a more caring conversation about mental health by acknowledging and supporting these experiences. This

will encourage women to speak their minds without fear of being judged. This phrase is a powerful reminder that true strength comes from being yourself and that facing your problems is an important step toward taking control of your life in a society full of impossible standards.

These fictional accounts are similar to real-life examples of women like computer executives who break glass ceilings but then have to deal with family issues when they get home, or teachers who work long hours but then have to deal with more duties at home. Many people tell their tales to help others understand these problems and push for more flexible work hours, more awareness of mental health issues, and a fairer allocation of household chores. Women's networks and mentorship programs are becoming important places for women to get support and feel like they belong, giving them the power to take back their stories. Independent women are redefining success as they deal with these demands. Instead of trying to fit in with old ideas, they are focusing on their health and being real. Their experiences underscore the critical necessity for systemic transformation, demonstrating that genuine empowerment requires not only individual resilience but also a supportive framework that recognises and solves their specific obstacles.

The Complicated Nature of Female Relationships

The theme of women torturing women, characterised by rivalry and conflict, is a multifaceted and ubiquitous issue that profoundly resonates in both literature and reality, frequently manifesting in home and professional contexts. In literature, female protagonists often deal with relationships that are full of jealously, betrayal, and manipulation. This shows how hard it is for women to get power and respect in a society that is run by men. In real life, these kinds of interactions commonly happen in families, where comparisons and favouritism can cause problems between sisters or between moms and daughters. One sister could feel jealous of the other sister's success, which can lead to resentment and passive-aggressive conduct. Mothers might unintentionally create competition by setting unreasonable goals for their daughters. In the workplace, these tensions might get worse since women may work in places where individual success is more important than working together. Women can be nasty to one another in homes, at work, and in social groups. For instance, moms and daughters

frequently engage in conflict due to cultural pressures that induce feelings of inadequacy and resentment. Popular culture also shows these delicate connections, as stories often depict how women of different generations deal with societal constraints.

In the workplace, "queen bee syndrome" shows how women in leadership roles may hurt their female coworkers, creating a culture of competition instead of cooperation. Notable instances in media and entertainment illustrate this dynamic, showcasing rivalries among female celebrities that reflect wider societal forces. In the end, whether in books or real life, the pain women cause each other generally comes from deep-seated social conventions, personal fears, and the challenges of living in a world that often pits women against each other.

The Effects of Women Outearning Men on Tradition

When women make more money than men, it can make things even more complicated. This is because social norms are having a hard time keeping up with these changes, which can make women feel bad or guilty. "We want to try to get as many men and boys as possible to stand up for change" (Watson 2014). This shows how important male supporters are in the fight for gender equality and social justice. This remark makes it clear that men and boys must also be involved in solving systemic problems related to gender inequality. The movement wants to change traditional ideas about masculinity and make everyone responsible for fighting and breaking down negative stereotypes and practices by getting people to speak up. This call to action is vital for influencing how people think about gender roles in today's world. It says that genuine change happens when everyone, no matter what gender they are, knows what they can do to help battle inequality. Getting men and boys to be advocates for gender equality not only helps more people support it, but it also makes the world a better place for everyone. This group effort can help us all understand each other's experiences better and, in the end, make respect and equality the norm in society instead of the exception. People typically don't expect these shifts to happen as more women become leaders and attain financial independence. This can cause problems in both their personal and professional lives. Women may feel bad about themselves or guilty because they think their achievement threatens their male partners or go against traditional gender roles. These feelings aren't just personal problems; they reveal that society doesn't like things that change. Society needs to adjust how it

thinks about women's success in business and money to solve these problems. Michelle Obama remarked, "There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish" (Obama 2020); therefore, it's crucial to make a space that honours these successes without putting them down. This continuing discussion about gender roles and success might help people let go of old assumptions that make them feel bad about themselves and guilty. By building institutions that support and reward what women do, society may progress towards a fair view of success that helps everyone. It's not simply a personal problem; it's a group problem that has to be recognised and understood. Contemporary literature illustrates the challenges women encounter in various professions and advocates for a more equitable and supportive society. The stories about women who live alone reveal how hard their lives are and how much they need reforms that will help them do well at work and at home.

Conclusion

Normalising madness is vital for dismantling the layers of silence, shame, and misunderstanding that have accumulated around women's mental health for generations. When female authors bring to life the intimate textures of psychological turmoil—the trembling anxieties, the suffocating expectations, the quiet rebellions simmering beneath polished exteriors—they invite readers to confront the emotional landscapes that women are often compelled to hide. These narratives do more than recount suffering; they expose the rigid boundaries of "normalcy" as constructs shaped by patriarchal pressures, cultural expectations, and historical misunderstandings of female emotion. By revealing how easily a woman's grief, anger, or dissent can be misread as pathology, such literature compels us to acknowledge that madness often reflects the emotional consequences of living within a system that restricts female agency. My intention in this paper has been to show that these literary portrayals do not merely echo personal distress; they operate as powerful cultural critiques, urging us to rethink how society interprets and responds to women's psychological experiences.

To sum up, this article contends that contemporary labels such as depression, burnout, and borderline personality in professional Indian women represent modern manifestations of the ancient "wandering womb." Ultimately, it portrays the literary madwoman not as a pathological figure but as a critical excavator of power who unveils the structures that have harmed women over two millennia. It is important

to note that accepting madness as a natural, even illuminating, part of human life strengthens both individual resilience and the collective capacity for empathy. When we recognise that madness may arise from years of emotional suppression, domestic confinement, or the relentless demand to conform, we begin to see it not as a private failure but as a deeply meaningful response to environments of constraint. Like a river that finally breaks its banks after long being held back, women's "madness" in these texts often reveals truths that society refuses to confront. Alan Watts's reminder-"The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance"- captures the transformative potential of embracing this complexity. By normalising madness and acknowledging its role in shaping women's inner worlds, we move toward a future where every woman's emotional reality is treated with dignity, her struggles are validated, and her journey becomes part of a larger, shared human narrative.

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15.

Gendered Violence under Biopolitics in *White Torture*: A Critical Reflection on Human Rights Violations in Iran's Prisons

Uttam Poudel

Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of gendered violence, biopolitics, and human rights violations against women prisoners in Iran, as documented in Narges Mohammadi's *White Torture*. The study argues that the Iranian state uses gender-targeted psychological torture as a tool of political repression, exerting control over both the bodies and agency of women detainees. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of "biopolitics" and Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life," the paper examines how state power erases women's identities and silences their voices within the prison system. Besides, human rights frameworks are used to demonstrate how these acts of violence represent severe human rights violations, especially toward women, by employing isolation and psychological abuse as tools of dehumanisation. This reflection on *White Torture* makes a significant contribution by drawing the attention of international human rights agencies to these abuses, emphasising the urgent need to advocate for the protection and dignity of women political prisoners.

Keywords: Gendered violence, biopolitics, human rights, Iranian prisons, political repression

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Introduction

White Torture: Interviews with Iranian Women Prisoners by Narges Mohammadi is a heartbreaking account of the suffering endured by women imprisoned for their political beliefs in Iran. Under the control of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, these women are subjected to systematic psychological torture and extreme isolation in solitary confinement. This work unfolds the dark reality of Iran's prison system, where women's basic human rights are suspended, and they are reduced to tools of political oppression. The book not only documents these abuses but also urges the global community to acknowledge and act against these injustices. This book highlights the deeply-rooted gender discrimination in Iranian laws and societal practices that systematically undermine women's autonomy and agency. Women face restrictions on freedom of expression, religion, education, and employment. In prison, these restrictions become even harsher, with women subjected to psychological abuse, isolation, and humiliation. These tactics simply break their spirit, silence them, and leave them vulnerable, hopeless and hapless.

Applying Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," this paper examines how Iran's prison system reduces women prisoners of conscience to a state of existence where their rights and dignity are completely denied. It sheds light on how gendered violence is used as a tool of political repression, turning these women into what Agamben terms "homo sacer"—life that can be controlled, abused, and violated without consequence. Through the perspective of human rights, this study emphasises the urgent need for international advocacy to end the dehumanisation of women prisoners of conscience and to restore their dignity and rights in Iran.

Gendered Violence in Iran

Numerous scholars, critics, and researchers have examined the inhumane and brutal prison system in Iran, highlighting various forms of human rights violations. These violations include physical abuse and psychological torture, often targeting political prisoners and critics of the state. In *A Study of Gender Apartheid: Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Safaeimojarad Golazin examines the systematic discrimination against women, known as gender apartheid. She focuses on how this practice, prevalent in Afghanistan and Iran, subjugates women and

denies them basic rights through deeply-rooted institutional structures. She argues that "gender apartheid is not only a direct product of governmental laws but is deeply intertwined with cultural and religious norms that perpetuate women's inferior status" (2). She further notes that "these cultural norms and values, often articulated through a strict interpretation of religious edicts, dictate traditional gender roles and expectations, exacerbating women's subordinate status" (5). Her analysis makes clear that dismantling gender apartheid requires more than revising discriminatory laws. It also demands confronting the cultural and religious beliefs that legitimise women's subordination and allow legal inequality to persist. By linking ideology with state policy, she shows how these mutually reinforcing systems create a durable structure of gendered oppression that cannot be undone through legal reform alone.

The 2013 Human Rights Report on Iran sheds light on the extensive human rights violations occurring within Iranian prisons, particularly focusing on the use of torture. It describes the common methods of abuse that include prolonged solitary confinement, rape, sexual humiliation, threats of execution, sleep deprivation, and repeated beatings. The report highlights overcrowded prisons and the frequent denial of medical care, increasing detainees' hardship and suffering. These reports reveal the harsh conditions prisoners face and bring systemic abuse in the country's penal system to the fore. The same report refers to "white torture," a method of psychological abuse used in prisons in which physical violence is not the primary tool; instead, sustained mental suffering is employed to break a person's sense of self. According to the report:

> Some prison facilities, including Evin Prison in Tehran, were notorious for cruel and prolonged torture of political opponents of the government. Authorities also allegedly maintained unofficial secret prisons and detention centers outside the national prison system where abuse reportedly occurred. The government reportedly used "white torture," a type of psychological torture that includes extreme sensory deprivation and isolation, especially on political prisoners and often in detention centers outside the control of prison authorities, including Ward 209 of Evin Prison, which news organizations and human rights groups reported was under the control of the country's intelligence services. (U.S. Department of State 6-7)

The report emphasises psychological violence as a major tool of abuse. "White torture" involves sensory deprivation, solitary confinement, and extreme isolation, all of which severely affect the mental health of prisoners. This form of violence can lead to long-lasting trauma, as it deprives individuals of their basic human rights, such as the right to social interaction, information, and basic sensory experiences. Such violations undermine the dignity of individuals and the integrity of the body and mind.

Ahmad Mohammadpour, in "Decolonizing Voices from Rojhelat: Gender-Othering, Ethnic Erasure, and the Politics of Intersectionality in Iran," discusses how women, especially from ethnic minorities like the Kurds experience specific forms of gendered violence. This violence is often tied to both patriarchal structures and the broader political repression in Iran. Women face not only physical abuse but also psychological violence that is often intensified by their ethnic identity. The article also brings in the idea that the Iranian state seeks to erase Kurdish culture and identity in favour of a more homogeneous national identity. This cultural violence marginalises the Kurdish language, traditions, and history, making it difficult for individuals to assert their ethnic identity without facing repression. As the critic argues, "for marginalised and minoritised ethnic-nations in Iran, gender oppression always intersects with ethnoreligious and linguistic forms of suppression" (16). From an intersectional perspective, Kurdish women face double marginalisation due to their gender and ethnicity. This lens shows how gendered violence in the region is both personal and political, worsened by national policies oppressing women and ethnic minorities. The article emphasises the dark side of gendered violence in Iran.

According to a 2021 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), the authorities regularly prosecute women for so-called "morality crimes" (21), including the failure to adhere to Islamic dress codes in Iran. HRW further highlights the prosecution of women's rights activists such as Yasaman Ariayi, Saba Kordafshari, and Farhad Meysami, who have been penalised for peacefully protesting against Iran's compulsory hijab laws. Moreover, the Iranian legal system offers no protection for women against spousal rape or domestic violence. Consensual sex outside of marriage is criminalised, with punishments like flogging. This makes female rape victims at risk of prosecution if they report their assault, particularly if authorities doubt their testimony. Consequently, many

women are arrested each year for engaging in consensual sex or for being victims of rape.

In "Women as Human Rights Defenders at Risk - A Present Case Example," Siroos Mirzaei, Jan Kizilhan, Reem Alksiri, and Thomas Wenzel note on the plight and predicament of women human rights defenders (HRDs) in Iran, particularly those imprisoned for their beliefs and activism as prisoners of conscience. These women activists advocating for gender equality, freedom of expression, or political reform face severe repression in Iran's prison system. The critics, here, refer to Narges Mohammadi and the severe repression she has endured under the Iranian regime for her advocacy of human rights and women's freedom. They foreground how she receives white torture from the regime "in which prisoners are systematically held in solitary confinement for an unknown period of time without even access to a lawyer, under harsh conditions such as being exposed to light or noise all the time, etc." (2). This type of "white torture" silences and isolates female prisoners, denying them basic legal and psychological support, which deepens their suffering and exposes systemic gender inequality in punitive systems.

The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) report, released on September 13, 2024, examines the situation in Iran, particularly during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement and the September 2022 protests. The report also shows a rise in state-sponsored gendered violence, specifically the use of excessive force by Iranian security forces against women and girls. These individuals are often targeted for not following mandatory hijab laws, using physical violence as a means of control. These women are subjected to violence such as beatings and slapping. The Iranian government has also implemented heightened surveillance measures to monitor hijab code, utilising technologies such as drones and surveillance cameras both in public spaces and private settings. The report highlights the government's increased repression through legislative measures like the "Hijab and Chastity" Bill, which would impose harsher penalties on women who defy hijab laws, including fines, longer prison sentences, travel bans, and limited access to education and employment.

The findings of the report reveal a systematic pattern of state-sponsored violence and surveillance targeting women, showing how

technology is increasingly used to control their behaviour and suppress dissent. Scholarly analyses further demonstrate how legal, cultural, and political structures intersect to sustain gendered oppression in Iran. From psychological abuse in prisons, including "white torture," to the state's enforcement of morality laws, women's bodies and freedoms remain tightly restricted. The evidence underscores an urgent need for stronger human rights protections to safeguard women from both direct abuse and broader structural oppression.

Reflections on Biopolitics: Power, Identity and the Body

Michel Foucault advances the concept of "biopolitics" in his book *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. He explains that modern power not only punishes people but also shapes their lives by controlling bodies, identities, and everyday behaviour. Foucault introduces the ideas of "biopolitics" and "biopower" to show how power decides who is heard, who suffers, and who is disappeared. This view is very different from earlier ideas that treated politics as something separate from life. For Foucault, biopolitics helps us understand how governments and institutions try to manage life itself through health systems, population control, and different forms of monitoring.

Foucault's concept of biopolitics highlights the systematic governance of life. Beginning in the seventeenth century, this form of power developed into two interconnected modes that "constituted rather two poles of development linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations" (139). The first pole "centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities…all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterised the disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body" (139). The second pole "focused on the species body…Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population" (139). Together, these poles show how biopolitics shapes individual behaviour and manages populations through subtle, pervasive mechanisms.

Foucault's framework of biopolitics provides a critical lens to understand the systematic control and subjugation described in Narges Mohammadi's *White Torture*. The Iranian prison system, as Mohammadi documents, exerts power not only through overt physical punishment but through psychological techniques: solitary confinement, sensory

deprivation, and prolonged isolation that resemble the "subtle, pervasive mechanisms" Foucault associates with biopolitical control (139). These strategies regulate the bodies and minds of female prisoners, denying them basic human rights such as social interaction, legal representation, and psychological support. By shaping behaviour, enforcing conformity, and silencing dissent, the prison system demonstrates the two aspects of biopolitics: disciplining individual bodies and controlling populations. Mohammadi's accounts show the human cost of this control, revealing women's suffering and how these mechanisms maintain oppression, fear, and social marginalisation.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life extends Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics by showing how political systems can strip individuals of rights and recognition, reducing them to mere biological existence. Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, develops a compelling theory connecting politics and life, emphasising the "hidden point of intersection between the Juridico-institutional and biopolitical models of power" (6). He begins by distinguishing between two forms of life in classical Greek thought: *zoe*, the natural life shared by all living beings, and bios, the qualified life associated with individuals who hold value and status in the political sphere. In ancient Greece, *zoe* was excluded from the political realm (*polis*), while bios was privileged.

However, in modern times, Agamben argues, this distinction has shifted as *zoe* becomes entangled with state power, where "natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power" (3). Despite its inclusion, *zoe* remains subordinated under sovereign control. Its inclusion is paradoxical, functioning through what Agamben calls "inclusive exclusion." This means that *zoe* is acknowledged within the political sphere only to stress her subjugation and inferiority. The sovereign, who holds ultimate authority, decides the fate of natural life, which is both essential for politics and excluded from full political participation. This dynamic renders human lives expendable, highlighting how *zoe* is incorporated into the political structure while being denied autonomy and agency.

Agamben asserts that this "inclusive exclusion of zoe in the polis" (7) is central to modern biopolitics, where life itself becomes the focus of political control. This interplay between inclusion and exclusion reveals the mechanisms of power that define modern political life, as

sovereign power depends on subordinating natural life to sustain its authority and relevance. Agamben's ideas on biopolitics show how power affects people's bodies in modern society. The state controls areas such as health, reproduction, and freedom, shaping people's identities and experiences. This control highlights the struggles individuals face as they face societal expectations and fight for their rights. Understanding biopolitics reveals the need to challenge these power structures to create a fairer society where everyone can shape their own identity.

Agamben's concept of "bare life" builds on Foucault's idea of biopolitics by showing how political systems can strip people of rights and recognition, reducing them to mere biological existence. In *White Torture*, Mohammadi shows how Iranian women prisoners face prolonged isolation, sensory deprivation, and psychological abuse, effectively being treated as "bare life". Denied legal protection, social interaction, and basic dignity, these women live under conditions where the state controls their very existence, showing how both sovereign and disciplinary power work to make certain lives vulnerable and marginalised.

Biopolitics and Gendered Violence in *White Torture*

Narges Mohammadi's *White Torture* is a harrowing account of the systemic abuse and dehumanisation faced by female political prisoners in Iran's prisons. Through personal interviews and firsthand accounts, Mohammadi exposes the brutal mechanisms of control used by the Iranian regime to suppress dissent, particularly against women who challenge its authority. As an advocate for human rights and a prominent voice against the death penalty, Mohammadi critiques the violent, patriarchal structures upheld by extremist Islamist ideologies. Her narrative reveals a stark contrast between the regime's oppressive moral codes and a counterculture supporting liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness.

This analysis explores *White Torture* through the dual lens of biopolitics and gendered violence, arguing that the regime's control over prisoners exemplifies biopolitical power, where bodies and lives are manipulated for political dominance. It also shows that gendered violence is key to this control, strengthening patriarchal hierarchies and silencing women's resistance. Mohammadi's work, thus, becomes a

crucial text for understanding the intersections of state power, gender and human rights violations in contemporary Iran.

White Torture is a compilation of "interviews conducted by Narges Mohammadi with women who were (and are) incarcerated for holding religious, ethical, and political beliefs that do not conform to the repressive conditions of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (*White Torture* xxxvi). These testimonies expose the biopolitical mechanisms of the Iranian regime, where the state exerts control over the lives and bodies of female prisoners, regulating their beliefs, actions, and even their identities to maintain political power. The book explains white torture thus:

> White torture deprives prisoners of all sensory stimulation over long periods, and this is applied to prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, alongside the techniques of solitary confinement and interrogation. The state often incarcerates people outside the formal judiciary system, meaning that they are in prison without trial, and the victim therefore is aware that there is no impartial court to which they can appeal. Incarceration without trial is used as weapon of torture and operation….. White torture is inflicted through the architecture of prison, the conduct of the staff and the interrogators' questions. (6)

White torture involves isolating prisoners and depriving them of all sensory input for extended periods. It is commonly used on political prisoners and those detained for their beliefs, often alongside solitary confinement and interrogation. The state also detains people without trial, leaving them with no legal recourse or hope for a fair hearing. The methods of white torture are reinforced by the prison's design, the behaviour of prison staff, and the nature of the interrogators' questioning, all contributing to the psychological and emotional torment of the prisoners of conscience.

The writer recounts her arrest, during which she was charged with "propaganda against the regime" (30). She describes the experience of being blindfolded and transported through various locations before ultimately being confined "to a small solitary cell" (16). This narrative highlights the oppressive tactics used by the authorities to break the spirit of detainees, using psychological and physical methods like sensory deprivation and isolation to maintain control.

Nigara Afsharzadeh, a citizen of Turkmenistan, recounts her harrowing interrogation experience after being accused of espionage by the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence. She describes being taken to an interrogation cell in Tehran thus:

> The first day that they took me to the interrogation cell in Teheran there were two interrogators: one young and one relatively middle-aged. They said that this was the end. 'Think that this is the grave? 'They said, 'You are dead, and we are Munkar and Nakir'[i]….. I was worried about my children. I was told that they had been left in the middle of the street and had to be taken to an orphanage. Distressed, I did not know what to do. I did not touch the food. They would get angry and say, 'Are you on strike?' (55-56)

This account unpacks the psychological and emotional manipulation used during interrogations, emphasising the role of fear, isolation, and the threat to loved ones as tools of coercion in oppressive regimes.

Hengameh Shahidi, another prisoner of conscience, was sentenced to six years in prison for charges including "gathering and colluding with intent to harm state security" and "insulting the head of the state" (136). She describes her traumatic experiences in solitary confinement and during interrogation. In the cell, "They didn't pay slightest attention to my physical condition. I had had heart disease before the arrest and because of the beatings I suffered anxiety attacks. When they took me to the ward's medical clinic, they kept me in bed for about four or five hours, I was in an awful physical condition" (138). Her account brings in the brutal methods used to break down political prisoners. The combination of isolation, the pressure of false accusations, and harsh interrogation tactics reveal the extensive use of biopolitical control in oppressive regimes, where the state seeks to dominate both the body and mind of its detainees.

Shahidi vividly recounts the brutalities inflicted by interrogators, detailing their methods of psychological and physical torment. She describes instances of sexual harassment directed at both herself and her cellmate, highlighting the deeply humiliating and traumatic nature of these encounters: "… a person called 'doctor' would also join the interrogations. He tried to act as if he had fallen in love with me… He sexually harassed her multiple times—asking her how much her breasts

cost and putting 5,000 toman notes on them" (142). Shahidi's account of sexual harassment in Iranian prisons illustrates how biopolitical power controls women's bodies. The interrogators manipulated and abused prisoners, exerting authority over their actions, identities, and dignity. This testimony shows how gendered violence in prisons is not merely incidental but central to the mechanisms of state control.

Andre Duarte, in "Biopolitics and the Dissemination of Violence: The Arendtian Critique of the Present," argues that "states have enacted repressive policies against immigrants and refugees, political movements that organize the unemployed, non-conformists of all sorts, displaced and homeless people, among many other undesirable social groups" (2). This perspective supports the concept of white torture discussed in *White Torture* by Narges Mohammadi. In the context of biopolitics, both Duarte and Mohammadi highlight how marginalized groups, whether refugees, political dissidents, or women prisoners, are subjected to state violence and control.

Similar to how women prisoners in Iranian cells experience repressive power structures, non-conformists in society such as political dissidents, refugees, and marginalized groups are often subjected to state control, imprisonment, and torture to maintain authority. These tactics are not just about punishing individuals but are also about silencing opposition and exerting power over those who challenge the state's norms. Just as authorities use psychological and physical violence to break the spirit of political prisoners, such practices form part of a broader biopolitical strategy to control and eliminate any potential threats to state power.

Shahidi, a prisoner of conscience, recounts the horrors of solitary confinement for herself and her fellow prisoner, describing it as "a place of torture… beatings, obscenities, and hunger strikes… the lights… deprived me of sleep… I endured vulgar words and sexual insults" and recalling how she was "completely disturbed when I heard the cries and lamentations of ISIS in nearby cells" (154–155). Shahidi's account of solitary confinement exemplifies Agamben's idea of "bare life", where prisoners are reduced to mere survival, deprived of rights and recognition. The constant lights, sleep deprivation, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and hunger strikes show the state's biopolitical control, as Foucauldian theory explains, regulating bodies through discipline and psychological pressure. The fear, distress, and cries from nearby cells

reveal how power dominates life itself, turning prisoners into objects of control while erasing their social and political agency.

Another prisoner of conscience, Sedigheh Moradi, arrested for joining anti-regime groups, recounts the physical and psychological torture she endured in solitary confinement: she was "pulled by arms and legs and tied… the cables hit the soles of my feet… I fainted and they poured water on me… I could not stand, but they forced me" and heard "the voices of elderly mothers… questioned about their children's hiding places" (186). Moradi's narrative reveals how biopolitical power targets individuals as bodies to be controlled, using physical and psychological harm to suppress dissent. Women experience gendered suffering, such as manipulation through their roles as mothers, highlighting the intersection of state control, patriarchy, and dehumanising practices in authoritarian regimes.

Nicholas Chare, in "The Gap in Context: Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*," explains Agamben's concept of "homo sacer" or "bare life" as "a liminal state occurring between *bios* and *zoe*, between life styled by law and natural life, between language and non-language," with "the most extreme example of bare life in the camps… embodied by the *Muselmann*" (45). The *Muselmann* were prisoners in Nazi concentration camps who were physically and mentally reduced to extreme weakness and exhaustion. They were alive but deprived of social, legal, and moral recognition. They could not act, speak, or assert themselves, existing only to survive. Chare explains that bare life is not just biological existence but a state between social life, shaped by laws and society, and natural life. The *Muselmann* exemplifies this condition, as their humanity was systematically destroyed while they remained under total control of the camp system.

In *White Torture*, a similar form of bare life emerges through the mechanisms of biopolitical control. Women prisoners of conscience in Iran are subjected to physical and psychological violence, including solitary confinement, interrogation, and surveillance, which reduce them to bodies under the state's control. The state enforces strict gender norms and legal restrictions that exclude these women from full social and political participation. Like the *Muselmann* in Nazi camps, their humanity is constrained, their agency limited, and their existence is marked by vulnerability and survival under constant domination.

Conclusion

In *White Torture: Interviews with Iranian Women Prisoners*, Narges Mohammadi exposes how gendered violence functions as a tool of biopolitical control in Iranian prisons, reducing women prisoners of conscience to a state of extreme vulnerability similar to Agamben's concept of "bare life". The Iranian state employs psychological and physical torture to dominate women's bodies, silence their voices, and erase their agency, demonstrating a systematic form of political repression. This intersection of gendered violence, biopolitics, and human rights violations shows the extreme oppression faced by women prisoners and emphasizes the urgent need for global attention and action. By revealing the lived experiences of these women, *White Torture* not only documents human rights abuses but also amplifies the call for justice, equality, and the protection of women's dignity under authoritarian regimes.

Notes:

i. [1] Munkar and Nakir are two angels who question the deceased on their faith in Islam.

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16.

Kaivarta Women and the Mythological Contours of Waterscape: Reading Homen Borgohain's *Matsyagandha* as a Critique of Intersectional Feminism

***William Sajid Sultan**

&

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Abstract: This article examines Homen Borgohain's *Matsyagandha* (1987; trans. 2023) as a reimagining of the *Mahabharata* myth of Satyavati through the lens of caste, gender, and subaltern resistance. By situating the Kaivarta community within the symbolic and material waterscape of the Mohghuli River, the study explores how Borgohain transforms myth into a vehicle for articulating indigenous feminist consciousness. The novel's female protagonists—Menaka, Kamala, and Memeri—embody a dynamic continuum between disempowerment and agency, reconfiguring their marginality into a space of self-assertion. Through parallels with Satyavati's mythic trajectory, Borgohain's narrative highlights the enduring conflict between purity and pollution, power and exclusion, revealing how feminine desire and survival become strategies of transgression within a caste-stratified society. Engaging with Nivedita Menon's critique of intersectionality, the article argues that Borgohain's text resists the imposition of Western feminist frameworks by foregrounding an indigenous intersectional reality historically embedded in India's social fabric. Drawing on oral narrative traditions and cyclical storytelling, *Matsyagandha* emerges as both a mythopoetic and political text, where the waterscape mediates between myth and modernity to sustain a uniquely Indian form of feminist energy that challenges hierarchies of caste, patriarchy, and class.

Keywords: Waterscape, Mythopoeia, Intersectionality, Female Sexuality, Mythopoeic consciousness.

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"O' bloody Soneswar, bloody Kolimon, while you sleep under the *mekhelas* of your wives, some sons of bitches have called you *Dom* on your doorstep. Can't you hear? If you are men, get up and go" ("Prelude", *Fisherman's Daughter*)[1].

The Assamese novel, *Matsyagandha* (1987) was published when the Mandal Commission report, 1980, was three years away from being implemented. While the commission's report would invite legislation on Other Backward Classes, the minority question, through the dual lens of caste and class, had gained a contentious visibility in India's socio-cultural milieu. Borgohain's narrative addresses the question through the Kaivarta-Ahom conflict, dating back to the 18th century '*Moamoriya rebellion*'[2] in which the Kaivartas fought against the *Ahom* community. Borgohain narrates that one of Digambar's ancestors was a part of the rebellion, who had "alone killed six scores of '*Ahom*' soldiers" (Borgohain 37). The pain and anger of Menaka, the protagonist, on hearing the word *Dom*, reflected in the extract above, suggests that the word bears a certain derogatory nature for her. The word *Dom* is associated with humiliation, insult and injustice for her. When one of the two wayfarers addresses the people of this community as low-caste, "dirty and uncultured", she expresses her anger at them using a diatribe. She becomes rebellious, unwilling to accept the low-caste status imposed on her community by the social hierarchy. The scope of inquiry in the novel also discerns another major intersectional factor, gender, and unsettles the issue of urbanised, upper-class feminism in India.

It is to be noted that the Kaivarta caste had been included in the list of Scheduled Caste Communities of Assam, according to the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. The Tribal Research Institute, in its survey (1987) reports the Kaivarta caste as occupying "the second largest position having a total population of 2,94,809 as per 1971 Census" (2). Fishing is considered to be the primary occupation of these Kaivarta people. Etymologically, the term Kaivarta has been derived from the root words 'ke' or 'ka' (water) and 'vrit' (exist). So, people who live in water or by water are known as Kaivartas. The term has largely been used to indicate the fishing communities like Doms, Nadiyals, and Jaluwa Keots. The term has its different histories of origin in different myths. In *Mahabharatha,* Kaivarta is mentioned as a distinct community. Satyavati, the fisherman's daughter, who later became the queen of the Hastinapur dynasty, was addressed by her stepson Devavrata as "Daseyi", one of the *Dasa* or *Kaivartta* clan (Pargiter 69). The community

is also mentioned by Kalidasa in *Abhijnanam Sakuntalam* while depicting the scene where the lost ring is recovered from the stomach of a *rahu* fish (*Labio Rohita*) caught by a fisherman (Sarma 23). The great *Manu Samhita* also considers fishing as the main profession of the Kaivarta community (23). In the *Jatakas* also the community is also called as *Kevartta* (*ke*-water, and *varta*-livelihood) (23).

The mythological underpinnings of the origin of the community imply that the Kaivartas derive their daily livelihood largely from water. The Kaivarta community, with its close connection to the water, further directs the interpretation of the novel, especially through its protagonist. The fact that she is a fisherman's daughter of the Kaivarta community further connects the narrative to the mythical Satyavati from the *Mahabharata*. Like Satyavati, she exemplifies the tension between purity and impurity, power and oppression, negotiating her transgression within a caste stratified society. The narrative's ambiguous feminist energy is enabled through this tension, as Borgohain's characters struggle for their social prestige.

Matsyagandha, first published in the Assamese language, was translated and published as *The Fisherman's Daughter* in 2023. The recent translation reintroduces the novel to the contemporary re-emergence of mythological retellings in Indian writings. In its attempt to re-materialise the negotiation between female sexuality, duty and power through the figure of Kamala and Menaka, the narrative carries the reverberation of Satyavati, the mythic great-grandmother of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. He transforms a mythic figure to be the embodiment of modern subjectivity that subverts the dominant structure of caste and gender. The translation revitalises *Matsyagandha* as a timeless text which exposes how myths, once regionalised to interrogate the dominant power structure asserted by the epic, continue to evolve in interpretation across language, temporal and ideological shifts. – But it is to be noted that Borgohain does not construe the conventional 'retelling-of-myth' genre that has gained popularity in the last few decades. Kavita Kane portrays Satyavati as the grand matriarch who set off the Kuru dynasty in the *Mahabharata*. But, as the article shall argue, the narrative strategy and the feminist energy that emanate from Borgohain's narrative are different from Kane's narrative.

As such, the article shall examine the vortex of caste and gender as it becomes the mechanism for the oppression, exploitation and

marginalisation of the Kaivarta women who eventually assert their female agency in subverting such vortex. The first section of this study seeks to investigate how mythological reverberations sustain the feminist energy that the Kaivarta women employ to negotiate the oppressive structure of society. The second section offers a feminist interpretation of the waterscape portrayed in *Matsyagandha*. It shall examine water as a contested space; how it functions both as a site of exclusion and transgression for the low caste women, especially Menaka and Kamala. The final section undertakes the theoretical scaffolding, discussing whether (or not) Menaka's victory plays into the political and critical oeuvre of intersectional feminism in India.

A Fisherwoman, *a Mahabharata* Myth and Empowering Female Sexuality

"There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history of its own", writes Raja Rao in his widely read novel *Kanthapura* ("Foreword", *Kanthapura*). Rao further adds, "In this way the past mingles with the present . . . bright" ("Foreword"). Rao's observation reflects an ambiguous gender politics where the characters of Indian myths are 'men and gods', whereas the storyteller, the grandmother, is a woman. This article shall interpret the mythical underpinnings of the novel, *Matsyagandha*, corroborating Rao's claim about the mythopoeic fabric of Indian villages; however, "mean", like the Kaivarta community. However, it is a male author, now, narrating a story about a fisherwoman, thus subverting the ways of 'men and gods'.

Accordingly, the trajectory of Menaka, a *Dom* woman and the protagonist, ostensibly follows the regular pattern of oppression and subversion. Bezbaruah states that "the word 'dom' was once used by the upper caste people in their day-to-day conversation to identify the Kaivarta as a low caste community" (Bezbaruah 45). In the 1881 census in Assam, the Kaivartas were categorised into two folds: 'halwa kewats'—the Kaivartas involved in cultivation— and 'nadiyals' or 'kaivartas'— the Kaivartas involved in fishing (Saikia 272). The former was conferred a higher status in comparison to the latter, which was accorded much lower status (272). As such, the word 'dom' has no official use to indicate the status of the lower caste. But the continuous usage of the word by upper caste people earns it the status of 'untouchability'. Gradually, it becomes associated with discrimination and deprivation for the Kaivartas.

Consequently, being a *Dom,* Menaka has been exposed to the horrors of caste discrimination and poverty from her early childhood days after the death of her father and brothers. Her life becomes "a curse for taking birth as a *Dom*" (Borgohain 7). She recalls an especially painful memory of getting slapped by an unnamed upper caste woman when she was only five or six years old. In order to borrow some rice grains, her mother takes her along to an upper caste house. There, Menaka is reprimanded and gets a "resounding slap" from the house owner's wife as her "parboiled rice" spread out in the courtyard to be dried was touched by her shadow (3). She further recollects the humiliation of the *Dom* people that she witnessed in her childhood days: "[T]he very touch of the *Doms* made all foods inedible. If a *Dom* happened to be very thirsty, he or she will have to take a leaf of arum plant from the roadside and approach a house owner for water to be poured on to that" (6-7). What Borgohain tries to foreground through his narrative is the ritualised dehumanisation of the *Dom* people. The caste-based horror leads her towards opium addiction and being an aggrieved woman. Living a life of bitterness, lashing out at everyone who addresses her and her community as *Dom*, cursing her husband and her sister, who married Jayahari (the more industrious brother of her husband), Menaka remains on the lookout for an opportunity to improve her social standing, both as an individual (an impoverished woman) and as a member of her community (an impoverished *Kaivarta* woman). It is in the illegitimized pregnancy of Kamala (her sister-in-law) that Meneka finds such an opportunity.

Notably, Borogahin's novel does not simply re-tell Satyabati's story but causes the myth to emerge through echoes. In Rao's words, the "past mingles with the present". The word *Matsyagandha* refers to the mythical Satyabati, who was brought up by a fisherman and helped her family earn a livelihood by ferrying boats. Satyabati's subaltern status is signified by her name "She who smells like fish" due to the smell emitting from her body, coalescing her livelihood, her family background with her sense of self (Ganguly LXIII)[3]. As the novel's title, the word refers to the protagonist Menaka, who, along with her mother and sister, lives on rice-grains borrowed from elite *Ahom* families in exchange for "fish and snail-lime" (Borgohain 20). The smell of fish from Menaka's body symbolises her marginalised status, caused by her mother's inability to procure "contracts to harvest paddy from a few wealthy farmers Kadigaon and Mohghuli" unlike other *Kaivarta* women (21). Menaka's sense of inferiority with her socially outcast self is further

underscored by her distaste for the word 'Dom'. Whenever she hears someone using the word, she remembers the "full handed slap" (7) from an upper caste woman, and begins throwing invective words at him/her.

Remarkably, the mythological reverberations run beyond the lowly birth-status of the *Mahabharata* character and Borgohain's protagonist. Satyavati in the *Mahabharata* belongs to the *Nishada*, a lower caste fisher-folk community. Satyavati, along with Matsya, was born to Adrika, a cursed apsara who was turned into a fish. Their father, Uparichara Vasu, a *Chedi* king, accepted the male child, Matsya, who became the founder of the Matsya kingdom and abandoned the female child, Satyavati. The female child was then brought up by Dasharaja, a fisherman who named her Kali— "the dark one"— because of her complexion (Ganguly LXIII). She had to undergo unbearable difficulty in leading her life as a lowly status of a fisherman's daughter. Due to the stinky fish-like smell emanating from her body, she was ignored as an untouchable and unpleasant presence.

However, in Rishi Parashar's attempt to seduce her across the river Yamuna, she finds the opportunity for her upward mobility. In exchange for satisfying his sexual desire, she asks the sage to make a promise to keep the sexual union secret and her virginity intact. She also asks him to grant her eternal beauty, sweet fragrance, and to make her son born from the union as famous as the great sage. The sage grants all her wishes, and she is transformed into *Yojanagandha* ("She whose fragrance can be smelled across a yojana") and gets her virginity back. The son then came to be known as *Krishna* ("the dark one) or *Dvaipayana* ("One born on island"), and would later become *Veda Vyasa* as the compiler of the Vedas, author of the *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata*, fulfilling Parashara's promise. The coitus with Parashara becomes a catalyst for Satyavati, which gives her life a new dimension. This transformation was her first success in getting rid of her social exclusion.

Furthermore, the mission of her social upliftment reaches its peak when Shantanu, the king of Hastinapur, is captivated by Satyavati's beauty. King Shanatanu expresses his love for Satyavati and she avails the advantage to be the queen of Hastinapur. When asked by King Shantanu for Satyavati's hand, Dasharaja, not satisfied with her just being a queen, cunningly said that his daughter would marry the king on the condition that her lineage would continue ruling the throne of Hastinapur. But Shantanu becomes disappointed at such a proposal

because he already had a son Devavrata mothered by Ganga. Devavrata, however, looking at his father's distressful condition, takes a vow of celibacy, thereby renouncing his right to the throne. Finally, Satyavati marries Shantanu and bears him two sons–Chitrangada and Vichitravirya–who would later sit on the throne of Hastinapur. But, unfortunately, Satyavati's desire to continue her lineage is shattered when her two sons meet an untimely death without leaving heirs to the throne. Determined on her mission, she asks Devavrata to marry the widows of Vichitravirya and be the king. But he refuses to remind her about his vow of celibacy. On Devavrata's suggestion that a Brahmin could be summoned to father children of the widows, Satyavati persuades her son Vyasa to have *niyoga* with his brother's widows–Ambika and Ambalika. From the coitus between Vyasa and the widows, Dhritarashtra and Pandu were born, who would begin the Kuru dynasty and Pandava dynasty, respectively. Satyavati thus transcends her subaltern status to be the queen of Hastinapur and the grand-matriarch of the Kauravas and Pandavas.

In contrast, Menaka's marriage does not fulfil her goal. This is unlike Satyabati, who would have become the second wife, but her father can manipulate Debabrata (Vishma) to quit his right to the throne, securing the throne for Satyavati's lineage. Memeri, Satyavati's mother, finds a glimpse of hope for their social upliftment from the horrors of caste-based discrimination in marrying her daughters to the sons of Digambar, the richest and most respected person of the Kaivarta village. Memeri "encourages Purna [One of Digambar's sons] to become intimate with Menaka" (Borgohain 43), believing that such a union will ensure for her daughter social dignity and economic stability. Menaka begins to enjoy the elevated status as the daughter-in-law in Digambar's prosperous household. But her sense of empowerment is crushed when Purna is thrown out of the house and made to set up a separate establishment by Digambar due to his "laziness and addiction to bhang" (44). This leads to the loss of his right to the family wealth. But this loss proves to be more devastating for Menaka than for Purna. For it not only decimates her economic mobility, but it also fractures her agency to get rid of her social exclusion.

However, through Kamala, Menaka has another opportunity to reclaim her feminist agency. Kamala's seduction mirrors that of Satyabati's by Parashar. While crossing the Mohghuli river in Moniram's boat, Kamala's "fierce youthful beauty" (78) is exposed to Moniram's (an

upper caste *Ahom* boy) male gaze due to the heavy rains. Attracted by the beauty of Kamala, Moniram asks her to make love with him. Initially, Kamala doesn't surrender her body to Moniram's urge. But when Moniram repeatedly promises to marry her after the sexual union, her dream of dismantling the social division, taking revenge against her social exclusion, is sparked. She finds an opportunity for her social ascent in her marriage to an upper-caste boy, Moniram. Conscious of her subjugated state, she employs her sexuality and feminine charm to negotiate power and agency within the hierarchical norms of caste and gender. Satyavati demands her beauty and virginity back from Rishi Parashara by quenching his sexual desire. Kamala performs her agency to take revenge against their exploitation and humiliation. She reveals: "[T]hese were the people who have always hated us for belonging to a low caste; and now if he actually married me, there would certainly be chaos in the society. It would be nice to see such a thing. It would certainly be a proper revenge for the injustice done to us" (84). Kamala's consent to intimacy transforms her body into an act of retribution against social discrimination, depravity and disparity.

Moreover, Kamala's consent is also directed by her participation in economic activities, her desire for a better life by getting married to someone with wealth and riches. She clearly states that Moniram is "the owner of four *puras* of agricultural land. If he marries me, I will also be a co-owner of those four *puras* of land. I will be going to my own land to reap paddy crops. I will bring rice grains from my own fields into my granary…" (86). Borgohain suggests that conscious articulation of female sexuality can disrupt power and hegemony prevalent in society and retrieve the agency of the marginalised communities. Kamala's consent is not just a submissive surrender. It is for Kamala a mechanism for ensuring her social recognition and female agency within both a patriarchal structure and a hierarchical structure based on caste and gender.

Yet, Kamala does not have the strength to execute her manipulation of male desire, where Menaka's perseverance becomes significant. After the sexual union, Moniram rejects Kamala, refusing to marry her because of her status as a *Dom* girl. Kamala is denied her dignity and legitimacy due to the rigid caste hierarchy. Bereft of social acceptance and fraught with her illicit pregnancy, she is driven to despair and attempts to commit suicide. But Menaka does not give up her attempt to transgress the caste boundary. Menaka's strategy of

retribution against her social exclusion reaches its peak with the illegitimate pregnancy of Kamala. The love affair becomes a miracle (which she wished for in the beginning of the novel) for her to shatter the long-held caste discrimination. Despite her hostile relationship with Kamala's family, she decides not to abort the foetus from Kamala's womb. Rather, she clearly states that she shall "ensure a safe conception to save the life of a *Dom*, to save the honour of a *Dom*" (102). Rather, she uses the illegitimate foetus to convince Moniram to marry Kamala, which she believes would disrupt the caste hierarchy and compensate for the deprivation and injustice done to them. Finally, Menaka succeeds in her mission when Moniram marries Kamala and leaves his home permanently to live as the residential son-in-law in Kaivarta village. Interestingly, Menaka's manipulation of male desire using the illegitimate foetus to assert her feminine energy in subverting the hegemonic structure of the society echoes that of Satyavati's. Satyavati too, not being able to have heirs from her sons born from the marriage with Shantanu, summoned her illegitimate son Vyasa to father children of her son's widows in order to continue her lineage on the Hastinapur throne. Thus, Dhritarashtra and Pandu were born to establish the Kuru and Pandava dynasties, respectively, making Satyavati the grand-matriarch in the *Mahabharata*.

As such, Meneka's victory sustains through the mythological overtones of Satyabati's creation of the Kuru dynasty. To celebrate the marriage between Kamala and Moniram, the *Doms* arrange for a procession where "the spiritual head of the *Doms* will uplift him to the caste of the *Dom*" (118). Menaka believes that Moniram is not 'lowered', but he is uplifted to the status of *Dom*. This belief evidently subverts the caste hierarchy that considers the *Doms* as a low caste. Menaka asserts: "Today, one man of your caste has been uplifted… Your time is coming, too. One by one I will uplift all of you to this caste" (119). Menaka's assertion implies the rearticulation of her subaltern identity as a medium of reclamation. She thus rises from her doubly exploited state of subalternity to the level of an 'authoritative' matriarch and the queen of *Kaivarta* community, dismantling the social hierarchy.

However, Romila Thapar notes that Satyavati has been decontextualized within later interpretations of the narrative. She observes that "attempts were made later to suggest that Satyavati was actually the daughter of a *Kshatriyas*" (Thapar 158), as, according to the custom, only the lineages of *Kshatriyas* could be among the ruling clans.

Whether Borgohain is able to reinstate the subalternity of Satyabati through his modern-day narrative of the fisherwoman's daughter is a question that shall be engaged with in the next section.

Waterscape, Female Sexuality and Recontextualising Mythological Consciousness

In this section, the study interprets *Matsyagandha* as a text that recontextualises the Satyavati myth from the *Mahabharata* to the female energy of the marginalised caste. The primary strategy of this recontextualization occurs through the depiction of the waterscape in the novel. The term 'waterscape' is used to signify the socio-cultural aspects of life formed around water. Erik Swyngedouw, in his study on the water history of Spain, foregrounds Waterscape as a perspective to understand that "water and society are deeply intertwined" (Swyngedouw 1). Similarly, it is connected inseparably to the socio-cultural fabric of India. Water, being one of the elements of *Pancha Bhuta*, has a symbolic significance as a source of survival, purity, spiritual recognition, cleansing sins, and also a source of material wealth.

Hence, the significance of waterscape in translating the mythical female energy to the modern-day woman's question may be traced through Satyabati's origin story with her mother as an Apsara (Adrika) and her father as a Chedi king. Adrika was transformed into a fish to live in the Yamuna River by a curse (Ganguly LXIII). While hunting, the Chedi king sent his semen to his queen through an eagle. But due to a mid-air fight with another eagle, the semen fell on the water of the Yamuna and was swallowed by the cursed fish, Adrika (Mani 809). Consequently, the fish became pregnant, and two babies were born. The king accepted the male child, Matsya and abandoned the female child, Satyavati, who would later become the queen of Hastinapur. Thus, Satyavati's origin reimagines water as a transformative force that connects mythic feminine energy to the subaltern feminine energy of modern-day society.

As such, Borogahin's modern-day mythopoeia is able to offer a subalternist reinterpretation through Memeri's relation to waterscape, which echoes that of Satyavati's mother, Adrika. As noted earlier, Adrika was an Apsara who was cursed to live in water as a fish. Likewise, Memeri also lives a cursed life after the death of her husband. Her husband, Duryodhan, even though a fisherman, becomes wealthy by

cultivating paddy, pulses and mustard on open grasslands. This enables Digambar and Memeri "to eat well all the year round" (Borgohain 15). But Digambar's death leads Memeri towards a distressful and dejected life. She undertakes a journey of utmost hardships to feed her two daughters. She loses her chance of living a life of dignity that the resources from the land offer her. Her destitution leads her to opium addiction. During the harvest season, she is not able to get "contracts to harvest paddy from a few wealthy farmers, Kadigaon and Mohghuli" (21). As a result, she has to rely on water to earn her livelihood. She becomes a serving and fish-selling woman.

Subsequently, the waterscape became a site of struggle for the social prestige of the Kaivartas. This struggle is perpetuated further through the land-water conflict in the novel. According to the caste hierarchy, land ownership is a pointer of social privilege, and the upper-caste status, while reliance on water resources implies a low-caste status. Due to the lack of customers and means of transportation, the Kaivarta people's "[b]askets of fish got rotten" as the local farmers hardly show any indulgence to buy fish or exchange it for grains (15). As a consequence, Borgohain narrates, "the fisherman community of Goroimari village could never be free from poverty" (15). One of the ways that the Kaivartas undertake to earn a life of respectability is through land resources. Digambar, even after being a fisherman, became "the richest and most respected person" (36) through cultivation on grasslands. Menaka also sees an opportunity for her social upheaval as the daughter-in-law of Digambar. But Menaka's dream does not come true because, as noted earlier, her husband is denied his family rights due to his laziness and bhang addiction. She is driven back to the water to earn her livelihood. Thus, water assumes a very ambiguous presence in the novel. It sustains the lives of the poor people, and simultaneously becomes the medium of their caste-based marginalisation.

It is to be noted that Menaka's defeat, in a way, becomes the reverberation of Satyavati's ill fortune with her legitimate sons to continue ruling the throne of Hastinapur through her lineage. Satyavati's sons did not father any children who could sit on the throne. But Satyavati does not lose her perseverance. As noted earlier, she calls her illegitimate son Vyasa to be intimate with her daughters-in-law, subsequently enabling her lineage to rule the kingdom of Hastinapur. This myth is repeated through the waterscape in the novel in deriving feminist energy and the Mohghuli river becomes part of it.

As such, the Mohghuli river becomes a site where the myth of female agency is reclaimed in modern-day context, uplifting the Kaivarta women from their status as outcasts. It is the waterscape of the Mohghuli river that provides the scope for Menaka's ultimate victory. The sexual union between Kamala and Moniram, which would later become Menaka's weapon for subverting the caste hierarchy, takes place on the water of the Mohghuli River. It is in the boat of Moniram that heavy rains exposed Kamala to Moniram. Borgohain writes, Kamala's garments across her breasts were flying because of the westerly wind; her *mekhela* was wrapped tightly across her hips, exposing her fierce youthful beauty" (78). Captivated by Kamala's body, Moniram seduces her. Left with no choice, Kamala surrenders herself to his sexual desire. However, as mentioned earlier, turning the situation in her favour, she employs her sexuality to transform her body into a site of her self-assertive agency. But she does not succeed in her goal. However, it is Menaka who transforms the sexual union into a mechanism for transgressing the social boundary by coordinating a marriage between a low-caste and an upper caste (Kamala–Moniram).

Here, too, mythology connects with the waterscape to sustain the feminist energy. Just as Satyavati's sexual union with Parashara enables her to redefine her social position, the waterscape in Borgohain's narrative also enables the Kaivarta women to challenge social boundaries based on caste and gender. In both the mythical and modern-day contexts, the fisherwomen can disrupt the caste boundaries and social norms. Thus, Borgohain derives the feminist energy, especially for Menaka and Kamala, from the re-imagination of Satyavati's feminist defiance within the lived experience of the Kaivarta women, transforming the waterscape into the site of this feminist energy.

Later, Moniram's defeat and, therefore, the Ahom community's inability to uphold the caste boundaries is etched out through a bowl of water. As to the social custom, the low caste *Kaivartas* were allowed to drink water from the upper-caste people on the leaves of arum plants only (6). They were not allowed to touch any utensils belonging to the caste-privileged people. But Menaka gives a shocking blow to such a cruel custom against the low-caste people by her subversive act. Menaka asks Moniram to give her a bowl of water to drink. At such a bold request from Menaka, Moniram was "bewildered for a moment. They had never imagined offering water in a bowl to the people of *Kaivarta* village" (101). But finally, Moniram has to succumb to Menaka's

authority. He gives her the bowl of water, and thus is forced to break the same caste boundary that they are using to perpetuate injustices against low-caste communities. Hence, the bowl of water assumes a symbolic meaning as it destroys the dominant caste system. It becomes a space where possession, purity and impurity are self-asserted. It is also given a function of female agency against the masculine domain of land.

Two Fisherwomen and a Critique of Intersectional Feminism

A vortex of caste, sexuality, myth and waterscape has been untangled through *Matsyagandha* in the two previous sections. In this section, the study engages with the relevance of intersectionality to this vortex. Certain Dalit feminists have chosen intersectionality as their theoretical framework to analyse the lived experiences of Dalit women. Drawing from Crenshaw (1989), they argue that, as Kumar and Bakshi (2022) note, "caste and gender are interlocking systems that produce specific experiences for women situated at the intersections of these systems, i.e, Dalit women" (Kumar and Bakshi 53). In foregrounding the issues of Dalit women at the intersection of caste and gender, such notions as "Double oppression" and "Thrice burdened" have been developed by Omvedt (1979) and Manorama (1992), respectively.

However, this article probes to examine that Borogahin's indigenous narrative does not surrender to the trapping of a Western theory, since the intersection of caste and gender has always existed as intrinsic to the Indian socio-cultural foundation. To reach its goal, this article draws insights from Nivedita Menon's argument. For Menon, the term 'Intersectionality', when used in Indian context to explicate "double and triple burdens, or that 'Women" must be complicated by caste, religion, class", does not bear any currency, and "adds nothing to our understanding" (Menon 38). The reason, as Menon further argues, is that "the politics of engaging with multiple identities, their contradictions and interrelations, goes back to the early 20th century and the legacy of anti-imperialists struggles in the global south (38). Therefore, based on the findings in the previous sections, the study seeks to decipher that Menon's theoretical observations in critiquing Intersectional feminism can be laid out into Borgohain's transformation of mythic female energy into the modern context.

The trajectories of Satyavati and Menaka converge in the following manner. Both Satyavati and Menaka lived a distressful and

dejected life in their early childhood days as both of them were abandoned by their fathers. Both of them ascend from socially downtrodden fishing communities to assert their feminist energy in transgressing caste hierarchies and social norms. They employ female sexuality as a medium for their upward mobility from their status as low-caste: Satyavati through her intimacy with the rishi Parashara and king Shantanu, and Menaka through Kamala's intimacy with Moniram. Both of them use illegitimate children (Satyavati, her son Vyasay and Menaka, her sister-in-law's unborn foetus) to create their own dynasties: Satyavati creates the Kuru dynasty and Menaka uplifts the Kaivarta community from its outcast status. As a fisherman's daughter, each of them reconfigures their marginality into their agency through destabilising the caste boundary and patriarchal norms. Just as Satyavati's self emerges from the water of the Yamuna, Menaka and Kamala's subjectivity is also perpetuated by the waterscape of the Mohghuli River, which becomes a site of subverting the hegemonic structure of society. Thus, a mythic feminine agency is reverberated through Borgohain's portrayal of modern-day feminine energy that resists caste and gender-based oppression.

The connections drawn between the two fisherwomen, mythical and modern-day, reemphasise Menon's argument that 'Intersectionality' does not "add anything new to our understanding" (38). Borgohain's reverberation of Satyavati's marginalisation and subsequently her self-assertive womanhood through Menaka and Kamala foregrounds that the intersection of caste and gender in shaping one's social identity has always been present in Indian consciousness. Further, the two fisherwomen's identity is not a fixed order, but fluid and conjunctural, continually formed through multiple converging axes including caste, class and gender. Borgohain's narrative explicates Menon's observation that "women" are not a "pre-existing" category, but rather constructed and contested through "different kinds of contexts" (Menon 43). Through Satyavati and Menaka, the essentialization of "women" as a category is dismantled in *Matsyagandha*. Their feminine energy in subverting the caste boundary and social norms echoes Menon's concept of porous systems, including caste and gender.

Moreover, Borogahin's narrative strategy also draws from the oral tradition. The narrative structure of *Matsyagandha* echoes the dialogic and cyclical form of narration prevalent in Indian oral narratives like *Mahabharata*. Borgohain's narrative begins with "The Prelude" where

Menaka is seen to use furious diatribe against the two wayfarers who stigmatise the Kaivarta women as low caste whose identity becomes the smell of raw-fish or roasted-fish. The narrative ends with "The Epilogue", where Menaka victoriously asserts the upliftment of the Kaivarta community. She proclaims that she will 'raise' everyone to the status of *Dom*, as she has done to Moniram. Borgohain employs this circular structure to emphasise how the *Ahom* people are forced to acknowledge the dignity that the Kaivartas deserve. The Kaivartas have managed to breach the social hierarchy. Through the dialogic repetitions echoing *Mahabharata*'s oral tradition, Borgohain narrates a story that is of the transformation from subjugation to empowerment. Borgohain is not only using the Satyavati myth, but he is also drawing the narrative pattern from Indian oral tradition as found in epics like *Mahabharata* to create characters who moved from disempowerment to empowerment.

This further attests to Menon's observation that *Mahabharata and Matsyagandha* exemplify that the Indian knowledge system has always been conscious of intersectionality. Borgohain's use of the oral tradition in his narrative foregrounds that the intersections of caste, class and gender have always been part of Indian mythical consciousness, long before it was invented in Western discourses. As the story of the *Mahabharata* emerges from the oral mode, in Borgohain's narrative also the oral tradition also spreads Menaka's self-assertive subjectivity. The mythic feminist energy of Satyavati continues to reflect in the modern-day context.

Conclusion

Thus, Homen Borgohain's *Matsyagandha* becomes a distinctive narrative that recontextualises the Satyavati myth into the everyday lives of the Kaivarta women, especially through Menaka and Kamala. The narrative becomes such mythopoetic that it articulates feminist agency, transferred from myths to modern-day experiences. Importantly, the feminist energy that disrupts the whole caste hierarchy and social boundary is perpetuated through the waterscape of the Yamuna and the Mohghuli river. In both Satyavati's and Menaka's cases, the waterscape becomes a site where the self is reclaimed. It is through the waterscape that the new history of Kaivarta women is rewritten when Moniram marries Kamala and leaves his upper-caste community. The narrative structure of Borgohain asserts Menon's critique of intersectional feminism, suggesting that intersectionality has always been part of Indian consciousness–be it mythic, indigenous or modern. By enabling

Menaka's voice to rise from the periphery of the society, which bears an echo of Satyavati's defiance, Borgohain constructs a narrative of reclamation of Self, a self that rises beyond caste, class and gender boundaries.

Notes:

1. The translated version of *Matsyagandha* (*The Fisherman's Daughter*) is used as a textual references.

2. Moamoriya rebellion (1769-1805) was the 18th-century uprising in the Ahom Kingdom of erstwhile Assam as a power struggle between the Moamorias and the Ahom kings. See, Borgohain.

3. For the Satyavati Myth, Kisari Mohan Ganguly is consulted hereon.

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GENERAL SECTION

1.

The Storyteller as Activist: Reading Temsula Ao's "Laburnum for my Head" and "Death of the Hunter"

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&
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Abstract: Environmental literary activism foregrounds the ethical and political potential of literature to intervene in ecological crises by shaping environmental consciousness and inspiring action. Drawing upon the theoretical foundations of ecocriticism articulated by Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty, this paper examines the storyteller as an activist through a close reading of Temsula Ao's short stories "Laburnum for My Head" and "Death of the Hunter." Situating Ao's writing within the framework of Environmental Humanities, the study argues that her narratives move beyond the aesthetic representation of nature to function as acts of environmental advocacy. Ao's fiction exposes the violence inflicted on landscapes and indigenous communities by anthropocentric, extractive, and colonial practices, while simultaneously recuperating indigenous ecological knowledge, ethical responsibility, and relational modes of being with nature.

Keywords: Environmental activism, storytelling, ecological justice.

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Environmental activism through literary writing has been an important aspect of Environmental Humanities. It refers to the use of literary texts in the form of poetry, fiction, non-fiction or drama as a powerful means of raising awareness about environmental issues, critiquing environmental devastation and encouraging sustainable living and promoting ecological justice. Lawrence Buell, in his foundational book, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), describes the capacity of literature to inspire cultural perceptions of nature and encourage action on ecological issues. This idea suggests that literature's value is not just aesthetic but also lies in its power to shape how we understand and relate to the environment. Buell says in an interview that both eco-literature and eco-criticism can have a public consciousness-raising effect. Environmental literary activism is not restricted to describing nature but produces writing that intervenes ethically and politically in the various debates surrounding the environment. Environmental literary activism focuses on critiquing and challenging exploitative and extractive ideologies such as industrial capitalism, colonialism and globalization, exposes environmental destruction due to anthropocentric activities like mining, deforestation, climate change, pollution etc, makes the marginalized voices like that of the indigenous people, Dalits and women who are adversely affected by environmental problems, heard and projects alternative futures that are more sustainable, inclusive and ethical. Environmental literary activism extends the critical insights of ecocriticism, a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the "relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm xviii), into the province of public engagement with the environment. Though Glotfelty's works have highlighted the significance of environmental themes and concerns in literature, they have encouraged scholars to recognise the immense potential of literature to figure environmental consciousness and consider the writer as an active agent in shaping this consciousness. Environmental literary activism employs various literary forms to raise ecological awareness in readers by engaging with the discourse on the environment. Thus, it inspires and urges readers of these literary texts to recognise their complicity in environmental problems and contribute to environmental justice. Thus, environmental literary activism is simply the ethical and political aspect of ecocriticism and calls for action, mobilisation, and transformation through the power of literary texts. While ecocriticism cultivates environmental awareness and provides a conceptual framework and vocabulary to critique climate change, toxic waste, and large-scale extinction of biodiversity brought about by systems of power, epistemology, and global capitalism, environmental literary activism

transforms this awareness into practice by the affective power of literature. As Naseer Dasht Peyma points out in the introduction of her recent book, *Eco-Literature and Environmental Advocacy: Bridging Theory and Practice (2025)*,

> Eco-literature plays a critical role in raising awareness about environmental issues, fostering empathy for the natural world, and inspiring collective action. It brings environmental concerns to the forefront of public consciousness, engaging readers emotionally and intellectually. Through compelling narratives and vivid imagery, eco-literature prompts reflection on the fragility of the planet and the necessity of conservation efforts. By portraying nature as a vibrant and sentient entity, eco-literature fosters empathy for non-human life forms and encourages readers to recognize their interconnectedness with the environment. Additionally, it advocates for environmental justice, highlighting the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation on marginalized communities and promoting inclusive approaches to conservation. Moreover, eco-literature serves as a valuable educational tool, enhancing ecological literacy and empowering readers to make informed decisions about sustainable living practices. Perhaps most importantly, it inspires readers to take action, offering visions of a more sustainable future and showcasing examples of environmental activism and resilience. (4)

India's ecosystem and biodiversity have been extraordinary. Still, in recent years, due to uncontrolled consumerism and modernisation, there has been an increase in flash floods, landslides, tsunamis, and other natural disasters. Despite various environmental programs initiated by successive government regimes in the form of plantation drives and other measures, environmental degradation has amplified in almost geometric proportions in recent times. In this context, we need to look at the ecology of the Northeast region of India to understand the dynamics of environmental literary activism, as the region has consistently produced significant literary works both in the languages of the region as well as in English on environmental issues that affect the people of the region.

Northeast India is known for its rich biodiversity and delicate ecological balance that sustains both nature and the many indigenous communities of the region. Traditionally, people of the region have

maintained a synergetic relationship with their environment, steered by traditional animistic beliefs and ecological ethics that view nature as sacred. However, with growing deforestation, urbanisation, and developmental pressures, this harmony has started to erode, threatening both ecological and cultural continuity. Within this context, Temsula Ao emerges as a powerful literary voice of ecological consciousness and quiet environmental activism. Through her works, she advocates for a return to indigenous ecological ethics, emphasising care, reverence, and coexistence with nature. This paper attempts to study Temsula Ao's two stories, "Laburnum for My Head" and Death of a Hunter", from her short story collection *Laburnum for My Head: Stories* as instances of her environmental literary activism. This study attempts to convey how the people of the northeast region possess a unique consciousness regarding the environment and how the same consciousness can be infused in the rest of the people. This paper attempts to show how storytelling can propel activism for environmental rehabilitation and resistance against anthropocentric attitudes, and can sensitise and shape responses to climate change and the depletion of biodiversity. Storytelling has immense potential to function as environmental activism by transforming environmental crises into narratives that are emotionally reverberating and inspiring awareness and action. Stories have always humanised environmental issues by giving voice to marginalised communities and knowledge systems, and have mobilised collective imagination for ecological justice and sustainable futures.

Temsula Ao is a prominent author and academic, and belongs to the Ao Naga community of Nagaland with several prestigious awards like the Padma Sri and Sahitya Akademi to her credit. Her works include a collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone (*2006) and *Once Upon a Life, a Memoir* that has given count as her prominence as one of the important literary voices from the North East. At the very outset of the story collection, *Laburnum for my Head: Stories*, Ao remarks, "Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard.- stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination; …those that are not always a figment of the mind but are, at times, confessions". (Ao, 2009)

Ao's stories are not simple ethnographic outlines of the lives in the North-East but are rich mosaics presenting issues such as gender, environment, modernity, loss of the wisdom of the tribal community, ethnicity, and so on and so forth. Ao's collection of stories *Laburnum for*

My Head: Stories has been mostly interpreted from the perspective of either eco-feminism, as a critique of development or as a conflict between radical and reformist environmentalism. As Dutta says, the "study of Temsula Ao's "Laburnum for My Head" through an ecofeminist lens underscores the profound interconnection between gender and environmental issues in her literature. Ao's portrayal of women and nature in Northeast India reveals a nuanced critique of patriarchal norms and their impact on both the natural world and women's lives. By highlighting Lentina's choice to forego traditional grave markers in favour of a laburnum tree, Ao challenges the conventional symbols of human conceit and advocates for a more harmonious relationship with nature." (300). Similarly, Abhishek Ghoshal in his "Appraising "Green Development": An Ecocritical Reading of Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*" brings out "the long-standing tension between radical environmentalism and reformist environmentalism as represented in the garb of tales thereby asking thinkers to mull over the notion of "green development", paying adequate heed to the necessary requirements of impoverished human beings". (19). K. Subapriya sees the stories as "post-millennial Indian fiction" as "they present the transformation of tribal literature from oral to written form" (81) and subaltern issues in the North East. T. Ramkumar and D. Padmanabhan, in their essay, "Psychosocial Impacts of War and Trauma in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*" (2020), attempt to study "the psychological impact of domestic violence over the combatants as well as non-combatants whose lives are inseparably intertwined with violence and bloodshed. Though violence is considered a typical condition of human nature, most of the time it leads to unbearable trauma and misery. This paper also attempts to interpret the representation of women from the marginalised Ao community who find it difficult to preserve the customs and moral values despite regional revolt." (1). Similarly, Afsana Khatoon in her paper "That Dangerous Supplement: The Evils of the Margins in Temsüla Ao's 'Death of a Hunter" applies Derrida's concept of 'supplementarity' to the story to show "how power, image, and the desire to live affect human behaviour, how geography, frontiers, and peripheries form a being's selfhood, rights and limitations and how certain species has usurped the 'other/s' on the Earth, who are different from them". Kantha and Christadoss in their "Memory and Conflict in Temsüla Ao's 'Death of a Hunter'" (2023) looks at how memory of the hunt of the wild animal and the conflict between human and nature, tradition and modernity operate in the story. Pallabee Dasgupta, in her well-researched paper, "Myth, Mystery and Animism: A Reading of the Animal Presence in Select Short

Stories in English from North-East India", looks at Ao's story as how "nature and animals in particular are conceived in tribal life and imagination, often as larger than life presences and yet both familiar and intimate." (1) None of the above works tries to look at both stories as advocating environmental activism. But the present paper tries to look at both stories under consideration as instances of Ao's environmental literary activism, where she uses the narratives for consciousness-raising in the readers for a more sustainable life and future in the North East.

The story, "Laburnum for my Head" begins with a cemetery, one corner of which abounds with a flowering laburnum bush. The cemetery is otherwise packed with stone structures, which assert themselves as only a manifestation of anthropocentric attitudes. Each year, stone structures display more grandeur and occupy a larger space. The author says, "Every May something extraordinary happens in the new cemetery of sleepy little town standing beyond the southernmost corner of the vast expanse of the old cemetery-dotted with concrete vanities, both ornate and simple - the humble Indian laburnum bush erupts in glory with its blossoms of yellow mellow beauty".(9)

Enchanted by the beauty of the flowers, Lentina, the central character of the story, purchases the plant for her garden and waits desperately for it to flower. Unfortunately, every time the saplings are planted, they are destroyed, once by the gardener, another time by the cows, and yet another time by spraying DDT. Soon, her family and her husband consider her strong attachment to the plant as a kind of mental disorder, signifying how modern families that have absorbed the consumerist value system look at someone's attachment to nature as discomforting and a sign of mental aberration. When her husband dies, she protests the cultural tradition and joins the procession of cemetery-goers. There, she suddenly determines to plant Laburnum in the cemetery at her own expense. She also wishes to see a blooming Laburnum near her grave while she is still alive: "At that thought she experienced an epiphanic sensation: why not have a Laburnum tree planted on her grave...." (4) To make this come true, she looks for a person to confide in this secret. After musing over this for a while, she chooses her widower driver, Babu, as her confidante. Now Babu, as directed by Lentina, goes to the town committee and requests them to allot a particular spot for Lentina's grave in advance, but they emphatically urge Lentina to apply formally for this strange request before they proceed any further. Babu informs Lentina about the complications and difficulties of securing such a piece

of land. He also fears that her plans may get exposed. She thinks of another option for buying a plot of land near the cemetery. Luckily, Khalong, the son of her late husband's friend, comes to her home to pay condolences on her husband's death. He had expressed his desire to sell his land near the graveyard, which no one is prepared to buy. Lentina readily comes forward with buying a piece of land. The boy feels guilty that such a land will be bought by her merely out of sympathy. However, she clarifies the necessity of having such a plot of land. As planned, she buys the plot of land and erects a boundary wall around it. This act of hers is counted as a "crazy plan" (10) by her family members. Her initial activism makes her vocal about disagreements with her family. When her family questions her showing more trust in the driver than her family, she unveils the secret of her daughters-in-law' too much nagging over the construction of a grand grave stone for their father-in-law. Her strong will as a single-handed activist comes out when she is told that the ground near the cemetery is to be under the custody of a church or religious organisation, and so an ownership issue ensues. She donates the land to a committee on the condition that in the grounds of the new cemetery, only flowering trees and no tombstone will be erected, and a plot of land will already be earmarked for her burial.

After the committee members and the chairman visit her, and after some denials, they agree to her condition and also offer her the land as requested. The laburnum saplings are planted in that ground, and she desperately looks forward to them blooming. One winter, her health worsens, but after the assuring gesture of the driver that "he had just visited the trees and that they were doing well", her condition improves and "that seemed to provide her with the will to live where food and medicine seemed to have failed." (15) After she recovers, she starts her normal course of life again by mingling with her family and going out in the drawing room. She also gives her daughters-in-law jewellery, and her sons consult her as they never did during her husband's life. The narrator points out the collective warmth and camaraderie among the family members: There was a visible easing of tension among them, and it became apparent that not only Lentina but the entire family was heading towards a healing that was more than physical. (15) Now, Lentina's trust in Babu is slowly accepted by the family, leading to a longer chain of mutual trust and humility.

Although the laburnum blooms, Babu does not disclose it to Lentila, as he doubts that she may become excessively emotional and

excited, which might turn fatal for her. The following winter, she again collapses, though this time her family looks after her. Next May, Babu reports that the laburnum plants are in full bloom, and hearing this delightful news, she dies. The new cemetery, with several blooming laburnums, suggests how Ao posits a biocentric view of life, as opposed to the anthropocentric view symbolised by the gravestones. As the story points out,

> If you observe carefully, you will be amazed to see that in the entire terrain, there is so far only a Laburnum tree, bedecked in its seasonal glory, standing tall over all the other plants, flourishing in perfect co-existence, in an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality. (20)

In this way, Ao, through Lentina, conveys her activism as evolving through little acts of resistance and including her family and others in this ecological drive. The narrator's wish to plant laburnum trees challenges the modern disregard for native flora and upholds an intimate bond with the land. Ao critiques urban consumerism and ecological erasure by reclaiming storytelling as a way to re-establish cultural memory. The story suggests that women's quiet choices, such as planting trees, can act as a resistance to environmental degradation. The story is representative of Ao's profound ecological sensibility and her subtle but powerful environmental activism, one that is ingrained in a profound spiritual and emotional connection with nature. Ao's eco-activism is rooted in her indigenous environmental sensibility, which considers nature sacred and intimately connected to human existence. In this story, Ao weaves ecology with ethics and spirituality, a defining feature of her environmental literary activism. Lentina's planting of the laburnum saplings is symbolic of the Ao community's ways of restoring the environment reverentially. Ao's activism is not evidently political but ethical as well as aesthetic. The story exemplifies Ao's silent remonstration against an anthropocentric, extractive, and exploitative model of relating to the environment, in favour of a more caring, reciprocal, and planetary stewardship.

Her second story, "Death of the Hunter," begins with its idyllic setting when Imchanok is oiling his gun and humming a song with the giggles of his daughter and niece, who are husking paddy. Imchanok is a hunter from the Ao tribe who has been a teacher, but his fame now rests mainly on his hunting finesse. He, at the very outset, expresses his

readiness for the hunting of "the big boar" who has been eating his "best paddy" for so many years, and he claims not "to miss his heart".(21) The animal is reportedly "of enormous proportions" with "lumbering gait" and "two yellowish tusks" (22). Because of the massive damage to his fields, he takes the boar for his "enemy." In this story, Imchanok, the hunter, and his wife Tangchetla reveal a unique and deep ecological concern that makes them activists of the environment.

Imchanok is assigned many hunting tasks that turn him into a legendary hunter, both in the eyes of the people and the administration. Once an elephant destroys farmlands and kills many people. Because other hunters do not accept the offer and point to Imchanok for the hunting task, the government orders him for the same. He is also offered a rifle and ammunition and is given seven days to kill the elephant. He feels unprepared for the task because he does not know when or how to shoot the elephant, apart from the bigger challenge of facing the animal. He also contemplates how easily the sahibs could give him a tough target without being aware of the intelligence of the elephants. He half-heartedly sets out on his mission to hunt the elephant with some hunting partners. Here, the narrative attempts to suggest that a tribe's understanding of nature is much more profound than that of others. In the process of hunting the animal, the author gives emphatic hints of anthropocentrism by showing how cultivation has badly usurped the forest land, causing animals to go into the deep jungle. Here too, the elephant is nowhere to be found except in the depths of the jungle.

The narrative also highlights how the Ao tribe is deeply aware of the jungle, trekking in the jungle, and the habits of wild animals. The waiting by the hunters from their allotted locations goes on for several days, and every minute, details of the elephants' activities are narrated with absolute precision. It is also emphasised that the elephant has the power to anticipate danger, and as the elephant, after he meanders, faces Imchanok and turns his head, Imchanok shoots him through the eye. However, after his death, Imchanok is terrified by its "unblinking…eye" and he is no more a "a menacing power". (28) Apart from the tears, he found something else "as though the dying animal were trying to convey some message to his destroyer." (29) After killing the elephant, for the first time, he questions the legitimacy of his hunting. Because all earlier hunting was his choice, this task was 'allotted' to him. For the first time, he feels remorse rather than joy. Despite the safety of the people around, he interrogates his culpability "for the eternal contest between man and

animal for dominion over the land." He accepts the cash reward from the government, but strangely refuses to take the gun. Thus, we encounter a crucial transformation in him, although ironically, he becomes more famous after this hunting exercise. Shockingly, the administrators are embarrassed by his refusal to take the gun. Here, his stance is enigmatic to the administration, while he no longer wants to be obliged by the administration and wishes to keep hunting a matter of his free choice.

He remembers how once a pack of monkeys ravaged his granary. In the retribution that follows, he finds the head monkey 'in surrender or supplication'. After that, the monkey is taken home, and a celebration begins because of the elimination of the menace and the availability of meat. When the monkey is being readied for meat, a sudden silence overtakes Imchanok, and this is noticed by Tangchetla. She also refuses to give the pot to prepare meat for the quick transformation. She also does not permit the meat to be brought into the kitchen. He also instructs his wife not to take any grain from the hut where the monkey was shot. His wife points towards the massive amount of grain stored there, but he says that the grain is contaminated by the blood of the monkey and leaves it for other animals and birds to consume. Despite the good location of the abandoned hut, no villager ever dares to build a hut there.

The third time, after he gained normalcy, the boar presents itself as a challenge. Now, despite his age and the need for an assistant, he prepares for the hunting because of the large scale of the boar's rampage. Later, he goes into the forest with his nephew, and after hours of meandering, they all of a sudden encounter a boar-like animal, "but no earthly boar could be this big or so black." (34) He shoots the animal, which falls back and rolls down into the deep forest. With the apprehension of facing the wounded animal again, he leaves the place, looking back again and again. He comes back home and, on others' insistence, he says, "I think I have shot the boar." (35) Now the villagers force him to tell the direction, and on his reply, they reprimand him for taking the haunted route to the deep forest.

Very strangely, the villagers' search for the dead body of the boar turns out to be a failure, as it seems to have vanished mysteriously. On the other hand, Imchanok is gripped by unrelieved headaches. Except for his wife, he allows no one to visit him. His wife alone knew about his nighttime screams when he used to yell, "Look at him, he is as big as a

barn and as black as charcoal" (37). In this obsessional excess, he refuses to eat anything. His wife advises him to visit the place of firing and seek the forgiveness of the animal. He sets out with his wife without a gun. On the riverbank, he does a ritual of holding a boar's tooth and an aged bone with the solemnity of prayer. More strangely, he plucks a clump of hair and blows it away in the deep, haunted forest. One thing still astonishes him as to why the villagers undertook a failed search for the dead boar, while the dead carcass so easily presented itself before the hunter. That day again, the memory of the monkey revives, and he feels "shame and regret". (39) Finally, he buries "the boar's tooth, the dismantled gun and Imchanok the hunter". (40)

The story advocates a kind of environmental activism very different from that of the previous story discussed above. While "Laburnum for my Head" presents the protagonist's quiet resistance to an anthropocentric worldview and advocates a biocentric way of understanding reality through simple acts of planting saplings, "The Death of the Hunter" is a complex, mystical tale that warns about the dangers of anthropocentrism. By emphasising the traditional Naga beliefs that view the forest as a sentient and living system governed by reciprocity, Ao powerfully presents the dangers of transgression of this natural law through the suffering and finally the death of the hunter. This ecological retribution at the end of the story underscores Ao's belief in environmental justice that is derived from Naga animistic cosmology. Ao uses the power of storytelling to advocate traditional environmental wisdom that critiques the anthropocentric view of nature being a commodity for use by humans. The story also performs the pedagogical function of imparting a lesson of humility, restraint, and respect for nature as the basis of sustainable living. While the story dramatises the costs of undue and excessive hunting through the figure of the hunter who gets gradually alienated from his community, nature, and himself, it also conveys a strong ecological message against any form of exploitation rooted in a masculine and extractive ideology. Ao's use of indigenous oral traditions and cosmology is an attempt to reinstate a sustainable way of living that the traditional Naga world view advocates. The themes that she explores in the story, those of care, reciprocity, and mutuality, make it a classic example of her environmental literary activism. Here, activism is not conveyed through any form of organised protest but as moral resistance. The story underscores the tribals' silent disapproval of the kind of hunting that Imchanok indulges in and posits a world-view rooted in respect for

forest and non-human life forms. While critiquing anthropocentrism, the story reverses the power equation between humans and nature. This reversal is a form of environmental activism because it dramatises nature's retribution against unsustainable practices.

To sum up, both stories reveal a shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric view of life where peaceful coexistence, intimacy with nature, contemplativeness, and regard for the least human intervention in nature are advocated. Both stories give the readers the agency to recognise their roles as environmental activists who, with their own quiet ways, can resist anthropocentric and extractive ideologies and transform the world into a better place to live in.

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2.

Enlightenment and Self-realisation through the Voices of the River: An Eco-theological Rereading of *Siddhartha*

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&

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Abstract: Converging the theme of self-realisation, *Siddhartha*, a novella, explores into life story of a young Brahmin boy who abandons his sumptuous life and commences a journey in pursuit of the understanding of reality. He has recognised the incongruities between what he feels it as real and what he has been taught. His goal is to find the quietude that, he expects, will empower him to defeat fear and to experience with equanimity the contrasts of life. Siddhartha has felt the awareness of life with his experiences from his amble from home to Samanas; from Samanas to Gotama; from Gotama to Kamala; and to the river and ferryman. He has undergone both extremities difficulties and the luxuries of life in his journey. He has gone to the lap of the river, which has changed him from an ordinary man to a man of understanding. His experiences are equally valuable, though. Wealth, sensuality, and the attentions of a lovely courtesan have not given him complete satisfaction. He feels sad with the conditions of life, and he has chosen to live near the river, where he learns simply to listen and to be patient. This study stipulates how the river has empowered him to understand a spirit of love and how he has learnt to accept human essence that is separate from others. Further, it uses eco-theology as the theoretical tool of analysis and examines how Siddhartha grasps the wholeness of life and achieves a state of bliss and highest wisdom through the voices of the river, and how his realisation of reality and the voices of the river get united into "OM", the state of enlightenment.

Keywords: Consciousness; corporeal; enlightenment; incorporeal; self-realization

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Introduction

Hermann Hesse, a German novelist, found varying stories of the life of Buddha while visiting the different villages of India. Compiling them, he has given a shape of a novel to those stories entitled *Siddhartha*, "a fictitious biography" (Butler 117), and published in the German language in 1922. The novel revolves around the theme of the search for self-realisation by a young Brahmin boy, Siddhartha. He has recognised the need of learning the essence of life and move away from home. He could have left the home without giving any notice to family members, but as part of the Hindu culture, he asks permission from his father, though he spends hours getting it from his father. He abandons his comfortable life with his intention to wander, thinking that wandering will certainly give him the knowledge of the world. Slowly, he finds a rooted ambiguity between reality and what he has been taught. He intends to identify the cause of this ambiguity. His main purpose of leaving the home and family is to find the serenity so that it will enable him to defeat fear in life; the fear of pleasure and pain, the fear of success and defeat, the fear of loss and gain, the fear of you and me and so on, however, "the unity or oneness he sought may have been nothing more than the resolution of the conflicts developing within his own personality" (Shaw 204). Further, he intends to experience self-control over the contrasts of life, including joy and sorrow, life and death. He travels from place to place and meets several people. His travel and experience have given him a sense of self-realisation by the end of the novel.

The novel has raised many questions on the philosophy of human sorrows, fear and experiences. Primarily, it focuses on the life events of Buddha, but in a distinct narrative form. The narrative includes major events of his life symbolically. This paper does not look into every other detail of his journey and his verdict, but explores how the river has brought transformation in him, especially in his understanding. It examines how the central character, Siddhartha, has achieved a sense of enlightenment through his experiences with special focus on the

mythical river symbol and the theory of eco-theology. This study identifies that the river in *Siddhartha* is not only a place where Siddhartha learns important lessons. It is a living and sacred being, and shows that Siddhartha's spiritual growth is closely connected to his respect for nature and his understanding of all life as interdependent.

The novella, *Siddhartha* has revealed numerous aspects of the life of Siddhartha. It has explored the philosophy varying concerns of human life: the search for happiness, queries on reality, and fretfulness, anxiety and fear in life. Siddhartha has realised the truth of life through his journey from an ordinary young boy to a man of understanding. The studies on *Siddhartha* by now have examined the philosophy of life as a journey from different perspectives, but this research has identified the river as the symbol of consciousness in Siddhartha. How the voices of the river have given him the insight of his in-depth understanding and the sense of enlightenment is the central problem of this study.

This paper tries to address the following research questions: How have the voices of the river empowered Siddhartha to the state of the wholeness of life and the bliss and highest wisdom in life? And how his realisation of reality and the voices of the river get united into "OM", the state of enlightenment? As a qualitative research work, this paper analyses the novel *Siddhartha* from an eco-theological perspective. The central focus of the analysis is the role of the river in making the central character feel changed. The main method of research in this paper is textual analysis using eco-theology as a tool, with special focus on the power of the river in Siddhartha's mind, and how he has listened to the voices of the river and has found the essence of human life. He has respected and supposed the river as a powerful agent; however, he has not mentioned the river as a divine agent directly.

River Myths and Symbols: From Divine to Earthly

Hindu cultural practices are purely eco-cultural. From birth to death, one who lives the life of a Hindu lives with nature culturally. From naming to death functions, one has to follow nature not just as the means of life, but also as the means of knowledge and understanding. Nature provides

the place to live, things to eat and the motivation to keep active. Among them, the earth is the first nature that provides everything else one after another. "The Earth with its resources such as air, water, and soil sustains us and other forms of life" (Baindur 01). Moreover, earth, water, river, air, fire, sky, sun, are only the agents that Hindus prepare their culture to worship on. No religious function begins in the absence of fire. No function is complete without offering *Argha* to the sun. Similarly, "Water is sacred because all life depends on it: it is the source of survival and energy, the medium of self-purification (Krishna 117), and no religious function is performed without being physically and mentally purified by taking a bath in Gangas (Rivers). Rivers, therefore, are crucial for purification culturally in Hinduism.

If Hinduism is seen just as a pure religion, it becomes inequitable because it sets a pattern of life. In this sense, it is a civilisation. This civilisation stems from Vedic tradition, and it begins "with the worship of nature gods and reverent hymns to the earth, a large part of the belief system of these earliest thinkers was deeply influenced by close observation and contact with nature" (Baindur 05). Based on this Vedic cultural practice of worshipping nature, respecting and preserving nature becomes one major aspect of life. Being accompanied by nature and its phenomenal elements, nature itself is a civilisation for the Hindus. Elements of nature representatively reflect the power and essence of life. Vedic hymns present water with feminine identity as 'waters' and "they are goddesses and flow into the sea. Waters are related to the ocean and other landforms as mothers or wives; it is very clear that the nourishing fertility of water makes it easy to imagine the waters thus" (68). Water means to function for purity, both physical and psychological. "The use of water in rituals was prevalent, and even symbolic sanctification, consecrations and the everyday rituals were done by offering water" (Baindur 68). Water, in this context, is not merely a divine image, but also an essential element of life.

The water image is further extended as rivers in cultural texts like the Vedas and in cultural practices. Water flows for purification, self and others. The flowing makes itself purified, and it purifies the earth

and other forms of nature while flowing. The places, along which holy water flows, are rivers. Rivers, therefore overtone with other aspects of nature too: "the mountains were sanctified by their association as the source of rivers and lakes, and the homes of the gods themselves. Many pilgrimage sites are found on riverbanks; sites where two or even three rivers converge are considered particularly sacred" (Krishna 117). This association and interconnection are the sources of nature purification; one element of nature purifies another at a time. The word "river" evokes positive emotions and associations of things pure, clean, and calm. For this cause, self-purification of nature is vital in the totality of the ecological system.

Chhandajnyopanishad (I, 1. 2) examines the interlink between the natural elements and water, and how water performs the function of purifying other natural elements, "The essence of all living organisms is the earth. The essence of the earth is water. The essence of water is plants" (Joshi, Bimali and Trivedi 104). This mythical concept of essential connection of water with other forms of nature is properly addressed in the modern principle of ecocriticism as well: "the word 'river" evokes positive emotions and associations of things pure, clean, and calm" (Mihov and Hristov 04). The origin and development of human civilisation are closely related to rivers, "the link between water and life is found even in descriptions where water is called the essence of the Earth that makes up the beings (Baindur 68), and therefore life and water/rivers have connections.

Imaginings of rivers are further transformed into the collective form of Saraswati in the Vedas. And rivers are personalised with individual names and feminine identity for cultural purposes, "interpretations give the sources of the waters—particularly the rivers—personalities and unique names" (68). Vedic symbolic association of Saraswati regards rivers as a feminine deity and the goddess of knowledge. In one sense, the river Saraswati, reflected as Ganga in later Puranic myths, represents consciousness with divine essence and purifies everyone who comes into contact with her (as Saraswati) on earth. Hence, rivers have mythical implications to life as the source of

purification, both physical and mental. Physical purification has to do with the material purification of the body, whereas mental purification has to do with spirituality and consciousness. The divine image of the river is identified with Saraswati or Ganga and the earthly image is identified with individual rivers similar to the one depicted in the novel *Siddhartha*. The role of the river, in either position, is the transformation from impurity to purity and from physical to spiritual.

In the Vedic tradition, rivers are seen as sacred forces that purify, guide, and connect human life with the divine. Texts like the *Rig Veda* describe rivers as living goddesses whose flowing waters carry both physical nourishment and spiritual power. This idea of the river as a source of wisdom and liberation forms a strong symbolic background for Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. Although the novel is shaped by Buddhist themes, it also reflects this older Vedic understanding of rivers as teachers that reveal deeper truths. When Siddhartha listens to the river, he follows a path that joins these traditions: he learns through direct experience, as in Buddhism, but the river itself acts as a sacred presence. It echoes the belief that nature can express the divine. In this way, the novel creates a bridge between river symbolism, the river's voice and Buddhist ideas of self-realisation. It allows the river to stand at the centre of both the physical journey and the spiritual awakening.

River in *Siddhartha*: Sanctifying the Corporal and Incorporeal

The river has generated a special image in Siddhartha's understanding. After the separation from Govinda and after he has begun a separate quest even ahead from the teachings of Gautama, Siddhartha has embarked on his journey to nowhere. Nowhere in the sense that he has no particular place to visit, but he has only one destination to achieve self-realisation. He has come across a river (the name of the river is not given in the text), and he has met a ferryman. He has felt a different sensation from the river for the first time in life, "never before he had like a water so well as this one, never before had he perceived the voice and the parable of the moving water thus strongly and beautifully" (Hesse 74). It seems as if the river has given him something special:

"river to represent life itself—a totality where all individual moments merge. The river becomes an image of unity that holds both the physical world and the spiritual dimension together" (Freedman 23). He realises that the river wants to tell him something meaningful, that he "felt a deep love for this rushing water, and decided for himself, not to leave it very soon" (74). The river reveals a deep oneness of all existence. Siddhartha sees that the physical and the spiritual are not separate.

He begins to hear the voice of the river. It is the voice of water for which he thinks that water talks as the mode of awakening, "which was newly awaking" (75) in him. He wants to stay in the river, near it; to learn from it; and to listen to it. He feels that "he who would understand this water and its secrets, so it seemed to him, would also understand many other things, many secrets, all secrets" (75). By this time, Siddhartha has developed an ultimate realisation that the real understanding of the world will only be possible by being close to the river-water and the sound it produces.

As the central factor of the world's different civilisations, both in the East and the West, rivers "have served for millennia as transportation routes; sources of food, water and powers; as sinks for waste products, and as objects of artistic and metaphysical interests" (Johnson, Richardson and Naimo 134). Likewise, Siddhartha has travelled many places and has understood that "this water ran and ran, incessantly it ran, and was nevertheless always there, was always at all times the same and yet new in every moment! (Hesse 75). Water runs; it runs, and again runs and therefore it becomes unadulterated and sanctified. Mihov and Hristov have seen the power of purity in water/river through constant moving, "You cannot step twice into the same river" – next time the river will not be the same. This maxim of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus probably describes most precisely the dynamic nature of rivers" (Mihov and Hristov 12). Running water of the river, therefore, can sanctify the earth and is sanctified itself due to its millennia-long incessant movement, and therefore it captures its ability to generate the civilisation.

The civilisation based on rivers or water, like the Indus civilisation, epitomises rivers' ecologically valuable mode of life for which modern eco-theory defines as eco-civilisation. It primarily focuses on how ecology determines the culture and behaviour of people. This theory seeks to observe nature's both physical and metaphysical benefits to human beings. This principle of looking into the corporeal and incorporeal connectivity of nature to humans and spirituality is eco-theology, which "seeks to uncover the theological basis for a proper relationship between God, humanity and the cosmos" (Deane-Drummond XI). Modern ecological study receives nature as the source of corporeal benefit, especially for the betterment of the material aspect of life; however, nature's purity for nature itself is a recent prominent aspect of deep ecological theory. Coalescing ecology and theology as a single term and concept, eco-theology presumes nature as the prime source of intangible and spiritual understanding. It seeks to see the connection between humanity, nature and the divine at a time. It provides the principle to see some sense of incorporeal realisation in nature. In this sense, corporal nature can transform intangible realisation.

River, as one essential phenomenon of nature, therefore transforms the physical into metaphysical realisation in eco-theological insight. The same transformation takes place in Siddhartha when he visits the river and the ferryman twice. In addition to being a physical river, for him, its water is not only inherently pure but also powerfully purifying, "spiritually cleansing, purging one of lifetimes of karmic and other religious impurities (Nelson 667). This is the moment he has found himself sanctified with the magnitude of the river. He has realized that river is everywhere, physically and metaphysically, "the river is everywhere at once, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the rapids, in the sea, in the mountains, everywhere at once, and that there is only the present time for it, not the shadow of the past, not the shadow of the future?" (Hesse 79). It is his sense of change taken place within him. He had seen and visited the river in his life many times, but this was the first time he had ever felt a change in his thinking because of the river. He listens to the voice of "OM" from the river,

which has made him really sanctified. Listening "OM" in the river's voice is the first step of his transformation from worldly understanding to the ultimate realisation. He has decided to listen to the same voice, the voice of the reality of nature.

River's Voices and Siddhartha's Consolidation within 'OM'

Siddhartha, the central character of the novel *Siddhartha*, was born in a Hindu Brahmin family. He has received a Hindu cultural upbringing. He has undergone the civility of venerating nature and its parts, such as earth, tree, animals, sun and river, as his family and religious culture. Hindu culture, in a great sense, is a civilisation, especially a river civilisation, begun from the Vedic knowledge transmitted as Indus culture, "The people of Indus Valley Civilisation seem preoccupied with the Vedic knowledge" (Roy 39). And, "it turned out to be the third major early culture of humankind after Egypt and Mesopotamia" (Staal 46). The earliest cultural and philosophical text founding Hinduism, the *Rig Veda* firstly tells that water is the first thing ever found at the time of origin, "There was complete darkness earlier, and all that existed was Salila" (ṚV. 10.129.3) (Roy 63). Roy further elaborates that "Āpaḥ were indeed Salila earlier. Now Āpaḥ and Salila both mean water" (64). In this sense, worldly existence, both physical and metaphysical, is watery existence. Being brought up with this culture, Siddhartha has followed the river (of which the name is not given) as the driving force in his journey to spirituality and understanding.

Vasudeva, a ferryman and Siddhartha's company during his final level journey, shares his lifelong experience with the river and his belief that the river teaches him the essence of life, "The River has taught me to listen, from it you will learn it as well. It knows everything; everything can be learned from it. See, you've already learned this from the water too, that it is good to strive downwards, to sink, to seek depth" (Hesse 78). The reference provides the illustration that the learned Siddhartha has become a ferryman. How it becomes is that Siddhartha has taken the river as a real 'Guru' in his journey to the spiritual. Guru, in Hindu and Buddhist tradition, is the uppermost image; the symbol of

divine consciousness from where/whom knowledge is transferred. This belief of “river knows everything and everything can be learned from it” is the sole cause of Siddhartha’s realisation of the river as consciousness.

No paradox exists in the argument that a river is an object. But how the river is consciousness is a real paradox. Consciousness enables one to think differently. It is not the matter as seen in the substantial world. It is a symbol and an abstract identity. The river is the symbol of consciousness because the river appears differently to different people in the way Krishna appears differently to all his followers as Krishna consciousness. While looking at the river through material eyes, one finds it just an object. One who makes use of the eye of consciousness, the inner eye, sees many things in the river. As “Hindu tradition embodies a wide variety of perceptions of nature” (Nelson 663), Vasudeva has realised many facets of the river, both physical and spiritual:

> I have transported many thousands, and to all of them, my river has been nothing but an obstacle on their travels. They travelled to seek money and business, and for weddings, and on pilgrimages, and the river was obstructing their path, and the ferryman's job was to get them quickly across that obstacle. But for some among thousands, a few, four or five, the river has stopped being an obstacle; they have heard its voice, they have listened to it, and the river has become sacred to them, as it has become sacred to me. (Hesse 79)

Vasudeva has spent his whole life with the river and in the river as a ferryman. He has understood the river properly. It is an obstacle for many people, especially those who are always in search of material prosperity, money and business. Very few people can listen to the inviolability and purity of the river. River is the same; sound is the same; pattern and mode are the same, but the way people perceive the voice of the river is different "the river has many voices, very many voices? Hasn't it the voice of a king, and of a warrior, and of a bull, and of a bird of the night, and of a woman giving birth, and of a sighing man, and a

thousand other voices more?" (80). The river, consisting of thousands of voices, is really a consciousness. This consciousness can be felt in two ways: the river having the quality of consciousness and the river enabling people to feel the sense of consciousness. In either of the cases, the river is the symbol of consciousness.

River reflects the cognitive essence to the ones who can really understand its voices, "the human cognitive process as comprising three parts: the initial sensory flux, the relations obtaining between this and the mental 'copies' that we then work on, and our existing stock of abstract truths from culture and past personal experience" (Stephen 281-82). The river in Siddhartha has "all voices of the creatures are in its voice." (Hesse 80). The multiple voices of this river have the combination of sensory flux, mental state and abstract truth. For those who think river just as an object through their sensory perception, presume it as an obstacle for their journey to the material life. Only a few who suppose the river as an abstract truth of life regard it as a conciliator to their journey to the conscious. Vasudeva has felt the same, and so does it happen to Siddhartha, but this cognisance comes into him only when he has returned from the journey of material life to the voyage to spiritual understanding.

This attachment of the river to Siddhartha's quest for the spiritual, beyond all mundane existence, reveals his quest for the essence of reality in the river. His belief in the essence of life in the voices of the river ultimately relates to his belief in 'natural religion' — the pantheistic belief of nature itself as God — and 'natural theology' — the belief of the existence of God based on natural facts. Siddhartha's perception to the river has changed from just as the physical object to the divine source similar to the theme of natural religion with the belief of nature as God or the divine, "a number of items came forth from the waters. Among them was Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and apsaras, the divine nymphs who were a class of demigoddesses" (Krishna 116), and Siddhartha also thinks the same, "every wind, every cloud, every bird, every beetle was just as divine and knows just as much and can teach just as much as the worshipped river" (Hesse 109). He has felt something

special in the voice of the river, "he spoke of the tree by the river, and of his deep fall, of the 'holy Om', and how he had felt such a love for the river after his slumber, the ferryman listened with twice the attention, entirely and completely absorbed by it, with his eyes closed" (Hesse 78). This realisation has different effects in life: "a symbol of nature; sensual experiences leading to spiritual awakening" (Field 147). In the natural world, "it refers to the intrinsic property of ecological entities" (Jain 115). Modern ecological practice defines this pleasure of listening to the voice of the river as one of the properties of an ecological entity. Likewise, in the supernatural world, "it refers to the matters related to religion" (115). This religion does not mean the worship of gods and goddesses; rather, it is the religion of fathoming into the sense of spirituality. Both Siddhartha and Vasudeva have understood that this realisation is a way to learn "the secret from the river: that there is no time" (Hesse 79). The river is the way to learn the secret of life.

As the way of learning the secret of life, Siddhartha listens attentively to this river, this song of a thousand voices, "he neither listened to the suffering nor the laughter, when he did not tie his soul to any particular voice and submerged his self into it, but when he heard them all, perceived the whole, the oneness, then the great song of the thousand voices consisted of a single word, which was Om: the perfection" (101). Thousand voices are united into a single word "OM", and "OM" sounds like the thousands of voices; the voice of suffering and laughter and the voice of oneness and wholeness up to the level of his soul. The sound of "OM" unites everything in a discipline in which "morality and natural phenomena are connected and interdependent" (Jain 113). This discipline has empowered both Siddhartha and Vasudeva into the mode of understanding. The river is a teacher in one sense. It teaches them the voice of the reality of life. Siddhartha tells his realisation of the teaching of the river with his childhood friend towards the end of his life, "when this holy man went into the forests, he knew everything, knew more than you and me, without teachers, without books, only because he had believed in the river" (Hesse 109). He has found that the 'OM' is floating in the air over all the voices of the river. With this word, he believes he has received the knowledge of life that

has led him to the sense of enlightenment.

River and Siddhartha's Nirvana

The novel, *Siddhartha,* does not exactly mention whether Siddhartha has received Nirvana, however, he has been on the journey to it. It is the state of ultimate knowledge of the real world and the position of the soul beyond the possibility of rebirth into physical life again. The whole journey Siddhartha has undergone shows that he has really understood the real world even without receiving any formal teaching. The source of knowledge is the experience of life. Towards the end of his life, Siddhartha spoke with Govinda, which reflects that he can imagine Nirvana and Samsara as one" (111). Govinda has felt that his words and appearance match together from which it is possible to guess Siddhartha's departure of his individual body and transformation of the soul to the mode of spiritual journey, "He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha, instead he saw other faces, many, a long sequence, a flowing river of faces, of hundreds, of thousands, which all came and disappeared, and yet all seemed to be there simultaneously, which all constantly changed and renewed themselves, and which were still all Siddhartha" (111). He has seen the smile on Siddhartha's face when his soul is departing his body:

> Govinda saw it like this, this smile of the mask, this smile of oneness above the flowing forms, this smile of simultaneousness above the thousand births and deaths, this smile of Siddhartha was precisely the same, was precisely of the same kind as the quiet, delicate, impenetrable, perhaps benevolent, perhaps mocking, wise, thousand-fold smile of Gotama, the Buddha, as he had seen it himself with great respect a hundred times. Like this, Govinda knew, the perfected ones are smiling. (112)

With this point of Siddhartha's departure, the novel focuses on the fact that the river is one of the major sources of Siddhartha's sense of understanding, enlightenment and Nirvana he has achieved. In Siddhartha, the river is one of the most important symbols. It symbolises not only the journey towards enlightenment, which is the entire goal of

Siddhartha throughout his life, but also the realisation of enlightenment itself. River is an eternal power "as a symbol of time, timelessness, unity, spiritual reconciliation" (Ziolkowski 112). Kumari opines that the river is a powerful symbol:

> The river is also a powerful symbol for eternity. It is there at different points of Siddhartha's life, and it will be there long after he is gone, just as it was there long before he was. This idea of being able to interact with such a powerful part of nature that is clearly eternal makes a powerful impression on Siddhartha. While the river's course may change, its depths swell or shrink, or even if it be dammed for agricultural use, the fact is that the river will always be there. (Kumari 655)

The river presents itself in Siddhartha's spiritual journey; provides the path to his journey of lust; and ultimately grants him salvation. It guides him through the entirety of the story, enabling him to find unity among his experiences. Indeed, it stands as the single most important symbol of the story. Once Siddhartha achieves his unity through the river, he smiles as the perfect Buddha does, for he achieves true enlightenment. Hesse uses the river to symbolise the unity of all things, eternity, and overall, the path of life and enlightenment. He mentions how the river's voice was full of longing, full of smarting woe, full of insatiable desire. The river flows on towards its goal. He connects how the river never stops flowing, never reaching an end or complete stop, to goals. This is what Siddhartha has realised his life consisted of. At first, his goal is to be a good Brahmin, then he wants to find his self by becoming a Samana, and after that, he wants to seek Buddha's experience in efforts to achieve enlightenment. One goal after another, Siddhartha is always chasing after something and his sense of desire to achieve his goal changes. Furthermore, the river shows how in life, the flow of the cycle of goals creates the feelings of desire, pleasure, sorrow, etc., which is what life is composed of. Siddhartha figures out through the river that to find unity and wholeness, one does not focus on goals or each outcome, such as pleasure or sorrow, which will then eliminate desire. Through the river, he learned what it took to find true salvation.

Conclusion

Herman Hesse's novel Siddhartha narrates the events in the life of Siddhartha, as the author admits, a reflective character of Siddhartha Gautama. It is the journey of Siddhartha's life from a young boy to his old age, from ignorance to his knowledge and from his search for the material world to the world of the spiritual. In his quest for ultimate knowledge, the river becomes a symbol of transcendence. It transcends the material into spiritual, corporeal into incorporeal, ignorance into knowledge, and part into the whole. It is the symbol of existence and eternity at a time. It teaches Siddhartha to exist and to learn the lesson of eternity. Along with his understanding of the river as awareness and consciousness, Siddhartha, with the voices of the river, has attained the highest level of understanding, which can be defined as enlightenment. It is the mode of self-realisation that he has learnt through nature, especially the river and its voice joined with 'OM'. In this sense, the river not only has physical value to him. It has the divine value to transcend him to the mode of self-realisation. Therefore, the river, in the novel, has a symbolic connection between the physical and spiritual, life and beyond life.

Eco-theology helps us see nature as sacred and alive. This idea of nature as divine symbolism establishes the connection between natural elements like rivers, mountains, and trees and sees them as divine forces. In *Siddhartha*, the river reflects these meanings. It is not only water flowing through the land. It is a spiritual guide. The river teaches through sound, movement, and silence. This role connects to the Vedic idea that nature can reveal deeper truths. These ideas lead directly to the philosophical theme of self-realisation. Siddhartha does not reach understanding through books or teachers. He learns by listening to the river. The river shows him unity, change, and interconnectedness. These lessons help him understand his true self. Hence, the novel *Siddhartha* establishes the sacred value of the river and its voices.

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3.

Navigating Disturbance: Ecological Challenges and Cultural Narratives in *The Hungry Tide*

Khushboo Agrawal

Abstract: Deforestation, industrialisation, and plastic pollution disrupt the fragile balance between human habitats and the natural world. In the Sundarbans, a vital mangrove wetland that buffers against disasters and shelters rare species, human encroachment erodes vegetation and imperils biodiversity. Urban dwellers feel these imbalances through extreme weather like scorching heat, bitter cold, and unnatural fog, while events like the COVID-19 pandemic reveal the perils of invading untouched wilderness. Overpopulation exacerbates this crisis, echoing the myth of Bonbibi, the forest goddess who brokered a pact with the tiger deity Dokkhin Rai: humans and tigers must respect each other's domains, lest violation invite doom. Sundarbans' impoverished communities, driven by necessity into the tiger-haunted woods for survival, invoke Bonbibi's protection, viewing the tiger as a devilish embodiment of peril. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, set amid West Bengal's mangrove islands, weaves the improbable bond between marine biologist Piya and fisherman Fokir, who connect wordlessly amid riverine nights against the backdrop of refugee resettlement in the Morichjhapi forest reserves. The novel probes the fraught human-animal dynamics in this tidal ecosystem, illuminating the ceaseless tussle between people and nature across India and Bangladesh. This paper uncovers fresh insights into these underexplored dimensions.

Keywords: Sunderbans, mangrove ecosystem, ecological disturbance, myth, eco-marxism, environmental threats

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I. Political aspect

There is an urgent need to understand the interconnectedness of political invasions, environmental degradation, and economic interests. Political invasions often result in environmental destruction, as seen in the case of fossil fuels. To meet global demand, the government remains reluctant to dismantle its fossil fuel industries. Since the British colonial period, the demand for fossil fuels has steadily increased. It is essential to understand this historical context and examine the global economy's impact on climate change "The British Empire was essentially built on fossil fuels: it was the British mastery of coal that gave it a huge military advantage over the rest of the world." (Ben) If nations were to shift toward renewable energy sources, the demand for fossil fuels would decrease. However, because fossil fuel supplies are largely controlled by Western countries such as Britain, Canada, the U.S., and Australia, their economies would likely suffer. This profit-driven motivation compels them to continue fossil fuel extraction, despite the imminent threat of climate change. The Sunderban region has also been stripped of its fossil fuel treasure. Although mangrove forests are one of the largest mediums of absorbing carbon dioxide, but the situation is different because digging out fossil fuels like coal, oil has an adverse effect on the environment. Digging out too much coal leads to land subsidence. On the other hand, the procedure of oil emissions leads to spills devastating marine and coastal life, poisoning water and harming mangroves, which protect coastlines. It puts wildlife in an endangered situation. The tigers loiter in search of fresh water, as also Irrawaddy dolphins and other sea creatures are on the verge of extinction. The vanishing Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarban region became a subject of research for Piyali, an American cetologist. They represent the fragile biodiversity of the Sundarbans and the urgent need for conservation. "For Lusibarians, on the other hand, dolphins might be perceived as messengers, or Bon Bibi messengers," as Kusum calls them (Ghosh 2005, 194). The fishmen consider them as an indication of a shoal of fish.

> While there is close to full scientific consensus that greenhouse gas emissions from human activities are a major cause of climate change—endangering human settlements, food production, and water supplies—the choice of mitigation policies depends less on simple cost-benefit analyses and more on the patterns of organized interests. Specifically, it depends on whether the costs

and benefits of these policies are concentrated or widely distributed (Tvinnereim and Ivarsflaten).

Political invasions have consistently harmed the environment, with political and economic priorities often disregarding safety and ecological balance. For example, the Morichjhapi incident in the Sundarbans illustrates the impact of political conflict. Refugees from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) were initially relocated to the forests of Madhya Pradesh but were later expelled and forced into the dense forests of the Sundarbans, resulting in illegal encroachment. These refugees were sacrificed for allegedly intruding on tiger reserve land as the Morichjhapi was turned into a battleground, leading to the tragic loss of thousands of lives as in present scenario "the production of 'human waste'—or more precisely, wasted lives, the 'superfluous' populations of migrants, refugees, and other outcasts—as an inevitable outcome of modernization."(Bauman) Similarly, Deep Halder, in his book *Blood Island*, depicts the pain and suffering of a Morichjhapi massacre survivor, highlighting how these individuals were sacrificed for intruding on the tiger reserve land. While balance in the environment is essential, one must question whether it should come at the cost of human lives. Should human lives be sacrificed to conserve wildlife? The Morichjhapi massacre reveals how societies often prioritise economic growth over ecological integrity, raising troubling questions about our values and priorities.

II. **Development of Theory: Eco-Marxism**

The understanding of the world expanded after the emergence of ecocriticism, first introduced in William Rueckert's essay *"Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism"* (1978). The term *eco* is derived from *ecology*, which is the study of living organisms and their relationship with the natural environment. Ecocriticism, therefore, intersects with sociology, examining the relationship between society and nature. This approach is also referred to as *green sociology*.

> This new eco-theory responds to the global ecological crisis and addresses important environmental issues, specifically by examining values, in literary texts, with deep ecological implications. Ecocriticism, then, takes an earth-centred approach to literature, and an ecological approach to literary criticism. Ecocriticism mainly

concentrates on how literature interacts with and participates in the entire ecosphere. (Oppermann and Glottfelty 29)

To understand the concept of Eco-Marxism, we must first revisit our understanding of Marxism. Marxism, as a scientific theory, is rooted in materialism and must account for historical processes. At its core, it is an anti-capitalist ideology that critiques capitalism for creating divisions between the "haves" and the "have-nots. "Eco-Marxism is a modernist extension of this theory. As the world continues to evolve, many countries are moving toward modernisation and adopting new ways of living in the twenty-first century. However, the constant rise in industrialisation and urbanisation, driven by the desire for a modern lifestyle, has led to several environmental and social problems.

Marxist theory argues that both the Earth (natural resources) and human labour are essential for wealth creation. The capitalist force that controls the working class (proletariat) not only exploits it but also contributes to its eventual destruction. Man and nature are directly interconnected. As Marx states, a critical history of technology "reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations" (Kloppenburg 1). Marx uses the term *history* to refer to the study of developmental processes in society, rather than simply a record of human events. These processes involve the interconnected evolution of society and nature. Climate change is one of the many consequences of environmental degradation, which is deeply tied to global politics and economic systems. Environmental law plays a vital role in shaping and protecting ecological conditions. It safeguards natural elements such as land, water, air, and soil from pollution, contamination, and exploitation. It also addresses liability and responds to environmental disasters.

Eco-Marxist theory began developing in the mid-twentieth century, initially emphasising revolutions and the search for new technical solutions to drive environmental reform. The novel uses the actual events of Morichjhapi to explore the conflict between environmental conservation and human rights, particularly for marginalised communities. Kanai reads Nirmal's notebook. It tells the story of how Nirmal became involved with the settlement on Morichjhãpi after he retired from teaching. In his youth, Nirmal was a

renowned Marxist in Calcutta, but he had to leave the city after he was arrested and suffered a mental breakdown. He spent 30 years teaching in Lusibari, and during that time, he wrote nothing. However, he remained a firm believer in Marxist theory, much to Nilima's chagrin—she spent those years developing the Babadon Trust, which provided healthcare and other services to the locals. She also developed a Women's Union to help the many widows on Lusibari, as it's common for men to die while out fishing. After his retirement, Nirmal began visiting schools with the help of Horen. One evening, Horen and Nirmal were caught in a storm and ended up meeting Kusum on the island of Morichjhãpi. She took them in and told them her story of finding her mother, getting married, having her son, and finally, joining a refugee march from central India all the way to the Sundarbans. Nirmal was thrilled to learn that Morichjhãpi was being developed in a very Marxist way, and he offered to teach the children there. When Nilima found out, she was incensed that Nirmal was involved—she insisted that the refugees were just squatters, and the land was protected forestland. She refused to provide medical services to the island. Nirmal vowed to keep his involvement secret and continued to go to Morichjhãpi with Horen over the next several months. By the late 1980s, the focus shifted from purely technical approaches to financial collaborations between the state and the market. The theory also began to consider the role of human agency, institutions, and culture in promoting reform. Since 1995, attention has increasingly turned toward non-European nations to bring about change in global environmental dynamics.

III. Environmental threats:

India's climatic environment varies in all four directions due to its diverse geographical features. The Himalayas lie in the north, plateaus dominate the south, the arid Thar Desert stretches across the west, and the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans are in the east. This geographical diversity gives India a wide range of ecosystems. At the international level, the Ramsar Convention brought global recognition to the Sundarbans. The Ramsar Convention began on 30 January 1975, and the Sundarbans was designated as the 27th Ramsar site in India in 2019. Before that, 26 Indian sites had already been recognised as wetlands of international importance. There are nine criteria under the Ramsar Convention for a site to be declared a wetland of international importance. The Sundarbans meets four of them: the presence of rare species and threatened ecological communities, high biological diversity,

significant and representative fish and fish spawning grounds, and important migration paths.

> The Indian Sundarban is home to many rare and globally threatened species, such as the critically endangered northern river terrapin (Batagur baska), the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin (Orcaella brevirostris), and the vulnerable fishing cat (Prionailurus viverrinus). Two of the world's four horseshoe crab species, and eight of India's 12 species of kingfisher are also found here. Recent studies claim that the Indian Sundarban is home to 2,626 faunal species and 90% of the country's mangrove varieties. (S.S. Singh)

The Hungry Tide is centred on the Sundarbans, a unique and ecologically significant region. The Sundarbans is the world's largest mangrove forest, home to a fragile ecosystem and several endangered species. This untouched vegetation and wildlife were first disturbed by Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scotsman who sought to establish a colony based on utopian ideals. Poor families from West Bengal and East Pakistan were invited to settle in the region, and their arrival disrupted the delicate balance of the local wildlife. The tension between humans and nature found symbolic resolution in the mythical figure of Bonbibi.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh vividly captures the life of the Sundarbans through detailed descriptions of its people, wildlife, local folklore, and historical events. The novel touches on key issues such as human trafficking, mythical beliefs, folk performances, and the Morichjhapi incident. The Sundarbans is a vast delta formed by the confluence of the Ganga, Jamuna-Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers. Two-thirds of the delta lies in Bangladesh, while one-third is in India. Known as *Bhatirdesh* (the tide country) by locals, its islands appear and disappear overnight due to powerful tidal currents that constantly reshape the landscape. "The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the ãchol that follows her, half wetted by the sea." (Ghosh 6)

Sir Daniel Hamilton arrived from Scotland to seek his fortune in British India. Initially employed by a shipping company connected to his family, he quickly rose in rank due to the company's monopoly and soon became wealthy. Motivated by his vision to rehabilitate the Sundarbans, he purchased ten acres of land from the British government at the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, the islands were

densely covered with mangrove forests. However, due to land scarcity in Calcutta, many impoverished people were willing to migrate—even "sell themselves"—for a bigha or two of land.

Hamilton believed in the principle that "labour conquers everything" (Ghosh, 51)and promoted a utopian community where people of all races, classes, and religions could coexist without social distinctions. As Ghosh writes: *"It would be a country run by co-operatives. Here people wouldn't exploit each other, and everyone would have a share in the land"* (Ghosh 51). Hamilton's egalitarian vision of a cooperative society naturally became a magnet for those who had been denied land, rights, and security, allowing his utopian ideals to take concrete shape as marginalised communities migrated to the Sundarbans in search of the very justice and opportunity his model promised.

> "His idealistic vision attracted marginalized groups—landless, poor, and underprivileged people from Orissa, eastern Bengal, and the Santhal Parganas—who flocked to the Sundarbans in search of shelter and opportunity. The islands soon became inhabited by a diverse cross-section of society and came to be known as *Hamilton-abad.* As the population grew, settlers began occupying nearby islands. Sir Daniel named many of these places after people associated with him—names like *Jamespur, Annapur, Emilybari,* and *Lusibari"* (Ghosh 51).

Amitav Ghosh vividly depicts Bengal as it was in 1903, when Sir Daniel Hamilton first explored the Sundarbans. The population of the region significantly increased after the Partition of 1947 and again in 1971 following the Bangladesh Liberation War. Life in the Sundarbans is a constant challenge. People migrated here in search of shelter, food, and clothing. Hamilton's vision of settlement demanded a sense of brotherhood and community. He mobilised resources to help people settle in the Sundarbans, and *The Hungry Tide* describes some of the French-style buildings that remain key attractions.

Electricity in the region is limited generators provide power for only a few hours after sunset. Yet the challenges of living in the mangrove forest are endless. The ecological conditions of the Sundarbans have created unavoidable hardships. Geographical studies suggest that the Bengal Basin is tilting eastward, causing freshwater to flow primarily into Bangladesh and leaving India with little to none. This

scarcity of freshwater affects both humans and animals—tigers, deprived of freshwater and prey, often turn into man-eaters. These powerful and feared animals have claimed the lives of many who venture into the forest in search of food and other natural resources. A grim tradition developed: whenever men entered the forest in groups, their wives would wear white garments in anticipation of death—believing that at least one man would not return.

The Sundarbans account for 60% of India's total mangrove forest cover. In 2019, it was designated as the 27th Ramsar Site in India. The Ramsar Convention, established in 1975 under an intergovernmental environmental treaty by UNESCO, recognises wetlands of international importance. It encourages national and international cooperation for the conservation of wetlands and promotes their sustainable use. The Ramsar framework specifically highlights wetlands that provide critical habitats for waterfowl and other species, emphasising both ecological protection and wise resource management.

IV. **Rescue in Mythology: The Cult of Bonbibi**

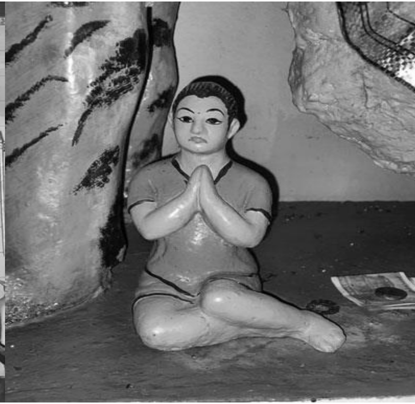
The Sundarbans, known as the "land of honey," is home to honey collectors called *Mouwalis*. In this tiger-dominated region, collecting honey and returning home safely is a perilous task. The constant threat of tigers has given rise to a form of religious protection embodied in the figure of Bonbibi "The cult emerged out of a myth centring around the glorious victory of Bonbibi over the land of Atharobhati and Badabon, names associated with the present-day Sundarbans." (Chakrabarty)

Bonbibi is also known as *Bandevi*, though the two names hold slightly different connotations. While Bonbibi's identity is deeply connected to the cult of *Dakshin Rai*, Bandevi is not linked with any such cult figure (Chakrabarty). There is no supernatural origin attributed to the forest goddess; instead, her story serves as an allegory. The demon *Dakshin Rai*, who often appears in the form of a tiger, represents the southern forest— 'Dakshin' being the colloquial word for 'south'. Bonbibi stands as a symbol of a utopian cult, embodying justice and protection for the vulnerable forest dwellers.

Bonbibi is one of the most syncretic deities in Bengal. She is worshipped by the entire community of the Sundarbans, cutting across religious boundaries. Her followers belong to no single religion. As the

goddess of the forest, Bonbibi is revered as the protector of the poor and helpless—especially those who depend on the forest for their livelihood. Interestingly, Bonbibi's origin lies in Islamic tradition, which seems contradictory to conventional religious divisions. She is believed to be a Muslim saint who follows the commands of Allah. According to legend, she arrived from Medina with her twin brother *Shah Jongoli*, following the instruction of the archangel, to protect the inhabitants and animals of the Sundarbans. Clad in white Arabian robes, they symbolise peace and justice. Their divine mission was to make *Bhatirdesh*—"the country of eighteen tides"—suitable for human habitation. Bonbibi eventually reaches a truce with the demon *Dakhin Rai*, agreeing that the dense forest would remain his domain, while the rest would belong to humans. Both parties would respect each other's territories. This myth lays the foundation for a new "religion of the forest"—where survival, harmony, and mutual respect are the highest values.

Religion in this forest region becomes a protective canopy under which all communities seek safety. Bonbibi (or Bandevi) serves as that divine shelter. Muslim devotees dress her in *ghagra* and *pyjama*, adorn her with braided hair, a cap, a *tikli* (forehead ornament), and shoes. Her vehicle is any wild animal. In contrast, Hindu representations of Bandevi depict her riding a tiger, crowned and garlanded, dressed in a sari. Bonbibi is typically worshipped alongside four other characters: *Dokkhi*, *Shah Jongoli*, *Dakhin Rai*, and *Barkhan Gazi*—a landlord and familial ally of Dokkhin Rai.



"Bandurga (Up Left): Hunting Tiger by Shah Janguli." *Sundarban Tiger Reserve*, https://sundarbantigerreserve.org/?tab=Sb_story.
"Bonbibi (Up Right): She Is Also Borne by Other Animals." *People's Archive of Rural India*, https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/ma-bonbibi-mother-to-humans-and-tigers/.
"Dokkhin Rai (Down Left): Representing Tigers of the South Region of the Forest." *Sundarban Tiger Reserve*, https://sundarbantigerreserve.org/?tab=Sb_story.
"Dukhe (Down Right): The Boy Rescued by Bonbibi in Mythical Story." *Sundarban Tiger Reserve*, https://sundarbantigerreserve.org/?tab=Sb_story.

The mythical story of Bon Bibi is periodically performed on stage by village artists. No technology supports these stage performances. The tiger costume does not completely conceal the actor, yet the scene where the tiger attacks Dukhey (Dukkhi) often brings tears to the eyes of the

audience. This tradition revives and reinforces the belief in Bon Bibi among the younger generation. The story revolves around a small boy named Dukhey, who is rescued by the goddess in response to his desperate cry for help. A boatman named Dhona had exchanged him for honey and wax with the evil deity Dokkhin Rai. When the demon attacked him, Dukhey called out to Bon Bibi. “She revived the boy, taking him into her lap while her brother, Shah Jangoli, dealt a terrible chastisement to the demon” (Ghosh 105). The weak and helpless Dukhey was blessed with good health and a treasure of honey and wax upon his return home. Thus, the law of the forest was established: “the rich and greedy would be punished, while the poor and righteous were rewarded” (Ghosh 105). In such fearful and dangerous regions, it is the mythical faith in Bon Bibi that keeps the human spirit alive. As the people of the Sundarbans believe: “You can enter the forest anytime you like. Whether you will leave it depends on Bon Bibi” (Nath). There are some auspicious beliefs and opinions of localities:

> The islanders believe that one must enter her kingdom without carrying any weapons. ‘…the islanders often explained that Bonbibi (sic) had left them the injunctions that they were to enter the forest only with a pure heart/mind’ (pobitro mon) and ‘empty hands’ (khali haathe). The islanders explained that they had to identify completely with Dukhe, whose unfailing belief in Bonbibi had saved him,’ writes anthropologist Annu Jalais in Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans. (Nath)

In the study of Eco-Marxism, the mythology of Bon Bibi offers a compelling lens through which to explore the relationship between nature and society, a theme that Amitav Ghosh has beautifully woven into his work. The man-eating Bengal tigers are referred to as Dokkhin Rai. “Dokkhin” is the Bengali pronunciation of “Dakshin,” which means “south,” referencing the southern region of Bangladesh, where the Sundarbans are located.

The deep-rooted belief in Dokkhin Rai reflects the pervasive fear of this mythical demon. All dense and wild forests are under his domain. This fear is so profound that it governs human behaviour: villagers are expected to leave no trace of their presence in the jungle. They strictly avoid urinating, defecating, or spitting while collecting honey or firewood. In this way, fear of the demon proves to be a more powerful

and effective deterrent than secular anti-littering laws. A municipal fine imposed by the government would likely be less effective than the natural threats posed by storms, floods, tigers, and crocodiles—forces that have long succeeded in keeping people cautious and respectful of nature. Moreover, ethical injunctions against pollution are not absent in Hindu tradition. Manu, the ancient lawgiver, wrote around the beginning of the Common Era: "Impure objects like urine, faeces, spit, or anything which contains these elements—blood or poison—should not be cast into water" (Narayan).

> The subaltern myth of Bonbibi provides an answer to the question of sustainable development for humans and non-humans. Such an eco-theology does not view the world of man as a colonizing agent. 'This is an agreement between non-humans and humans that permits them both to depend on the forest and yet respect the others' needs.' (P. Singh)

Life is not only a constant struggle against nature, wild animals and unpredictable tides but also a challenge to survive within human society. The living world is like a forest, where only the fittest survive. Just as wild animals prey on the weak, humans too exploit the vulnerable. Man is an animal, capable of ethical reasoning, yet often resorts to unfair means to satisfy economic and physical greed.

On the island, women were only considered safe under the custody of a male family member. If a family lost its male protector, the condition of the women became precarious as seen in the case of Kusum's family. Kusum lost her father to the sea, where he had gone in search of firewood. She witnessed a wild sea creature attack and devoured her helpless father. Falling to her knees, she called out to Bon Bibi to save him, but, as she later laments, the goddess never came. Legally, that area was off-limits to villagers, and Kusum's father lacked the necessary permit; as a result, her mother received no compensation for his death. Their lives suddenly turned miserable due to the loss of both money and male protection. They soon caught the attention of a landowner, Dilip Choudhury, who offered to send Kusum's mother out of the village for work. Grateful for what seemed like help, she accepted the offer only to fall victim to a human trafficking network. The landowner later attempted to exploit Kusum, but she was fortunately rescued by Horen.

The plight of women in the novel begins to unravel the simplistic man-versus-nature dichotomy, suggesting that while the struggle against nature persists, fellow human beings can pose an even greater threat. Recognising this, Nilima took the initiative to support the women of the Sundarbans by founding an NGO dedicated to their welfare and the upliftment of society.

Nirmal's diary recounts a real-life incident that he personally witnessed. A communist by ideology, Nirmal had long buried his passion to fight as a freedom fighter—until he encountered the Morichjhapi incident. Moved by the suffering of the refugees, he went to assist them on the island of Morichjhapi. The desire to struggle reignited in him like a fever of the mind, prompting him to leave home and live among the refugees. These refugees had fled from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the 1940s and 1950s. They were promised rehabilitation by the Left Front government, which had pledged to resettle all Bengali refugees in Bengal. However, the refugees were deceived: instead of being granted land, they were confined to camps outside West Bengal. The harsh treatment by the state disillusioned them. Around 30,000 refugees managed to reach the remote and untouched island of Morichjhapi in search of a new beginning. Their arrival, however, was unwelcome by the Left Front government. This act of neglect and betrayal ignited the revolutionary spirit in Nirmal—someone who had never previously experienced the thrill or burden of real political action. For a generation of old communists like him, the state's violence against the refugees represented a betrayal of everything left-wing politics had stood for in the post-Partition era.Nilima, Nirmal's wife, did not support the refugees. Her NGO was government-funded, and she could not risk opposing state policy. The government responded by cutting off industrial and food supplies to Morichjhapi. As a result, the refugees were forced to roam in search of food, leading to numerous accidents and casualties. The government argued that the refugees were illegally occupying land reserved for wildlife conservation and feared that allowing them to stay would set a precedent for future encroachments.

Ultimately, in May 1979, the refugees were brutally expelled from Morichjhapi, a violent act that starkly displayed the state's power. The Hungry Tide highlights how, under the guise of government policy, human life can become insignificant—even in comparison to man-eating tigers.

> That tiger had killed two people, Piya,' Kanai said. 'And that was just in one village. It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on the earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too—that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings? (Ghosh 265)

Women were assaulted and killed, and eventually, the river submerged everything. The powerful capitalist government mercilessly oppressed the weaker sections of society. The culture of the Sundarbans has been shaped not only by its rivers of silt but also by the many "rivers of language" that flow through it—Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese, and others.

The complex relationship between humanity and nature, along with the human cost of conservation, forms the backbone of this narrative. Despite not sharing a common language, Piya and Fokir develop a deep connection, united by their mutual understanding of the sea. Piya hires Fokir to assist her with her research, and Kanai—whose aunt and uncle have lived in the Sundarbans for years—helps as a translator. Fokir and Piya embark on a long journey together, navigating the river despite harsh weather conditions. During this time, Piya comes to realise that there is something more profound than verbal language that allows two people to understand one another—and even fall in love. Fokir, too, comes to understand the importance of Piya's life to him. He bravely battles the forces of nature in the dense forest, determined to protect her from the approaching darkness and storm. On that fateful evening, as they struggle to find safety, Fokir becomes a human shield for Piya. Amitav Ghosh vividly captures the depth of their connection: "Their bodies were so close, so firmly merged that she could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not: it had fused them together and made them one" (Ghosh 390). Fokir loses his life in the incident, leaving Piya bereft and shaken in her mission. In his absence, she joins the Badabon Trust and takes responsibility for financially supporting Fokir's son, Tutul, ensuring his access to education. Piya also commits herself to the protection of dolphins, continuing her research

with renewed purpose. She begins to call Nilima's house her new home, choosing to stay there as she carries on her work.

Meanwhile, Kanai learns a profound lesson from his own experiences: language is a man-made construct that often generates more noise than meaning. In contrast, the language of emotion—expressed through the body—has a direct and lasting impact on the observer. Emotions such as fear, happiness, love, and anger, when felt deeply, often transcend the limitations of spoken words. Kanai comes to realize that fluency in six languages does not necessarily enhance one's ability to truly express or understand. His confrontation with the tiger reinforces this understanding: the language of fear is ultimately speechless. In the case of Piya and Fokir, their invisible and unspoken love becomes visible through their silent companionship and mutual efforts to protect each other during the devastating storm. If signs and symbols of human emotions constitute a true language, then we must also pay attention to the environmental signs and symbols that consistently offer warnings before any natural calamity occurs.

V. **Industrial Challenges**

Nature is increasingly harmed by industrial tools and practices, such as the use of ultra-fine nylon fishing nets. Villagers use these fine nets to catch *chingrir meen*, the spawn of tiger prawns (Ghosh 135), which are in high demand. However, these nets also trap the eggs of various fish species, causing serious damage to aquatic life. The declining biodiversity, exacerbated by rising salinity levels in the water, is sounding the death knell for several rare species. And yet, the Sundarbans ecosystem continues to be home to the endangered Gangetic and Irrawaddy dolphins, crocodiles, deer, and numerous plant and animal species now facing the threat of extinction. For every living creature, existence in this region is a constant struggle against the forces of nature and against competition from other species, including humans. In his 2004 article, *"Greening Postcolonialism: Eco-Critical Perspectives,"* Graham Huggan highlights the growing global concern for environmental and ecological issues. He argues that these concerns have become an essential component of postcolonial literature. Huggan points to the "inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic and authoritarian abuse" (Huggan).

Amitav Ghosh consciously engages with these environmental concerns in *The Hungry Tide*, portraying the hostile natural environment of the Sundarbans and emphasising the delicate ecological balance that must be preserved in a land dominated by unpredictable tides. Man and nature are inseparably linked. Life on Earth thrives because of its biosphere, a thin layer that includes the soil and everything alive on the planet's surface. The relationship between environment and society is directly influenced by social and political systems, which are shaped by ideologies and priorities that often marginalise environmental concerns. Both capitalist and socialist ambitions tend to be more materialistic than ecological, and this disregard contributes to an irresponsible exploitation of natural resources.

Such an approach results in the uneven distribution of resources, unequal economic and social development, demographic imbalances, and conflicting governmental and individual perspectives on environmental issues—all of which ultimately harm nature. In contrast, Marxist ideology aspires to confront the destructive misuse of nature and aims to establish a more harmonious relationship between humans and the environment. Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide reflects these ecological concerns, highlighting the fragile balance between humans and nature in a postcolonial context. Citing Graham Huggan's article "Greening Postcolonialism," the passage connects present-day environmental degradation to historical legacies of imperialism and mismanagement. It emphasises that environmental policies are often shaped by political ideologies, where both capitalist and socialist systems tend to prioritise material gains over ecological balance.

VI. Conclusion

In the forested terrain of the Sundarbans, the conflict between humans and wildlife is both inevitable and enduring. The regional mythology of Bonbibi and Dokkhin Rai constructs a belief system that offers psychological assurance of divine protection against the perils of nature, particularly tiger attacks. This symbolic safeguard stands in stark contrast to the historical reality of the Morichjhapi incident, wherein displaced refugees faced systemic neglect in their struggle for shelter, livelihood, and sustenance. Nature, governed by the principle of survival of the fittest, dispenses nothing gratuitously, and the ideal of a utopian social order where equality transcends caste, creed, and class remains largely aspirational, manifesting only in the impartiality of ecological

processes. As Richa observes, "The interplay between religion and nations' politics is often one of the most perplexing aspects of national cultures," a dynamic reflected in the state's abdication of responsibility toward the cross-border displaced groups. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* integrates the Bonbibi mythos with Marxist and ecological discourses, advocating for equitable resource distribution and resistance to both human and environmental exploitation. Through its synthesis of science, geography, and ecology, the novel underscores the limitations of anthropocentric dominance and advances an ethic of stewardship aligned with Marxist principles of harmony between humanity and the natural environment.

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4.

Writing Contemporary Nepali Self in Sagar's K*arnali Blues* and Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphans*

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&
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Abstract: Works of fiction also provoke serious reflection on contemporary society. This study analyses Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* (2010) and Samrat Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphans* (2010) to examine the contemporary self they present. Both fiction derive their characters and the circumstances from Nepali society after 1990. We have taken 1990 as the point of departure in Nepali history, as the political changes of the 1990s put an end to the partyless Panchayat system, opening society to liberal ideas. However, the social contradiction also led to a new type of armed conflict, which began in 1997 and ended in 2005. The works of fiction set in this period depict the lives and struggles of people in Karnali, the Terai, and the Kathmandu Valley. We have applied new historicism as a critical lens to examine how both fiction engages with the contemporary self.

Keywords: Writing Self, Modernity, Contemporaneity, Nepali fiction

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Introduction

Writing about contemporary times necessarily involves complexities, as writers must play dual roles: both observer and the observed. This study centres more on the contemporary writings from Nepal. Two seminal texts appeared in 2010: Buddhi Sagar (1981) published *Karnali Blues* in Nepali, while Samrat Upadhyay (1964) offered a detailed account of life in the Kathmandu Valley in the historical backdrop of the 1960s onwards in *Buddha's Orphans*. Later, Buddhi Sagar's Nepali novel was translated into English by Michael Hutt in 2021. In the study, we have taken both fiction in English. The authors have drawn on their contemporary society and times, presenting the issues in the form of fiction.

Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* (2010) and Samrat Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphan* (2010) weave the narratives of the quotidian life and their own times. Writing the contemporary self, the author attempts to understand the present self. They derive the characters from the contemporary socio-political landscape and project them amid the struggles and quests of the ordinary people in Nepali society. Buddhi Sagar presents a picture of life in the Western part of Nepal, whereas Upadhyay writes about the transformation of life in the Kathmandu Valley in his own lifetime.

Contemporary Readings of *Karnali Blues* and *Buddha's Orphans*

Various critics have approached the two fictional works through different critical lenses. Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* (2010) has drawn the attention of critics to the lives of people from Nepal's distant Karnali region. Similarly, Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphans* (2010) has sketched the nation's entire history from the 1960s onward through the quest of Raja and Nilu, two representatives of the lower and upper classes, respectively. Their meeting typically represents the birth of the middle class in Nepali history.

Buddhi Sagar's novel centers on the father-child relationship. Father Harsha Bahadur and son Birsha Bahadur complement each other, as Bishnu Prasad Paudel argues that Harsha Bahadur, Birsha Bahadur's father, always excuses his son for his mistakes and supports him in his growth, as observed throughout the incidents in the story (3-4). The compassionate son attempts to understand his Father's struggles in the novel. As Sambhavi Basnet writes, "The present moves in a numbingly

slow pace as the human mind goes through moments rejecting death, and yet accepting the hopelessness enveloping it whereas the past rushes up to the narrator like a deadly current in a moody river that catches up to those who do not want to be caught" (n. pag.). Similarly, Tom Robertson biographically approaches the text as he illustrates Buddhi Sagar's experience of the earlier days of writing *Karnali Blues.* Buddhi Sagar himself states that, despite being tired, he would still write at least four pages every night before going to bed (5). *Karnali Blues* is also read as a novel that shows sensitivity to its time's sociopolitical context. Michael Hutt explains that "the characters of the text represent the lifestyle of people living in Karnali" (12). The two protagonists of the text, Brisha Bahadur (son) and Harsha Bahadur (Father), represent the lifestyle of people living in Karnali.

Similarly, Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphan* (2010) has been approached by different critics. For instance, Chandrahas traces the development of authorial self in Upadhyay, arguing that Upadhyay learns narrative from Nadine Gordimer, writing techniques from William Trevor, and that his own self learns skills and prejudices (1). He always reads texts produced by popular writers to gain inspiration for writing his text more effectively. This habit makes his characters more realistic. Upadhyay's characters show a realistic picture of middle-class people. As middle-class people always dream of success, Raja embodies the spirit. As Ligaya Mishan critically evaluates,

> Raja, as the foundling is named by his indigent rescuers. In literature, there's something liberating about being an orphan: you can create yourself from scratch and be beholden to no one. And so Raja ultimately ditches the servant woman who raises him; becomes the doted-on only son in a middle-class family (albeit one with a mentally sketchy mother); gets a good education; marries an upper-crust girl; and, after a few years of feckless navel-gazing, stumbles into a career as a journalist'. (2)

Such reviews focus on the emergence of a new class in Nepal's social milieu. Mishan further explores the theme of historical reality presented in the text when he writes, "The story traverses half a century of political and social upheaval in Nepal, from the 1960s to the present day" (2). His observation focuses on Nepal's political instability.

Along the lines of reading history in the novel, Andrew Nelson writes that Upadhyay's fiction portrays the emerging capitalist class society, a description of people's lifestyle in a particular time and place. He further states:

> … Upadhyay's second novel, *Buddha's Orphans*, takes place mostly in what we might call "new," or "post-Rana" Kathmandu. In its historical approach, which spans over fifty years, we are given a fictional account of Kathmandu converting from a small city to its current overpopulated condition, immersed in a transnational network of global people and goods. (8)

It illustrates the history of the Kathmandu Valley using place and time. It also indicates the ways the people had adopted towards modernity in the Kathmandu Valley.

The nation's political context evolves in response to youth demands. Young people have fought against the rules of the powerful government at multiple junctures of Nepali history. So, *Buddha's Orphan* is also approached from a contemporary historical perspective. As Mishan writes, "Occasionally Upadhyay seems to be hurrying through a checklist of major events: the Maoist rebels, 'with their old, clunky rifles,' make a brief cameo appearance, as does the crown prince who gunned down his entire family, precipitating a constitutional crisis" (2). The novel gathers momentum in its plot development, with such energy that it serves as an impetus in the text.

Both *Karnali Blues* and *Buddha's Orphans* have attracted substantial discussion in the media and academia. However, the texts have not been dealt with seriously from the perspective of contemporaneity and the formation of historical political ethos in Nepali society. The completion of the first decade of the twenty-first century marks a significant event in Nepali history in that the people have become more aware of their political rights, their history, and their own selves. The novels have telescoped the formation of the Nepali self in contemporary times.

Contemporary Nepali Self

This paper approaches the study of contemporary Nepali self from the critical position of new historicism, which advocates studying history

through materials beyond the regular use of official narratives. The authorized annals of Nepali history are at the level of policy briefs, reports of the bureaucratic units, and political decisions at the ministries. This study explores Nepal's social history in the aftermath of the 1990s and examines how the Nepali self is formulated during the most turbulent period until 2010. We have applied a basic frame of reference from Michel Foucault (1926-1984), who argues that social networks of power reconfigure the core of human self, thereby producing a particular type of identity for us. He asserts that "the individual… is already one of the prime effects of power" (*Power/Knowledge* 98). We have examined the question of contemporaneity as a source of inspiration for authors to respond to and write about in their fictional works. By adopting new historicism, we have attempted to theorise contemporary life in Nepal through Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* (2010) and Samrat Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphans* (2010).

Writing Contemporary Nepali Self

Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* (2010) and Samrat Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphans* (2010) write the contemporary Nepali self in the backdrop of Nepal's socio-political history. Though we can trace the historical landscape back to the 1960s, both novelists bring Nepali contemporary history into the limelight through their characters, their lives, and the social circumstances. Buddhi Sagar recounts the lifestyle of people living in Karnali. The socio-cultural changes in people's lifestyles are well explained in the story. The protagonist's life journey and that of his family members help determine Karnali's livelihood. Every individual's character is a source of inspiration that reflects a place's cultural history. On the other hand, Upadhyay's text, *Buddha's Orphans*, narrates the story of middle-class life in Kathmandu Valley. It documents various changes faced by people living in the valley, with accounts of individual lifestyles. It tells the story of modernity, political instability, people's suffering, and changes in cultural values. Characters advance the history of Kathmandu, showing the different changes in their lifestyles. The history of people's culture and traditions can be easily inferred from the texts of these two authors, Sagar and Upadhyay, as they focus on the lives of common people. Writing a contemporary self is important to advance the notion of reading history from a different perspective, as winners and influential people dominated history.

Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* illustrates the changes that occur in Matera. Traditional tea shops were closed, and people started new businesses that collected money rather than preserving past ideas. Matera was changing day by day, and many people came and started new businesses. Dailekhi Sau also enlarged his business. Uma didi also opened her shop where people of all types came, and all kinds of things were available. As Buddhi Sagar narrates,

> The astrologer's wife would say, "She sells buffalo meat! You should not even drink water if she touched it." And it was true that the first dried buffalo meat ever sold in Matera hung in Uma Didi's shop. Many people stop drinking tea there because of Brahmin women selling buffalo meat, but now the space they vacated is filled with rakshi drinkers instead. More and more new people came. They went into the shop sober and came out of it drunk. (105)

It shows the truth of society, where people change their traditional businesses to adapt to it. Uma's shop was the first place to sell buffalo meat in Matera. She belongs to the Brahmin community. However, she tries to adjust herself to the community by going beyond society's rules.

Events that occur in the lives of characters of any literary text illustrate the history of that time. Nilu and Raja, from Samrat Upadhyay's fiction, are people living in the valley who lead modern lives. As Upadhyay describes,

> In Freak Street, dreadlocked hippies with long beards and baggy corduroys hung about, looking stoned and happy. A heavy smell of ganja and harshness permeated the air. A multi-colored van sat outside a shop, a girl in a long, flowing frock, a cigarette in her hand, was arguing with a Nepali shopkeeper, probably unhappy with a business deal. From the second floor of the house, the steady, rhythmic beat of reggae sounded, leading the argument below an almost sensual tone. (149)

This shows that when marijuana was not banned in our country, hippies and other foreigners came to explore our country. It shows the history of our country, where local vendors trade with foreigners, thereby improving their living standards. Prateema explains how people addressed her grandfather. Upadhya writes, "Dhoti he was called.

Thieving Indian with his conniving ways. But he was never deterred, and he was the most patriotic Nepali I ever knew. He didn't like it when my grandmother spoke Bengali to her children at home" (250). Her explanation of her grandfather's struggle shows the history of Indian migrants who came to Nepal for trade and have since adopted our culture.

Every family wants their children to follow in their footsteps and help it in their work. Similarly, the parents in our text, Nilu and Raja, from *Buddha's Orphans*, desire for their daughter, Rangana, to develop her career in Nepal. Nevertheless, Ranjana has grown and wants to go to Chicago, America, for further study. Nilu explains, "You are beginning to sound like typical Nepali parents, worried that their children might not turn out to be doctors and engineers. You and I were never on track, in fact, we got miserably off-track, remember" (335). It shows the history of people who are attracted to foreign studies. They want to live an independent life. It also explains history and its events always follow its pattern to celebrate and practice.

Natives were always dominated and forced to live their lives according to the expectations of the elite. Upahyay pictures a real society where people discriminate against each other because of color. After the birth, Kali Ranjana starts living with Nilu and Raja. People in society always question Kali's colour. People always comment on Ranjana's daughter for her blackness. Upadhyay narrates:

> These kaleys are the worst. Mugging. Drugging, murders, riots-you name it, and all these blacks are the ones behind them. I mean, if she was going to get impregnated over there, why not choose a Kuirey, a white man? At least a baby would come out decent-looking. Look at this baby girl now- as dark as black smoke, as sewage water. (455)

It indicates the reality of society: how people judge others based on color, caste, and class. They are ready to accept the illegitimate child of Ranjana, but not her color. Moreover, Sagar portrays a society in which people's innocence is judged by their appearance. Often, language and food reveal a people's history. For instance, the potato and its story are enough to explain the European cultural history. As Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt explain, although potato production exceeded wheat production and the price was low, people classified potatoes as

food for the poor and wheat as food for the rich (361). It explains the history of people according to the food they consume and cultivate. Similarly, in *Karnali Blues, the* language of Saddham depicts the Western influence on the Nepali language. He explains how he learned English from Americans who came to Dodhar.

Technology is playing the role of influential people in society. People with power can sustain their lives in modern society. However, the poor are dominated by society's hierarchy, as they cannot afford the modern techniques that make their lives easier and better. The history of technology and modernity in the lifestyle of people living in our nation can be observed by reading the texts of Upadhyay and Buddhi Sagar. The episodes of characters' livelihoods show the influence of the modern lifestyle on people in Nepal. In *Buddha's Orphans,* Ganga Da offers the newlyweds, Raja and Nilu, a modern house equipped with modern technology. As Upadhyay writes, "An outhouse in the middle of the city?" he exclaimed. "And that too in area of Westerners flock? Why can't your landlady built a modern indoor bathroom, with a commode and a flush and everything, like the rest of civilization" (208). Through these lines, we can witness the changes in people's lives. They were being modern and adopting modern technology.

Likewise, in *Karnali Blues*, Sagar notes people's attraction to technology. Sandip is a cameraman who takes photos of people and the village's scenery, and villagers wait for him to take a photo. Buddhi Sagar writes:

> "Today you have to have a photo taken,' Mother said to Father one morning. 'Please don't just go somewhere again.'
>
> I was lying in bed, and I glanced at Father.
>
> 'I have to go the bazaar early,' said Father, buttoning his waistcoat.
>
> 'What is he like? After so many days, Sandip is coming to take a photo today. We don't have a photo of the whole family. And you don't have a photo at all." (65)

This line shows the influence of modernity in the lives of common people. People celebrate new devices as festivals and enjoy their

facilities. Sometimes modern technologies become a source of valuable memories for people, as illustrated by the proof of writing history.

The concept of capitalism creates the notion of the rich and the poor in society. People were exploited and dominated by the rich. In the texts of Sagar and Upadhyay, occurrences of characters' life stories reflect capitalist society. Raja Saheb of *Karnali Blues*, a wealthy man of that place, secretly tempts a Tharu girl for his pleasure. Sagar writes, "Do you know?" Chandra whispered once," They say there is the ghost of Tharu Girl in this house! Khusiram saw it once, that's why he went mad!" (86). This indicates the activities of a rich and influential person in the community. He exploits poor Tharu girl. His crime was known to the Khusiram, so to hide his wrongdoing, Raja Shaeb declared him mad. According to texts, in *Buddha's Orphans*: Muwa, a woman from an aristocrat's family, refused to perform the funeral rites for her servant, RamKrishna, after his death. Upadhayay narrates:

> Can you believe it? I don't know where these servant-class people get their nerves these days. It's all because of these politicians, especially these communists. They are always inciting them to ask for their right. Now, where would I go to arrange for his corpse to be burned? So, I told the nephew no. If you don't come to fetch your uncle's corpse, he's going to rot in this house.' (272)

It telescopes the reality of capitalist society where the working class spends their whole life serving their owner, but they do not get respect even after their death. They are constantly exploited in such a context.

History is written in many languages by many people, through literary texts or otherwise. These are all practices in the canon of academia that help elaborate on the history in a global context. Many people can question the notion of history and rewrite it. Vesser describes:

> The immediate politics of human-scientific academic movements are in classrooms. The long-term politics, based on published and unpublished evidence, is constructed and judged by the future. The most ambitious hope of any academic would be that something like the gap I describe will stand, however obscurely, as "unpublished evidence." Thought is ... the blank part of the text, the necessarily indeterminate. (277)

It explains the practice of history in common life. The globalization of history helps identify its loopholes. Furthermore, many people can teach it as it is practiced in canon. Literary texts by writers show the lifestyle of people living in a place at a given time. A revolt against dominance and power brings about changes in people's lifestyles. It promotes national development, but sometimes innocent people become victims. They need to pay with their own lives to gain freedom. In Upadhyay's story, Nilu was unable to take her son, Maitrey, to the hospital in time because protesters blocked the roads. Upadhyay illustrates:

> Fifteen minutes passed. The chanting outside grew louder. She heard somebody saying that there was now a standoff between the police and marchers. Glass scattered somewhere close. But the guard didn't return. Maitrey's head was on her lap. She kept dipping the handkerchief in the bucket of water, wringing it, and pressing it on her son's forehead, watching the water trickle down the temples. A bead or two of water streamed to the corner of Maitrey's eyes. (228)

Nilu was helpless and was not able to take her son to the hospital. Maitrey dies in her lap. This incident shows a pathetic situation of people protesting as they raise their voice for freedom and rights, but it is harming innocent people.

It presents ideas; sometimes, oral voice is also important for writing history. The voice of the victim or the lower class gives evidence of discriminatory practices in society among various groups of people. Raja was an active citizen of the country. He writes against the dominance of powerful people, so he was suspected by the police of supporting Maoists. Upadhyay presents, "A few months ago, he'd been called into the Hunuman Dhoka police station, where the high-ranking officer had interrogated him, inquired about his party affiliation and asked him what he meant by a specific point in the offering column" (459). People were not allowed to raise their voices because the monarchy ruled over them. Raja represents people in the present society who protest for their freedom without caring about its consequences. Similarly, in *Karnali Blues*, Jarilal, who belongs to the lower class, was not given enough food, though he deserved it, because people use their power and take food from the poor. As Sagar writes, "Did you get any?" "Why would they give me any, those leprous sons of widows?" "It can't

go like this forever" (340). It explains that the language people use reflects a community's cultural practices.

Every incident of history carries the experience of self. It is taken as the child who follows history as a father to develop the ideologies of their life. Culture and traditions are celebrated according to the practices of the old culture. In *Karnali Blues,* Brisha Bahadur also illustrates the history of youth who choose to leave their parents after building their careers. Moreover, his Father and Mother represent all parents who spend their lives in hope of a better life and a better future for their children.

> Sagar writes:
>
> "Look and see," she told me, "Are there any crows?"
>
> If only I could see one!
>
> "Tell good news, good news," Mother said in a loud voice.
>
> One or two took to the air in fright, and then returned to alight on the roof again.
>
> Father came back that very day. (299)

A crow is considered the messenger animal in Hindu mythology. His Mother was also waiting for his Father, as there was no means of communication with people far from home. Similarly, in *Buddha's Orphans,* Nilu was haunted by her son's spirit, so Prateema suggested that she visit Lamaji, who helped her come to terms with her husband's reality. Upadhayay thus explains:

> "Are you talking about your janne manchhe?"
>
> "Yes, everyone called him Lamaji."
>
> 'How can he help me?'
>
> 'Amaji knows many things about this world and beyond, things you and I don't know. She paused. 'He's helped me understand

> things about my own life, especially about the man I was married to.' (252)

These incidents show that, although both ladies were educated and modern women. They still had superstitious thinking, as evidenced by their conversation. They describe the psychology of people who try to adopt a modern lifestyle but remain unsuccessful.

Women are biased in society, and its members create boundaries for them. Only a few of their stories are included in history. So modern women of this time revolt against all those boundaries and rewrite their own history. In *Buddha's Orphans*, Ranjana challenges society's norms and chooses to be a single Mother. She was pregnant with Amos, a black man with whom she was in a relationship. She thought of having an abortion, but was not successful like her grandmother Mohini. A similar story repeats here: Ranjana was in a situation similar to Mohini's. Upadhayay writes: "But every time she picked up the phone to called Planned Parenthood, she found that her hands trembled. She doesn't understand why: she was opposed to abortion" (430). In the end, she decides to have a baby and raise it as a single mother, which presents a history of modern women.

Parvati of *Karnani Blues* was unable to express her desire to her parents and eloped with her lover without informing them. Sagar explains:

> She took hold of both of my hands. Her palms were warm. Then she looked deeply into my eyes and said softly, "Don't give Father and Mother any grief."
>
> I stared at her, perplexed.
>
> "Study well, don't fail," said Sister, and then it seemed as if she was going to cry. (263)

It explains the condition of women in a past society in which they were unable to make decisions for themselves. Revolting against parents' desire means remaining alone; it is because neither society nor family members accepts those females who cross boundaries of culture. Not only women, but sometimes people belonging to the lower class are not allowed to raise their voice against evil practices. In *Buddha's Orphans*,

Kaki observes Muwa and Sumit's activities but cannot question them (100). This incident implies the power imbalance in society, where powerful people can break other rules. Muwa's affairs with Sumit, half her age, were accepted.

Approaching Modernity through Contemporaneity

Literature and history are interconnected. Fictional stories evolve by observing the lifestyles of people living in a place. The writers closely examine society and its culture to create characters who feel real in the world and resonate with readers' emotions. Playing with all these features leads to picturing a real community porter. Characters forward the authentic culture and tradition of that era. A study of literary texts helps generate insights into a particular tribe's ancient beliefs. The lifestyle of common people provides evidence of their group's history. Rewriting one's history requires a certain degree of imagination on the part of the author. Self-introduce groups of people in a place, as every individual forms a troop and sets society rules and regulations. All those rules reflect the culture of a people. Every nation has its history, and the changes along a person's life journey define that person's history.

In Nepal, literature written over time by many writers guides the study of its history. The texts of Buddhi Sagar *Karnali Blues* and Samrat Upadhya *Buddha's Orphan* present a small part of history, with references to their fictional study. Since the characters display various changes in Nepal, these works reflect on the contemporary Nepali self. As Upadhyay himself asserts,

> The descriptions of the Maoists – "old, clunky rifles," "unforgiving eyes" –comes form the well-known photos of the Maoist leaders. But large political conflicts or dramas, I feel, are best channeled through individual characters. Raja, with his interest in politics, serves as the common man who's trying to digest the crisis. His "frozenness" also encapsulates the near-hypnotic state that many Nepalis found themselves in during those years when the Maoists were on a rampage. (564)

People living in a community represent a nation. Cultural beliefs, practices related to modern lifestyles, exploitation, boundaries set for living, etc., help analyze historical changes in a place. Every society has its own cultural beliefs and religion. Moreover, people live their lives,

celebrating them. It develops unity among them. Superstitious thinking and the creation of boundaries for performing rituals are common practices that provide identity to the community.

Buddhi Sagar and Upahyay represent the self powerfully. Each protagonist of fiction is explaining a story of time. They reflect the lifestyles of common people and serve as evidence of the history of Kathmandu Valley and Karnali. The changes and social practices of Kathmandu surround Nilu and Raja's lives. Their way of life helps them understand cultural, technological, and political changes in the valley. They even witness the valley and its people's transformation due to the modern lifestyle. Similarly, Sagar shows the lifestyle and real suffering of people living in Karnali, while Harsha Bahadur and Birsaha Bahadur present the life of Karnali. Buddhi Sagar expresses a sense of suffocation in life in the absence of facilities or in being forced into a subaltern group due to a lack of development infrastructure. The dominance of the self is always there. Reading and writing the history of a place is well told in both texts.

The two novels *Karnali Blues* and *Buddha's Orphans* write the contemporary self in Nepal. It includes all people in society to study their lifestyle and experience. Culture, norms, values, political changes, and individuals' oral stories express a group's history. A study of the macro and micro perspectives of a place provides clear evidence for a study with closer perspectives. Power relations are not always important for collecting records. Sometimes the lifestyle and narration of powerless people of an incident become more powerful to obtain details, as society is full of a variety of people who belong to high caste or class, women, children, the elderly, and the subaltern. Every person in society is equally important because they contribute equally. Moreover, people of different classes or castes speak their own history. *Karnali Blues* and *Buddha's Orphans* propose the lifestyle of people living in Karnali and the Kathmandu Valley. Characters' life incidents reveal the historical changes in two different places. Fiction can rewrite contemporary history by observing the protagonist's life events and experiences.

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5.

Children as Environmental Envoys in Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind*

**Musarrat Shameem*

Abstract: This study examines children's perception of nonhuman nature, contrasting it with that of adults, as portrayed in Rumaan Alam's novel *Leave the World Behind*. The central argument asserts that, despite being largely overlooked in global ecological decision-making, children possess an instinctive understanding of nature that often surpasses that of adults. This article explores this theme through the lens of the novel, focusing primarily on the character of Rose and her brother. It contends that children not only grasp the intricacies of nature better than adults but also have a deeper awareness of ecological challenges. Utilising existing discourse on children and ecology, the study addresses issues such as eco-anxiety, resistance, rights, and the intrinsic value of nature. Building on theories regarding children and the environment, the article highlights significant insights from the novel's omniscient narrator. Given that the novel concludes with the same ambiguity that lingers throughout, this study remains speculative as well. It underscores young people's concerns about environmental degradation and their frustration at being inadequately recognised when expressing their anxieties, as articulated in contemporary children–ecology social theories. A parallel examination of these theories and the destabilised world presented in *Leave the World Behind* is also undertaken.

Keywords: Eco-anxiety, nature, ecology, crisis, anxiety

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Introduction

This article explores Rumaan Alam's 2020 novel *Leave the World Behind* from an ecological perspective, connecting it to the omniscient narrator's reflections on the interaction between children and ecology. These reflections resonate with the broader ecological concerns raised in the essay, serving as part of the ripple effect of the anticipated disaster that the novel hints at. The internet-dependent characters' vulnerabilities, alongside themes of racism and capitalist decline, reflect a detachment from nature, reducing it to merely a perpetual provider of human needs. An eco-conscious reading of the novel delves into Alam's portrayal of generational divergence, emphasising children's intuitive superiority over adults in adapting to monumental changes. In today's complex world, the relationship between children and ecology is intricately intertwined. Beneath the surface of a seemingly simple plot, the novel weaves a mysterious tapestry in which humans and nonhuman nature engage in a profound, though elusive, interaction. Drawing on relevant theories about children and the environment, this article investigates how Rumaan Alam illustrates that children possess a greater perceptiveness of nature than their adult counterparts.

Leave the World Behind is an ambiguous apocalyptic novel open to diverse interpretations. Released just before the coronavirus pandemic, it has taken on a prophetic quality. The pervasive sense of impending disaster throughout the narrative evokes a more primal, cyclical pattern of renewal in nature, spurred by human failures. This concept of renewal reflects nature's ability to adapt and thrive despite the transformations it must undergo. The narrator, along with the coping mechanisms of various animals such as deer and flamingoes, captures the survival instincts of Rose, whose youth gives her the strength to embrace change and move forward. From the onset, Alam employs an intruding narrator to establish an atmosphere filled with suppressed tension and anxiety, underscored by an unsettling sense of impending dread that haunts the characters.

There are countless questions posed throughout the narrative, yet few definitive answers. The plot of the novel centres on six characters: four adults and two minors. Among the adults, a palpable tension arises from a blend of racial prejudices and an overarching sense of xenophobia. The Black couple, GH and Ruth, who own the house, must navigate these complexities alongside the white family of Amanda

and Clay, who have rented the vacation home. Forced to coexist, they attempt to bridge the awkwardness of their situation through shared food, drinks, and amenities. Alam skillfully illustrates the psychological struggle of the four adults as they grapple with the bewildering circumstances, they and the world around them face. The novel is punctuated by narrative interventions in the form of fragmented reports of human catastrophe, often accompanied by ecological disasters. These glimpses into a troubled world offer ominous hints at future mutations the Earth and its inhabitants may endure. This collection of unsettling images creates an inexplicable sense of dread, heightened by the mention of a deafening noise that shatters glass and leaves people in a state of terror.

Children's vulnerability in the face of environmental hazards and climate change is a significant theme in contemporary socio-economic discourse. Studies focusing on children and ecology explore the potential damage children may suffer due to ecological crises. Before delving into these theories, it is essential to examine how Rumaan Alam portrays child characters in *Leave the World Behind* as they become ensnared by the mysterious forces engulfing their reality. Alam suggests that children, perhaps through an instinctive connection to nature, possess a deeper understanding than adults. They believe that answers to their confusion lie hidden in the natural world. Alam's depiction of siblings Archie and Rose, the children of Amanda and Clay, takes an evocative turn as they traverse the woods. He describes them as becoming part of the forest: "Peach-colored, fuzzed, sticky, their bodies dissolved into the foliage; they couldn't be seen, heard, or spied on as they investigated" (Alam, ch. 19).

Leave the World Behind recounts how the two families find themselves stranded in a Long Island vacation home due to a power outage in the city. The collapse of the internet and television leaves them blissfully ignorant of the outside crisis. In this oppressive environment, the adults tend to remain indoors while Archie and Rose seek adventure in the surrounding woods, escaping the monotony of their disconnected existence. As they explore deeper into the forest, they stumble upon an abandoned shack and glimpse another home across the way, belonging to the Thornes, but choose not to visit. Notably, Rose observes more than a hundred deer in chapter 13 but refrains from sharing this revelation until chapter 19, deciding instead to confide in Archie while they are in the woods. This decision underscores the children's tumultuous feelings

about the inexplicable forces at play in their surroundings. The narrator suggests that one day, the changes in nature will profoundly impact their lives: "It would, of course; the world belonged to the young" (Alam, ch. 19). This notion resonates with theories in children–ecology discourse, which emphasize how young people view the preservation of nature as deeply personal, given that their futures are inextricably tied to the well-being of the Earth.

This study employs a secondary research methodology centred on fictional writing. It involves extensive readings of literary articles, online resources, and the main text. The arguments presented focus on sociological and ecological aspects, drawing upon scholarly works from sociology, anthropology, and ecology to explore themes beyond the literature itself. Although the relationship between children and the environment is significant, it remains underexplored in the extensive anthropological literature on environmental education. Contemporary ecological studies increasingly foreground justice and equality as prerequisites for environmental preservation. Burns H. Weston, for instance, articulates a principle of "intergenerational ecological justice" grounded in three core commitments: the conservation of ecological options, the conservation of planetary quality, and the conservation of equitable resource access (Weston 254). Ecological justice, therefore, cannot be claimed until individuals of all ages, classes, races, and genders hold equal rights and responsibilities in environmental decision-making.

Ecofeminism, a pivotal branch of ecocriticism, has long interrogated the oppressive structures embedded in patriarchal thought. In "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism," Karen J. Warren proposes the concept of an "oppressive conceptual framework," one that clarifies, defends, and sustains relationships of domination and subordination (Warren 125). Ruthanne Kurth-Schai extends Warren's insights by linking children's subordination to similar patterns of marginalisation experienced by women and other disadvantaged groups. She observes that although children bear "the heaviest burden" of environmental degradation, their concerns—lacking political power—are consistently overlooked (Kurth-Schai 197). Kurth-Schai argues that Warren's themes of "relationship, pluralism, inclusion, and transformation" collectively offer a more suitable ethical and conceptual framework for addressing the needs and interests of children (201).

However, even Kurth-Schai's inclusive approach proves insufficient for analysing how *Leave the World Behind* represents children's perceptions of, and responses to, ecological change amid intersecting concerns such as racism, capitalist collapse, and geophysical upheaval. The novel's prescient narration also gestures toward evolutionary processes and highlights how individuals of different ages, races, and genders react to environmental crises. In an interview, Rumaan Alam described the difficulty of writing children's psychology as "young children are not governed by adult logic." He suggested that children, unlike adults, are often guided by instinct, a quality that adults frequently dismiss because it eludes their rational frameworks. Alam notes that he treated children and animals in parallel, regarding both as psychologically inscrutable—much like the natural world itself. Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator invokes universal phenomena such as animal migration, mutation, and geological transformation. Contemporary scholars have similarly noted the deep, often overlooked connection between children and nonhuman nature—a connection that adults tend to neglect in favour of their own priorities. Louise Chawla, Bridget Stirling, and Caroline Hickman are among those who question whether children's rights to environmental knowledge and participation are adequately recognised.

Recent ecological theory increasingly emphasises the inclusion of children—alongside women—in environmental decision-making processes. Canadian scholar Bridget Stirling argues that children should be regarded as "distinct environmental citizens," rather than merely vulnerable individuals, so that they may respond actively and meaningfully to environmental concerns (Stirling 222). Addressing Canadians' ambivalent attitudes toward climate inaction—marked by tensions between environmental protection and economic interests—Stirling identifies Indigenous communities and Canadian children as groups that consistently demand urgent climate action. She characterises children's school strikes not simply as protests but as "resistance to a system that isn't responding to their demands" (224). Her work is especially relevant to this article, which draws from the expanding literature on children and the environment.

Stirling critiques the tendency to deny children agency by restricting their participatory and decision-making power in ecological matters. She argues that adults often impose a relationship between children and the environment that is premised on children's "futurity as

human becomings" rather than acknowledging them as human beings in the present (226). Although this stance may appear protective—preserving a supposedly innocent childhood—it ultimately serves adult needs (229). Moreover, she warns that framing children as future "problem-solvers for our present-day harms" not only perpetuates environmental injustice but also places an undue burden of responsibility on them (230). Stirling concludes that incorporating children into environmental discourse as both stakeholders and "very real present-day citizens" is essential, since they are disproportionately affected by environmental harms and will continue to experience those consequences long after adults are gone (235).

The concepts discussed in the theoretical framework align closely with Rumaan Alam's nuanced portrayal of parent–child dynamics in *Leave the World Behind*. In the novel, Amanda and Clay adopt the role of protective parents by suppressing information and containing their anxieties within the adult sphere. The narrative establishes a persistent divergence between adult and child experiences—one that proves largely insurmountable. When the Black Washingtons appear at the door of their own home, now rented to Amanda and Clay, the white couple is immediately fearful, unable to imagine that Black people could own such an affluent property. Although Amanda worries about the safety of her children, neither she nor Clay wakes them. They prefer to keep them in what they perceive as blissful ignorance. This motif of dual realities—one for adults and one for adolescents—pervades the novel, eventually extending to the Washingtons as well. All uncanny events and the adults' frantic conjectures about them remain confined to adult conversation. As Amanda insists, she wants to "keep… things between the adults. I don't want the kids to panic over nothing" (Alam, ch. 14).

Yet Rose also harbours her own secrets. After witnessing an unusually large herd of deer in chapter 13, she chooses not to tell her parents. She anticipates disbelief because she is a child; adults will assume she is lying or exaggerating. Only she senses that something is fundamentally wrong: "The morning was too quiet. It was telling her something. She tried to hear that" (Alam, ch. 15). The narrator repeatedly reinforces the idea that children perceive ecological shifts more acutely than adults. As Archie and Rose navigate the forest, the narration reflects on the instinctive knowledge children are said to possess, which diminishes with age before resurfacing in old age. Unlike the adults, who

respond to uncertainty with fear, the children anticipate change without dread. Nonhuman nature, too, is portrayed as aware of and prepared for imminent transformation. In chapter 21, the narrator forges an explicit connection between youth and nature, suggesting their shared attunement to the larger patterns of the world—a connection that the final chapter revisits and tentatively resolves.

The children's relationship with nature in the novel mirrors the ambivalence described in psycho-social environmental theory. Louise Chawla identifies three primary sources of children's environmental anxiety: fears for self-preservation, responsibility toward present and future generations, and recognition of nature's intrinsic worth ("Children's Concern" 14). Reviewing a wide range of studies, she observes that both rural and urban children "were simultaneously tantalized by the woods and afraid to enter them" (15). While such ambivalence gradually shifts as children age, Chawla notes that genuine caring dispositions toward nature—valuing it not merely for human utility but for its intrinsic significance—must be cultivated through empathy and sympathy (16). She argues that collaborative social education involving both men and women, shaped by caregiving practices, can foster children's sense of connection and nurturing regard for nonhuman nature (18). Chawla ultimately advocates a restructuring of "human relationships with the physical world" (19). In *Leave the World Behind*, nature functions as a vital, animate presence—magnanimous, awe-inspiring, and at times menacing. Rose in particular senses its mystery and seems to possess survival knowledge shared by trees, animals, and insects.

The novel's intrusive omniscient narrator reinforces this insight through intermittent revelations about both present and future catastrophes, even as the narrative voice often remains cryptic and suggestive. The final chapters, however, adopt a more direct tone. Rose's solitary venture to the abandoned house across the forest underscores her resilience and adaptability. The narrator becomes especially forthright about children's tacit wisdom: "Kids knew something, and the knowledge they had was tacit or unspeakable" (Alam, ch. 40). This assertion parallels the narrator's broader belief in nature's cyclical power to regenerate following catastrophe, reminiscent of the Earth's rebirth after the biblical flood.

Rose's silence regarding the deer further demonstrates that children often withhold knowledge because they anticipate adult dismissal. This contributes to their anxiety about environmental change. The narrator's reflections in chapter 21 extend this idea to trees, which are described as "alive," capable of feeling like "Tolkien's majestic creatures," and able to mutate and endure—as mangroves do—amid ecological upheaval. The chapter ominously references "the seismic reverberations of bombs far distant" and the death of trees due to the ocean's recession from the land. It predicts that trees and animals will not merely withstand future evolutionary shifts but will flourish without human interference. The following passage, though lengthy, is central to this article's argument:

> The sickness in the ground and in the air and in the water was all a clever design. There was a menace in the woods and Rose could feel it, and another child would have called it God. Did it matter if a storm had metastasized into something for which no noun yet existed? Did it matter if the electrical grid broke apart like something built of Lego? Did it matter if Lego would never biodegrade, would outlast Notre Dame, the pyramids at Giza, the pigment daubed on the walls at Lascaux? (Alam, ch. 21)

The narrator's unusually direct tone in conveying the magnitude of ecological risk contrasts with the restraint evident elsewhere in the novel. While *Leave the World Behind* intertwines character and plot from the start, its most striking accomplishment is its sustained alignment of children with nature—a thematic gesture consistent with contemporary ecological theories that foreground intersections among environment, society, race, and economy.

As noted earlier, the narrator becomes even more explicit in the final chapter about children's superior understanding of ecological transformation: "Rose knew what the noise was, but no one had asked her. It was the sound of fact. It was the change they'd pretended not to know was coming. It was the end of one kind of life, but it was also the beginning of another kind of life" (Alam, ch. 40). Travelling alone through the woods, Rose pursues the possibility of finding other survivors, yet her bond with nature remains equally central. After eating a nectarine, she drops the pit, hoping it may grow into a tree in the years to come. She knows that trees do not grow into one another: "Trees knew to occupy only their given patch of earth and sky. Trees were generous

and careful, and maybe that would be their salvation" (Alam, ch. 40). Such reflections imbue Rose with a wisdom that surpasses that of the adults—Clay, Amanda, the Washingtons, and others.

Rose's withholding of knowledge reflects a broader phenomenon: young people believe adults will not take them seriously, a perception that produces anxiety. Caroline Hickman discusses this in her 2020 essay "We Need to (Find a Way to) Talk About… Eco-Anxiety." Eco-anxiety refers to the distress arising from heightened awareness of environmental and biodiversity crises, emphasising the emotional response to large-scale ecological harm. As a psychotherapist, Hickman finds that children often experience environmental destruction as "personal" (Hickman 412). They feel that those with power do not care about their future and are failing to preserve ecological balance. Many children she interviewed described feeling abandoned by a world that is "cruel and indifferent" (412). Meanwhile, debates persist over whether children should participate in environmental activism or even be made aware of ecological risks. Parents and policymakers often argue that such involvement imposes unnecessary anxiety on young people. Scott Morrison, for example, publicly urged Australian children to reduce their climate protest activities. Confronted with this tension, many young people, Hickman notes, fear "being judged and criticised" when they speak about the climate crisis (413).

Conclusion

In *Leave the World Behind*, Rose ultimately chooses to confront her anxiety by sharing her emerging strategies for survival in a transformed world. The novel concludes in a manner consistent with its earlier chapters: it resists definitive closure, refusing to explain or resolve the uncanny events that have unfolded. Instead, it ends with a series of unsettling yet meaningful questions that reinforce the pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty. Through her solitary journey and practical decisions, Rose learns to rely on modest pleasures, cooperation, and the small acts of endurance that make life tenable amid collapse. She comes to recognise that larger forces—geopolitical, ecological, evolutionary—lie beyond human control, and that a humble, communal mode of living may offer a sense of purpose within an otherwise chaotic existence. This sensibility aligns with Louise Chawla's emphasis on cultivating connection and hope in ecological education. Chawla argues that the study of ecology and natural history "needs to be combined with learning how to protect

the natural world," underscoring the value of social trust and the reassurance that "individual actions are amplified by the contributions of other people" ("Childhood Nature Connection" 635). Ecological studies, she contends, should help young people articulate their emotional responses to environmental transformation. One way to do this is by enabling them to locate meaning and optimism within a crisis. Rose's efforts to survive through simplicity echo what Chawla describes as "finding value in voluntary simplicity"—a lesson that the adults of *Leave the World Behind* neither model nor understand (635).

This article has demonstrated how children-centred ecological theory illuminates the novel's persistent alignment between youth and nonhuman nature. The final chapter thus emerges as a fitting conclusion, depicting a child's attempt to create meaning and coherence amid chaos, uncertainty, and ecological dread. Through Rose, the novel suggests that children possess forms of knowledge, adaptability, and emotional clarity that adults lack—qualities that become indispensable when confronting the irreversible changes of a world on the brink.

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6.

A Study on the Postmodern Realism in *Ram C/O Anandhi*

**Pratheesh Padath*

Abstract: This article is an attempt to explore Akhil P. Dharmajan's *Ram C/o Anandhi* as a unique convergence of cinematic realism, urban affect and wider readerly participation. The novel deviates from conventional fiction by combining spatial symbolism, narrative fragmentation and visual narration techniques to create a subdued, engrossing topography of emotion. The study investigates how cinematic syntax-such as jump cuts, frame-switching, and mise-en-scene, is translated into writing to engage readers visually and emotionally. Through rigorous textual analysis, reception studies, and interdisciplinary theoretical framing, the article reveals how Chennai develops as an emotional topography and affect becomes narrative architecture. This study situates *Ram C/o Anandhi* within the changing outlines of Indian postmodern literature, emphasising the novel's connection with contemporary readers used to visual storytelling. It contends that the book initiates a spatial-emotional style of literary realism adapted to the sensory rhythms and interpretative wants of a digitally saturated audience.

Keywords: Cinematic Realism, Affective Realism, Urban Fiction, Malayalam Novel, Visual Narrative, Reader-Response, Postmodern Aesthetics

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In an age of hyper-visual culture, literature no longer operates solely within the bounds of linguistic narration. *Ram C/o Anandhi*, a Malayalam novel by Akhil P. Dharmajan, represents a paradigmatic shift in how regional Indian literature internalises and refunctions cinematic aesthetics (Dharmajan 2020). The novel organises its narrative through visual sequencing, affective modulation, and active reader participation, making it a significant contribution to hybrid literary forms in post-liberalisation India. As André Bazin argues, cinematic realism relies on long takes, natural lighting, and the minimisation of authorial intervention to present a continuous and interpretive reality (Bazin 19). In a similar vein, the novel's refusal of heavy exposition in favour of an ambient, immersive atmosphere invites the reader to function simultaneously as spectator and co-narrator. Matthew Gamble extends this understanding by suggesting that cinematic realism, when viewed through a Kantian framework, encourages spectatorship as an ethical mode of engagement characterised by restraint and perceptual patience (Gamble 64).

Through the affective framework offered by Pramod K. Nayar, the novel's emphasis on mood and ambient feeling can be understood as a form of literary realism attuned to postmodern sensibilities (Nayar 22). These aesthetic decisions render the text not only an instance of cinematic literary expression but also a document of spatial and emotional interiority. In the sections that follow, this article examines how cinematic grammar, such as montage, silence, and *mise-en-scène*, shapes the novel's narrative architecture. It also investigates how space and affects coalesce into emotional topographies and how readers, shaped by image-driven media environments, engage with a narrative that deliberately resists conventional storytelling. Ultimately, *Ram C/o Anandhi* emerges as a text that both reflects and refracts the aesthetic conditions of twenty-first-century storytelling (Pratheesh 122).

The convergence of cinematic realism and literary narrative has shaped a significant body of interdisciplinary scholarship since the mid-twentieth century. Bazin's foundational work foregrounds realism as cinema's ethical and aesthetic commitment to the ontology of the image, advocating for long takes, deep focus, and narrative ambiguity as mechanisms for preserving perceptual freedom (Bazin 41). Although Bazin's theory originates in film discourse, it offers crucial insights into literary works like *Ram C/o Anandhi* that simulate cinematic temporality and realism within prose. Expanding Bazin's framework, Gamble argues that realist cinema withholds manipulation, allowing viewers to discover rather than be directed toward meaning (Gamble 64). This principle

echoes in literary texts that prioritise minimal narration, ambient detail, and interpretive openness—hallmarks of this Malayalam novel.

In literary studies, the use of cinematic methods within narrative fiction is frequently discussed under the broader concept of media hybridity. Rajewsky characterises intermedial fiction as that which rearticulates the codes of other media in its textual form, often resulting in hybrid aesthetic grammars (Rajewsky 46). Kashaka identifies a rising genre of 'visual novels' in Indian fiction, characterised by montage construction, ambient symbolism, and an emphasis on mood over exposition (Kashaka 1224). Simultaneously, affect theory offers a robust vocabulary to understand the novel's emotive registers. As Nayar posits, affective realism in literature centres around evoking mood and sensation rather than conveying psychological depth through exposition (Nayar 24). Characters become emotional conduits, and spaces transform into affective containers.

Reader-Response Theory also plays a central role in conceptualising the novel's reception. Rosenblatt emphasises the reader's role in producing meaning, particularly when the text offers interpretive ambiguity (Rosenblatt 196). Fish reinforces this model through the concept of interpretive communities, where meaning arises through communal frames of reception (Fish 526). Together, these critical traditions of cinematic realism, affect theory and reader-response criticism provide a composite structure through which to examine *Ram C/o Anandhi*. This fusion clarifies the novel's aesthetic innovations and situates it within broader transformations in literary form and reader subjectivity in the age of media convergence.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology based on close reading, digital ethnography and spatial-affective analysis. Rather than relying on formalist approaches, this framework emphasises literary phenomenology, where mood, space and reader perception co-produce meaning. The novel is approached as a visual-affective artefact, and its text is treated as a network of cinematic codes. As literary texts increasingly borrow from filmic grammars, the methodology must recognise the fusion of narrative and sensory techniques. The paper tracks how cinematic cues, jump cuts, mise-en-scène, long silences translate into literary minimalism, relying on Bazin's visual ethos and Gamble's aesthetic realism as critical anchors (Bazin 22; Gamble 19). To explore spatial affect, the study maps emotional tonality to specific locations in the novel—balconies, metro stations, film studios—interpreted through the lens of Nayar's affective realism (Nayar 29). These geographies do not merely house characters; they modulate psychological tension and ambient emotion. Reader engagement

is traced through digital ancillary texts, Goodreads reviews, Instagram captions, and forum threads, to observe how contemporary readers, especially younger audiences, respond to the novel's fragmentary and visual form. These responses are framed through the theories of Rosenblatt and Fish, whose emphasis on reader-generated meaning illuminates the novel's dialogic texture (Rosenblatt 197; Fish 539).

The study aims to explore how *Ram C/o Anandhi* weaves cinematic realism into its literary fabric, paying particular attention to the techniques through which the novel mirrors filmic sensibilities. It also seeks to understand how spatial aesthetics and emotional cartographies shape the narrative's overall mood and tone. In addition, the research examines how readers in the digital age, especially those engaging through online platforms, interpret and respond to the novel's affective and visually oriented storytelling. Guiding this inquiry are a set of questions that probe the novel's formal and affective textures. First, the study asks how cinematic techniques, such as visual framing, montage, and meaningful uses of silence, are translated into the novel's prose. It also considers the role urban settings play in shaping the story's emotional dynamics and the characters' inner worlds. Finally, the research examines how contemporary readers respond to the novel's formal minimalism and its reliance on visual and emotive cues, particularly within a media environment increasingly shaped by image-driven sensibilities.

Ram C/o Anandhi eschews conventional plot progression in favour of atmospheric vignettes that simulate the rhythm and syntax of cinema. This formal departure from linear narration represents not merely stylistic experimentation but a deeper epistemological recalibration of how narrative, subjectivity, and space are constructed and received. Its episodic structure, frame-switching, and montage logic produce what may be termed a cinematic phenomenology—a shifting emotional field in which meaning is not declared but emerges through duration, silence, and spatial immersion. The novel demands not just interpretation but presence, not just cognition but affective attention. Echoing Bazin's formulation of cinematic realism as a commitment to perceptual freedom, Dharmajan constructs a literary space where the authority of the narrator is purposefully diminished (Bazin 23). Narrative power is instead distributed across objects, gestures, weather, architecture, and absences. Prose in these novel functions as mise-en-scène; composition, not commentary, animates its pages. Transitional moments, a sideways glance, the echo of footsteps in an empty stairwell, the hush of rain through a metro grille, become narrative fulcrums. These details demand slow reading, a suspension of interpretive urgency, a textual equivalent of the long take.

The emotional tempo of the text follows what Gamble describes as "ethical spectatorship", a viewer-reader relation premised on time, patience, and moral proximity rather than interpretive dominance (Gamble 59). Ram and Anandhi do not exist to disclose truth; their presence unfolds in gradients of gesture, silences, and unresolved longings. Unlike conventional psychological realism, Ram C/o Anandhi dislocates interiority from verbal exposition, rendering emotional reality through glances, pauses, and spatial placements. This challenges literary norms of characterisation and anchors the reader in a post-verbal, visual mode of empathy.

Chennai, far from being a neutral backdrop, operates as an emotional topology. Its urban cartography shapes and reflects the characters' affective states. Rooftops serve as affective thresholds, staircases encode ascents and descents not only of space but of mood, and corridors hold the inertia of human delay. Such alignment between built environment and emotive undertone situates the novel within what Nayar calls "affective cartography," wherein space is neither container nor context, but an agentive register of emotion (Nayar 29). In this novel, the city, like a character, does not talk but gestures, echoes and absorbs. Then the epistemological claim is clear: the 'space knows'. This idea reorients narrative epistemes away from the speech and internal monologue and towards architecture, gesture and environmental resonance. Such a formulation disrupts the classical notions of knowledge production in literature, proposing a poetics of environmental cognition and atmospheric memory.

The character, Anandhi's portrayal, radicalises this further. Her character journey, if you can call it that, is chronicled via embodied opacity rather than events or words. Her silences defy narrativization, and her resistance to offer psychological clarity represents a feminist intervention in the long history of female characters rendered intelligible solely via emotional exposure. Anandhi remains an affective occurrence rather than a psychological profile—an exemplar of Barthes' punctum: an element that outflows symbolization and thus acquires haunting intensity (Barthes 65). In one striking instance, Anandhi's tranquillity in the hospital corridor is rendered with such cinematic precision—her face half-lit, her posture unmoved, and her eyes averted—that it becomes the narrative's emotional centre of gravity. No dialogue is needed; the scene bears the meaning through affective architecture. This refusal to translate silence into explanation is not simply aesthetic minimalism—it is an epistemological ethic that privileges ambiguity as the legitimate narrative mode.

The novel's reflexivity too deepens in its theoretical architecture. Ram's film-school background is purposeful and not incidental, as it becomes a site of metanarrative critique. His commentary on his classmates' films—critiquing their overuse of the close-ups, melodrama and resolution—mirrors the novel's own departure from similar tropes. Ram C/o Anandhi does not merely narrate the story, but it critiques the very expectations of story-ness. The novel is an exercise in literary phenomenology, where reading becomes an act of watching and watching becomes an act of being. This reflexivity serves a dual purpose: it emphasises form as content while also involving the reader. When the text denies exposition, it invites affective co-authorship; when it withholds climax, it asks the reader to reconsider narrative satisfaction. Empirically, this structure maps onto the reading practices of contemporary young audiences increasingly shaped by the visual media. According to studies on reader behaviour in digital contexts, younger readers engage more profoundly with texts that provide open-endedness, visuality, and emotional tone rather than plot-driven linearity. The reaction of Ram C/o Anandhi on platforms such as Goodreads and Instagram backs this viewpoint, with readers characterising the novel in terms of how it feels rather than what occurs. The novel's motifs—rain, stairwells, balconies, and doorways—are repeated not to add metaphorical weight, but to establish a mood ecology. These are not symbols to be deciphered, but sensory signals to be experienced. This is consistent with an emerging style that academic Divya Kashaka refers to as the "visual novel"—in which the story emerges through ambient accumulation rather than teleological sequencing.

Finally, the Ram C/o Anandhi enacts a postmodern ethics of storytelling, as it goes non-linear as honesty, with honesty as meaning and spatiality as epistemology. It challenges not just established narrative norms, but also ideas about what readers want or need. Its interpretative complexity is not a defect, but rather a challenge—a call for a slower, deeper, and more spatially conscious manner of literary interaction. Reading Ram C/o Anandhi takes you through a landscape of emotion, a picture corridor and a rooftop of remembrance. It is a novel that must be felt to be known, halted to be comprehended and observed rather than eaten. It establishes a new grammar of literary realism that accepts cinematic speed, spatial sensitivity and emotional architecture as viable modalities of epistemic inquiry and narrative articulation.

Unconventional Elements and Their Narrative Efficacy: A Critical Analysis

What sets *Ram C/o Anandhi* apart in the canon of contemporary regional (Indian) fiction is not simply its subdued effect or the spatial elegance, but its

radical departure from the expectations of the narrative convention. The novel succeeds in challenging the reader's literary expectations by deploying a series of unusual strategies that defy regular storytelling mechanics—techniques that are not just aesthetic but also epistemologically revolutionary.

First and foremost, the narrative abandons a teleological storyline. Instead of cause-and-effect logic, the story moves via fragmented moments that do not lead to a conclusion, but rather create a complex emotional topography. This anti-plot device is a structural dissent, an intentional denial of narrative closure that distinguishes the book as postclassical by design and intent. Here, the author aligns with the postmodern ethos articulated by literary theorists such as Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon, who argue that narrative authority must be problematized and not asserted. The narrative's structure reflects not the journey of a protagonist but the meandering of the perceptual experience, challenging readers to abandon the anticipatory logic of climax and closure. Second, the novel's narration style is iconoclastic in its restraint. Rather of providing explanatory scaffolding, the language in Ram C/o Anandhi is noticeably thin. Minimalism, or evasive grammar, is used to produce emotional intensity rather than dramatised interiority. Ellipses, visual fragments, environmental allusions, and sensory residue all contribute to the novel's emotional palette. This storytelling strategy has theoretical resonance with Roland Barthes' concept of the "writerly text," which allows the reader to create meaning rather than receive it. Such writing requires interpretative labour, resulting in a kind of cognitive-emotional involvement that is uncommon in current popular literature.

Another unusual feature is the visual syntax integrated in the text. Dharmajan creates scenes with cinematic intentions, using compositional framing, lighting metaphors, and camera logic. Scenes, for example, begin with spatial descriptions that resemble establishing shots, such as a shadowy corridor, a neon sign blinking outside a metro station, or the angular immobility of a chair in an empty hostel room. These visual blueprints stimulate the reader's cinematic sensorium, enabling a new way of textual absorption. This intermedial crossover—between prose and visual imagery—places the novel squarely within the scope of what Irina Rajewsky calls intermedial literature: tales that translate the codes of one medium into another without becoming purely derivative (Rajewsky 44). The narrative temporality is one of the most notable examples of an unconventional success. In Ram C/o Anandhi, time is recursive, non-linear, and frequently fragmented. Mood takes precedence over chronology, and emotional velocity—rather than temporal sequence—is used to experience temporality. This temporality is consistent with what Gilles Deleuze calls the

"time-image," in which moments float as unadulterated manifestations of duration and sensation rather than being subservient to action (Deleuze). Like memory intruding upon consciousness, Ram's flashbacks are not discrete; instead, they bleed into the present. This approach produces a phenomenological authenticity that resembles lived experience, despite the possibility of disorientation.

The work also deviates from mainstream fiction by refusing to psychologise its characters in a traditional sense. Characters are portrayed through spatial inhabitation, visual presence, and emotive resonance rather than history or speech. Legibility is particularly resisted by Anandhi. Her silences are retained as emotional relics rather than being filled with explanatory intent. Feminist criticisms of representational excess, which frequently reduce women to symbols, tales, or metaphors, are consistent with this aesthetic of opacity. Ram C/o Anandhi resists such reduction and adds to a growing corpus of feminist-visual literature that values independence above accessibility. The novel's exploration of space goes beyond traditional narrative structures, presenting the city as a vital character rather than just a backdrop. This urban landscape is depicted through emotional experiences rather than mere functionality, emphasising how locations like the metro, cafés, and hostel corridors serve as significant sites of emotional resonance. Each of these spaces has its own unique rhythm and atmosphere, contributing to the overall narrative in profound ways. For instance, the recurring imagery of rain-slicked balconies, dimly lit hallways, and flooded intersections elevates these settings into symbols that evoke deeper meanings, yet they resist simplistic interpretations. These environments are not merely allegorical; instead, they create rich atmospheres that enhance the emotional depth of the story, reflecting the complexities of urban life and the characters' experiences within it. The interplay of these spatial motifs invites readers to engage with the narrative on a sensory level, allowing the city to emerge as a living entity that shapes the characters' journeys and emotional landscapes.

Also, the novel's artistic position is elevated by Dharmajan's reluctance to editorialise or moralise. No lessons learnt, no redemptive arcs, no epiphanies. The characters wait, act, retreat, and go. By doing this, the book presents a realism that is far closer to the rhythms of actual life than it is to the structure of fiction. This is integrity to experience, not a lack of resolve. The way this method forces readers to embrace ambiguity as a principle of story design rather than as a deficiency is what makes it so successful. From the empirical standpoint, the novel's unconventional systems have been met with considerable acclaim across social media platforms and reader forums. Its widespread use on

Instagram, incorporation in academic curricula, and high Goodreads engagement rate all attest to its cultural traction. The novel's cinematic pace, atmospheric beauty, and defiance of melodrama are often cited by readers as its main draws. These signs demonstrate that rather than alienating readers, the novel's experimental elements have developed a specialised, emotionally aware readership.

Overall, Ram C/o Anandhi achieves a wonderful balance of experimental form and emotional clarity. Its unusual strategies, anti-plot structure, minimum writing, cinematic design, spatial poetics, and female opacity are not gimmicks, but rather epistemic choices. They form a narrative grammar that is fit for the cognitive-affective reality of a visually overloaded, temporally fragmented, and emotionally sensitive readership. By rethinking how tales should be conveyed, the novel redefines what it means to narrate in the twenty-first century.

Reader Response Indicators: Engagement and Interpretive Communities

The *Ram C/o Anandhi*'s popular and critical acclaim reveals its appeal to readers who enjoy hybrid forms of narrative. Rather of providing a neatly planned narrative, the novel encourages a participatory reading style in which emotive clues, spatial moods, and narrative ellipses combine to create meaning. This approach is consistent with Rosenblatt's concept of the transactional reader-text interaction, in which the meaning of a literary work is derived from the reader's active interpretation rather than the text itself (Rosenblatt 199). On forums like Goodreads and Reddit, fans praise the novel's emotional nuance and quiet intensity. User reviews frequently include descriptions such as "cinematic but not dramatic," "haunting," and "slow but unforgettable." These indicate that the emotive atmosphere, rather than the story, becomes the major attraction. Fish's notion of interpretative communities helps explain how readers with comparable media experience and aesthetic tastes congregate around common meanings, especially when interpreting Anandhi's silences or the city's sad atmospheres (Fish 534).

Instagram posts inspired by the novel frequently include sombre, desaturated visuals—empty seats, rain-soaked windows, and lighted balconies at night—along with text snippets. These image-text pairings mirror the novel's own grammar of visual narration and highlight how readers' interpretative behaviours extend beyond reading to curation and visual creation. Such methods support Kashaka's concept of the "visual novel," which is increasingly influenced by digital aesthetics and networked reception (Kashaka 1224).

The novel ‘asks us to dwell in the quiet’, according to literary critics like Radhika Jayaram, who writes in The Hindu Literary Review. Jayaram argues that the novel's stylistic choices purposefully forgo dramatic arcs in favour of emotional integrity. In a similar vein, screenwriter and director Anwar Ali compares the text's structure to a slow movie and commends it for not over-scripting impact. According to these comments, the novel's popularity lies in its capacity to promote emotive recognition among a range of readers, including social media users and scholarly reviewers. It transforms from a word into an environment and a mood that may be experienced. The variety of interpretations supports the novel's artistic approach even more: Deferred, diffused, and co-constructed meaning

Conclusion

A subtle yet powerful recalibration of literary realism for the digital, post-cinematic era is demonstrated by Ram C/o Anandhi. The novel rejects traditional emotional arcs and dramatic closure through its ambient moods, visual grammar, and narrative fragmentation. Rather, it transports the reader to a temporal-spatial continuum characterised by silence, pause, and glance—elements of a literary practice influenced by the spirit of cinematic realism. Because of its formal restraint, mood can take the place of message, readers can co-compose meaning in dialogue with the text, and space can host feelings. The characters in the book are not arc-bound but rather emotionally resonant through gesture and absence, and the cityscapes are not settings but syntax. This supports Gamble's claim that ethical spectatorship, which underpins realism in art, asks how we see rather than what we know. Moreover, the novel’s resonance in reader communities both popular and critical reader communities reveals its adaptability across interpretive registers. It invites not consensus but multiplicity, not immediacy but reflective depth. In this, *Ram C/o Anandhi* signals a literary turn where storytelling becomes affective cartography and textuality becomes cinematic in its visual restraint and spatial pacing. The novel thus offers more than a narrative; it proposes a new sensorium of reading—one attuned to silence, surface, and slowness. In doing so, it anticipates a literary future shaped not by plot but by perception.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

1
Salem Ireland, my Love

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Salem Ireland, my Love

And yes, it is with this heartfelt greeting that I first approached your shores, Ireland, a wish for peace and well-being upon the land and its people, a silent prayer for a safe and meaningful journey within your embrace.

From the very first stirrings of my heart, a deep sensitivity and a natural reaching across cultures have been woven into the fabric of my being by the language of stories, immortally captured by your great novelists and poets. Their words have opened my eyes to the quiet beauty of your secret gardens, the steadfast heart of your ancient castles and the lingering echoes in your sacred, remembered places. But, it was when our souls first met, when my feet first touched your green earth, that these celebrated spaces, these keepers of time and witnesses to eternal lives, became a boundless source of an inexplicable, vibrant and deeply felt magic within me.

And it is this very pulse of emotion that quickens whenever I am near you, whether in the lively embrace of Dublin, the warm heart of Limerick, the creative spirit of Galway or in your other towns. Yes, my

beloved Ireland, our shared story is filled with tales both whispered and true and a timeless cultural heart beats alongside mine. Yes, my beloved Ireland, it is this ineffable connection, this silent language between us, that lifts my spirit beyond the limits of words, beyond the edges of the everyday world, beyond even the grasp of time and what we can see or touch and perceive. It is this very fascination that has drawn forth a wellspring of feelings, a harmony of memories that linger like a familiar perfume, residing in a place deeper than words, a powerful echo of a past that lives within us, surpassing mere understanding, filled with the profound emotions of your real world and the mythical beauty of your Eden-like soul.

And it is with a heart full of tenderness and a spirit humbled by your grace that I open myself to your verdant landscapes and the unwavering strength and beauty of the very creation that breathes within you, each time I return to your arms. You are a land where the ancient whispers of the earth and the quiet devotion of the heart intertwine, where old beliefs dance with the magic of Celtic tales, and where the wise ones of the past sought to understand the mysteries that lie just beyond our sight and touch. Indeed, the deepest part of me, the place where feelings are anchored, is nourished by the ancient stories that are woven into your beautiful lands – a touch of the unseen, a hint of the 'unknowable' that sparks my imagination and creates a bond so deep with your green heart, a bond that goes beyond just seeing beauty or understanding stories.

Then, my unforgettable Ireland, there was that moment during our first real meeting, a moment that bound my heart to yours forever. For no clear reason, tears flowed as I left your Dublin for the journey home. Yet, it felt as though you held me back, for my path was delayed at the airport, for a later departure that day. Whether it was chance or fate's gentle hand or your own sweet magic keeping me near, it remains a cherished memory that speaks to the special and deep connection between my soul and yours. That unexpected gift of more time with you felt like an answer to my heart's ache at leaving. And I was given the precious chance to feel those indescribable emotions again, that undeniable sense of belonging to your land, finding peace in the quiet presence of your trees, breathing in your very essence as I walked your paths, and simply smiling in the warmth of your spirit.

Yes, my Ireland, my love, it is this deep, sensory experience that has tied my heart to your sacred places with bonds that will never break. There is no need for a reason, only this profound and beautiful feeling, an

inexplicable harmony with your very air, your very being. I treasure this peace and joy that I find only with you. Indeed, it is a powerful testament to the deep mark you have made on my fragile soul. Even those who know me see this clear connection, this undeniable love I have for you, my Ireland! Who can ever truly understand the depths of such a love?

Visiting your places of remembrance, from weathered headstones to grand memorials, was never an act of mere sightseeing, but a pilgrimage of respect. I moved in quiet contemplation, feeling the echoes of lives lived and lost, honouring the stories held within the earth. Undoubtedly, I approached them with a deep sense of reverence, a feeling so ingrained that I remember, even once while visiting such a place with friends of different backgrounds, I felt compelled to voice the importance of respecting the silence and the stories held within the earth. Though my words were spoken in French and Arabic, languages the local guide might not have understood directly, my sentiment resonated. He turned to the group and echoed my plea: 'Please respect the dead.' It was a moment that underscored a shared understanding, a universal acknowledgement of the sacred nature of these spaces, a principle that guides my steps on your hallowed ground.

More than just admiring your beauty and history, Ireland, I feel woven into your very essence. It is as if a part of me has always belonged here, and each return is a reunion with a long-lost part of myself. I am not a foreigner in your land, but a fellow traveller, a soul sister on its ancient paths, healing my torn halves. As generations pass and families journey across continents, the whispers of our origins can fade, becoming faint, distant echoes in the chambers of memory. Yet, in that Galway souvenir/bookshop, the past spoke again with a clarity that transcended time and distance or space. The revelation of part of my family's original name etched in Ireland's ancient records felt like a reclaiming, a remembering of lost roots that had perhaps been unknowingly calling to me across the years. It was a poignant reminder that even when the conscious memory of our origins blurs, the threads of heritage still weave their way into the reconstruction of our being, leading our hearts home.

Even in the intricate tapestry of history, Ireland and Algeria find unexpected threads intertwined. From the complex story of Richard Joyce's time in Cherchell to the enduring legend of the Claddagh ring, born from a love that transcended captivity in Algiers, these connections, both shadowed and romantic, hint at a deeper, perhaps even fated,

relationship between our lands. Knowing these stories, I feel my own connection to you, Ireland, which resonates on levels I am only beginning to understand, a sense of belonging that feels both deeply personal and somehow echoed in the currents of history. There are whispers of connections stretching across vast distances. It is as if this enduring emblem of connection speaks to the deeper, often unseen, threads that bind our hearts and histories to claim my own heritage. Even more, knowing the struggles for independence that have marked both our lands, I feel a resonance with the spirit of resilience that defines you, Ireland, a spirit that perhaps finds a distant echo in the heart of Algeria, too.

Perhaps this profound sense of belonging is not just a meeting of hearts, but a reunion with a long-forgotten part of myself, a whisper from the past calling me home. And in the depths of my heart, I truly believe that a part of my own story is intertwined with yours, Ireland, a whisper from ancestors carried across time and sea. But it was through the warmth and open heart of my Irish friend that I truly began to understand the spirit of this land. Despite our different cultural paths, and beyond the more recent layers of our cultural identities, I discovered a fascinating resonance with my Irish friend, a kinship that felt ancient and profound. Perhaps, it is in the deep roots of our respective pasts, in the echoes of ancient pagan beliefs that honoured the land and the cycles of life, that we found this unexpected common ground, a reminder of a shared human history that transcends the boundaries of time and tradition.

My cherished Irish love, it is not a farewell, but only an authentic love surviving or rather floating with defiance across time and space, a love that transcends earthly separation, residing in that thin place – a Barzakh of the Heart awaiting its true belonging.

And yet, having been granted the precious key (visa) to your shores for two years, my heart soared with anticipation, Ireland. Though Covid circumstances beyond my control limited my time within your embrace, the moments I did experience only deepened my yearning to return and fully immerse myself in your beauty and spirit. That trip would be a profound pilgrimage to a country that already holds a piece of my soul, walking again and again the grounds of Trinity College which has nurtured the literary giants I so admire or imagining wandering the vibrant musical streets of Temple Bar or simply giving the opportunity to stand in awe of the Book of Kells, and feeling the salty rebooting greetings of the wild Atlantic coast.

BOOK REVIEWS

I.

Environmental Ethics, Cross-Species Empathy, and Cultural Symbolism: A Review of *The Adventures of Rocksa*

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&

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Mitra, Amrita. *The Adventures of Rocksa*. Vidya Publishing, 2025, pp. 121, ₹150, ISBN 978-1-998475-94-0.

The Adventures of Rocksa (2025) occupies a significant place within contemporary Indian children's ecofiction. In this book, Amrita Mitra presents a narrative that unites ecological learning, mythic symbolism, and adventures in childhood. The novel follows a young boy who survives a tsunami and finds a new life within a multispecies world, where turtles, birds, monkeys, dolphins, and other creatures shape his understanding of care, danger, and interdependence. Through these relationships, the book introduces young readers to the idea that ecological life depends on cooperation and shared responsibility. Its interplay of environmental themes, cultural motifs, and moral questions speaks to ongoing work in children's literature and environmental humanities.

The Adventures of Rocksa introduces ecological concepts in ways that remain closely connected to the movement of the story. When the mother turtle speaks and says "We should all help him" (Mitra 24), Rocksa enters a world in which interdependence forms the basis of all life. The narrative teaches ecological principles through concrete experience rather than through explicit explanation. Rocksa learns about turtle nesting through direct observation of buried eggs, the presence of predators, and the vulnerability of hatchlings. He also learns how predators are real threats. This provides an accessible introduction to food chains and species survival. The book returns to similar environmental rhythms throughout the narrative. These include tidal cycles that trap dolphins, storms that disturb marine life, nocturnal hunting in the forest, and the constantly changing conditions of rock pools. Rocksa's empathy across sea, forest, and shore becomes the emotional centre of the book's ecological message. He rescues a baby dolphin who pleads, "Please someone help me!" (82). He protects turtle hatchlings from eagles. He also saves a rabbit from Mahiraj. These acts show that his instinct to protect the vulnerable expresses an environmental ethic rooted in care rather than control. The narrative, therefore, presents ecological consciousness not as technical knowledge but as a lived relationship shaped by attention, compassion, and responsibility.

The integration of Indian mythology and folklore into the ecological world is an important aspect of the book. The Shiva temple, situated deep within the forest, adds a cultural and spiritual dimension to Rocksa's environment. The carvings of the Dashavatar, the sound of the bells, and the priest's rituals place the natural surroundings within a culturally resonant landscape. The narrative frequently blurs the boundary between myth and reality. When pearls and gems fall from Rocksa's shell, the priest exclaims, "Oh my Lord! You appear again!" and mistakes Rocksa for the Kurma Avatar (92). This moment, although humorous, shows how natural events may take on symbolic meaning within a cultural framework. The priest's belief that the gems are divine offerings illustrates a process of interpretation that enriches the narrative while allowing the ecological concerns to remain clear and central. The mythic scope of the story becomes more pronounced in the portrayal of Mahiraj, the two-headed serpent whose "Mani diamond" illuminates the forest at night (72–73). The history of Mahiraj, which involves fire, conflict, and a lingering curse, resembles oral folklore that has become

part of the ecological world in the book. Rocksa's confrontation with Mahiraj, which ends with his use of Shiva's trishul (120), reinforces the symbolic link between ecological protection and mythic responsibility. The novel does not reduce mythology to a simple allegory. Instead, it presents myth and environment as coexisting forces that shape how humans and animals understand the world. Through this approach, *The Adventures of Rocksa* creates a culturally grounded ecological imagination that encourages children to see nature as both a physical environment and a space of story, spirit, and memory.

Rocksa's emergence as an eco-hero is noteworthy. The book traces his growth from a frightened child washed ashore to a figure who can defend entire communities across diverse ecosystems. His agency develops gradually and is shaped by experience, empathy, and increasing moral clarity. The early moments of heroism, such as saving turtle hatchlings from an eagle, establish courage as a relational quality that arises from care for others. Later rescues, including nursing an injured monkey with sweet mango juice (68) or comforting the stranded dolphin, further demonstrate that his bravery is closely connected to acts of compassion. His strategic thinking becomes most evident when he infiltrates Mr Rao's boat and begins pushing turtles through the window into the sea (98). This scene presents Rocksa not only as a brave figure but also as a thoughtful and resourceful leader who can coordinate action across different species. The climax of his heroism occurs in the temple when he confronts Mahiraj in order to protect the priest and Lata. Even in this moment of extreme danger, Rocksa acts from a sense of responsibility rather than aggression. After defeating Mahiraj with the trishul, he refuses to kill her. He instructs her to return to the ocean and to avoid harming weaker creatures (120). This moment shows a sophisticated understanding of justice that is restorative rather than punitive and is consistent with the ecological ethics presented in the book. The novel portrays heroism as a form of care that is grounded in relationships. This approach shows a strong alternative to the conquest-driven models that often dominate adventure fiction. It also situates child agency within a broad network of interspecies bonds and highlights cooperation, empathy, and moral resilience as central qualities of the eco-heroic ideal.

Human intrusion emerges as the major source of ecological disruption in the fiction. While natural predators such as eagles, snakes,

and octopuses act from instinct, human actors, particularly Mr Rao and his men, operate from motives of greed and exploitation. Their plans to capture turtles for illegal trade and to kidnap Rocksa for profit show how economic desire can damage ecosystems. The animals recognise this danger with clarity, as seen in the warning "Toot…Toot…Toot,… they are our enemies" (52). The contrast between animal cooperation and human exploitation is intentionally sharp. Mr Rao's actions repeatedly disturb ecological balance, whether he is capturing turtles, pursuing Rocksa, or moving through the sea without regard for the environment. The theft of gems by his workers, taken secretly from Rocksa's earlier discoveries, further reveals the multiple forms that human greed can take. The narrative does not portray humans as entirely beyond redemption. Mr Rao's transformation after he witnesses Rocksa's bravery is an important moment. His expression of shame and his realisation that he cannot catch the turtle-boy again suggest that human characters are capable of moral change when they confront ecological and ethical truth. This treatment prevents the story from falling into simplistic oppositions between good animals and bad humans. It also allows space for the idea of reconciliation.

The formation of alternative communities based on cross-species kinship is significant in the book. From the moment Rocksa receives his name from the animals, he begins to enter a world in which belonging is defined not by biological ties but by mutual care and collective responsibility. The turtles become his first family and offer him guidance and affection. Birds warn him of danger and assist him when he searches for lost companions. Squirrels play with him and hide him from human intruders. Monkeys welcome him into their forest activities, and dolphins later repay his earlier act of compassion by rescuing him. These relationships show that community in this novel is presented as an ecosystemic concept. Species share space not only in physical terms but also in emotional terms, and they shape one another's chances of survival. Rocksa's identity as "turtle-boy" symbolises this hybrid sense of belonging and challenges anthropocentric ideas about family, home, and care. The celebratory scenes at the end, where "birds, squirrels, rabbits, and monkeys" gather around Rocksa (121), present a utopian image of interspecies harmony. Although this vision is idealised, it serves an important pedagogical purpose. It introduces young readers to the emotional possibilities of ecological solidarity in a manner that is both imaginative and accessible.

The strengths of *The Adventures of Rocksa* lie in its thematic richness, its ability to combine ecological and mythic storytelling, and its emotionally compelling portrayal of a child hero shaped by empathy. The accessible language and episodic structure make the fiction suitable for young readers, and the symbolic and cultural dimensions offer material that supports deeper academic analysis. The ecological pedagogy of the book is effective because it is grounded in lived experience rather than formal instruction. Rocksa learns through feeling, responding, acting, and making mistakes. This experiential approach represents current theories of child-centred eco-literature that emphasise relational forms of learning and the development of environmental understanding through emotional and ethical engagement.

Placed within the wider field of Indian children's ecofiction, *The Adventures of Rocksa* fits into a growing body of writing that introduces young readers to ecological vulnerability, multispecies kinship, and environmental responsibility. Authors such as Lavanya Karthik (2018) and Venita Coelho (2017) also use animal perspectives, environmental crises, and child protagonists to build ecological awareness; however, *Rocksa* stands apart through its use of mythic symbolism within an intertidal landscape. In a global context, the novel participates in the eco-hero tradition seen in Piers Torday's *The Last Wild* (2013) and in the juvenile fiction of Carl Hiaasen (2002), where children act as ethical agents who resist ecological harm. Mitra's narrative is distinctive because it presents care-based rather than conquest-based heroism, a model that resonates with Donna Haraway's (2016) idea of multispecies thinking, Affrica Taylor's (2013) concept of common worlds and kin-making, and recent scholarship in childhood ecocriticism that stresses relational learning and embodied encounters with the more-than-human world. Through these connections, *The Adventures of Rocksa* can be read not only as a standalone ecological narrative but also as a meaningful contribution to the wider field of children's eco-literature that seeks to redefine how young readers understand agency, ethics, and environmental belonging.

The Adventures of Rocksa presents an optimistic model of ecological storytelling for young readers. Through its combination of environmental learning, mythological resonance, and adventure, the fiction imagines a world in which interspecies solidarity forms the basis of ethical action. As previously noted, Rocksa's development from a

vulnerable child to an empathetic protector illustrates a form of eco-heroism that is grounded in care rather than conquest. The book encourages readers to understand the natural world as a network of relationships and contributes in a meaningful way to contemporary children's eco-literature. Although the narrative contains occasional simplifications, its central message remains strong. Environmental responsibility appears as a shared and collective practice that depends on courage, empathy, and a deep sense of belonging within the more-than-human world.

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2.

Metamorphosis and Memory: Rewriting Selfhood in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2024), originally written in Hindi as *Ret Samadhi* and translated into English by Daisy Rockwell, emerges as a landmark achievement in contemporary Indian literature, offering a profoundly meditative exploration of identity, memory, and the transformative potential inherent in human experience. The novel refuses to adhere to linear or conventional narrative structures, instead embracing a fluid, experimental approach that melds the ordinary with the philosophical. Anchored by the journey of an octogenarian protagonist, Ma, the text interrogates the processes through which selfhood is continually reconstructed in response to trauma, history, and personal acts of defiance. Shree's narrative demonstrates that the path to wholeness does not entail erasing the imprints of past suffering but involves embracing and integrating these experiences into a renewed sense of self.

From the outset, the novel's stylistic expansiveness, its playful yet precise use of language, shifting perspectives, and rich metaphorical density, embody the very concept of metamorphosis it seeks to portray. As Francesca Orsini notes in *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (2002), modern Hindi fiction progressively foregrounds interiority and formal experimentation; Shree advances this lineage by treating language itself as a dynamic and transformative space in which identity and perception remain open to continual renegotiation. Daisy Rockwell's translation further enhances

this dynamic, transforming the act of translation itself into a form of metamorphosis that negotiates meaning across linguistic, cultural, and emotional registers. In this sense, the novel's linguistic playfulness mirrors its thematic preoccupation with the fluidity of selfhood.

Central to the novel's symbolic framework are recurring motifs such as sand, borders, and sunlight. Sand, a seemingly simple image, evokes impermanence, fragmentation, and continual reshaping, reflecting Ma's evolving selfhood and the wider human capacity for renewal. Borders function both as political demarcations and psychological thresholds, marking the intersection of personal and collective histories. Sunlight, recurring throughout the narrative, suggests illumination, vitality, and the emergence of consciousness from the shadow of grief. Together, these symbols form a dense interpretive network that underscores the novel's concern with fluidity—not only of identity but also of memory, experience, and historical consciousness.

At the emotional and philosophical heart of the novel stands Ma, whose withdrawal following her husband's death initially suggests decline but gradually reveals itself as a profound reconfiguration of identity. In the context of Indian society, where widowhood has historically signified social erasure, Ma's journey is a radical assertion of agency. As Uma Chakravarti notes in her feminist critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, widows have long been pushed to the peripheries of social life, their voices muted and their identities constrained (112). Shree overturns this logic through Ma, whose silence becomes not an erasure but a profound site of self-reflection, imaginative resurgence, and transformative rebirth. With the encouragement of her daughter, Beti, and the unconventional but vibrant Rosie Bua, Ma reconstructs her identity, challenging entrenched expectations linked to age, gender, and familial roles. Her transformation illustrates the novel's central assertion: that identity is not static but malleable, capable of continual reinvention.

The narrative reaches a pivotal juncture when Ma decides to cross the border into Pakistan. Rather than presenting this journey as a mere physical traversal, Shree frames it as an engagement with memory, history, and the legacies of Partition. Scholars such as Urvashi Butalia, in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India (1998)* and Gyanendra Pandey, in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and*

History in India (2001), have demonstrated that women's experiences of Partition remain largely obscured within official historical narratives. Shree's novel intervenes in this critical gap by foregrounding Ma's suppressed past as Chanda, thereby revealing the intimate ways in which personal memory intersects with national history. Through this revelation, Ma's layered identities, Chanda, Chandraprabha Devi, and Ma, are shown to exist as a continuum shaped by trauma, resilience, and renewal, highlighting the novel's feminist and historiographical interventions.

Beti, Ma's daughter, complements and contrasts her mother's narrative arc. Free-spirited, intellectually curious, and independent, Beti embodies the evolving gender dynamics of contemporary India. Her journey is not simply one of rebellion against patriarchal norms but rather of reconciliation with history, family, and selfhood. Drawing on Susie Tharu's reflections in *Women Writing in India* (1993) on how women narrativise their lived experiences beyond patriarchal frameworks, the relationship between Ma and Beti reveals how alternative kinship models can challenge entrenched hierarchies and enable the flourishing of female subjectivity. Their relationship, marked by empathy and mutual transformation, illustrates how narratives of renewal are deeply relational, contingent upon the interactions between self and other, past and present.

Equally transformative is Rosie Bua, whose presence as a vibrant transgender character destabilizes fixed notions of identity. Rosie embodies fluidity, queerness, and the defiance of normative boundaries, functioning both as a catalyst and companion in Ma's journey toward self-renewal. Her dynamic persona aligns with Judith Butler's theorization of performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), which posits that identity emerges through repeated acts rather than fixed attributes, thereby resisting any static or essential classification. By integrating Rosie's narrative, Shree broadens the novel's engagement with marginality and inclusion, suggesting that selfhood is inherently relational, porous, and capable of infinite reinvention.

The novel's expansive, digressive structure mirrors its thematic concerns. While its wandering form may challenge readers accustomed to linear storytelling, this very fluidity enacts the unsettled nature of memory and identity. Shree's narrative meanders, interrupts itself, and

shifts perspectives, inviting readers to inhabit the provisional, transformative spaces that memory and history produce. Storytelling, in *Tomb of Sand*, becomes an act of reclamation: a means to give voice to those previously silenced and to redraw the boundaries of belonging.

Viewed through the lens of contemporary literary theory, *Tomb of Sand* assumes a crucial place in modern Indian literature, interrogating the afterlives of Partition, the layered complexities of gendered existence, and the fundamentally fluid nature of identity. Engaging with Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) and Francesca Orsini's *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920–1940* (2002), and drawing on Paul Ricoeur's meditations on narrative identity in *Time and Narrative* (1983), Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of cultural hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal intervention in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Shree's novel emerges as a luminous exploration of hybrid selfhood—one shaped in the interstices between past and present, silence and articulation, nation and exile. Ma, Beti, and Rosie collectively dismantle rigid architectures of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and nationalism, offering a vision of identity as a constantly evolving continuum. The novel's philosophical depth and emotional resonance affirm the enduring capacity of storytelling to reimagine history, restore agency, and illuminate the transformative potential of human experience.

Shree's novel also prompts reflection on the nature of storytelling itself. Narratives, like identities, are mutable, recursive, and permeable. By eschewing teleological plots, the novel mirrors the drift of memory and the fragmentation inherent in lived experience. Aijaz Ahmad, in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992), argues that postcolonial Indian literature frequently unfolds within layered and non-linear temporalities, resisting singular closure in favour of multiplicity, recursion, and narrative dispersal. Echoing this insight, Shree structures her novel around the recognition that identity itself is a constructed and continually shifting terrain; age, gender, nationality, and kinship appear not as fixed categories but as fluid formations that can be destabilised, reimagined, and ultimately subverted.

The political dimension of *Tomb of Sand* is inseparable from its personal, emotional, and philosophical inquiries. Partition functions not as a mere historical backdrop but as an active, shaping presence that

informs Ma's evolving sense of self and her fraught relationship with memory. As Gyanendra Pandey argues in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, the memory of Partition endures not through official documentation but through the affective, embodied recollections of those who lived through its violence. Shree's narrative echoes this insight, foregrounding the intimate, lived textures of historical trauma as central to Ma's metamorphosis. Ma's journey into Pakistan represents a symbolic return to the site of trauma, an engagement with suppressed memories, and a confrontation with the legacies of colonial and national histories. Through this act, Shree critiques hegemonic historical narratives, privileging personal truth, emotional resonance, and ethical remembering.

The novel further subverts conventional perceptions of ageing. Whereas old age is frequently depicted as a period of decline, invisibility, or marginalisation, Shree reimagines it as a stage of radical possibility, creative vitality, and intellectual awakening. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette observes in *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011), cultural anxieties often impose narratives of diminishment upon the elderly, constraining their social and personal agency. By foregrounding Ma's late-life transformation, Shree contests these limiting scripts, portraying ageing instead as a fertile terrain for self-reinvention and renewed engagement with the world. Shree subverts this narrative by portraying Ma's late-life metamorphosis as the most vital and creative phase of her existence. This approach not only enriches the literary discourse on ageing but also expands the possibilities for the representation of elder characters within South Asian literature.

In *Tomb of Sand*, language itself emerges as a pivotal site of transformation. Through its shifting tones, idiomatic play, and nested narratives, Shree exemplifies what Alok Rai identifies as the "multilingual imagination" characteristic of modern Hindi literature (67). Here, language is not merely a vehicle for storytelling; it becomes a living, breathing entity, elastic, unpredictable, and generative, capable of shaping consciousness, identity, and perception as dynamically as the narrative it conveys. Rockwell's translation respects and extends this linguistic vitality, demonstrating how translation can function as an act of co-creation rather than mere transfer. In this regard, the novel engages with a broader global discourse on translation and the politics of

linguistic representation, resonating with Lawrence Venuti's call for translator visibility and the creative labour inherent in the act of translation (1–14). Through Daisy Rockwell's inventive rendering of Shree's multilingual and experimental prose, translation itself becomes a performative and transformative act, shaping meaning as dynamically as the original text.

Borders—whether literal, cultural, or emotional—emerge as a central motif in the novel, framing both movement and transformation. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space," as articulated in *The Location of Culture*, resonates profoundly throughout Ma's journey, revealing a liminal realm where identities intersect, collide, and are continually reconstituted beyond fixed binaries. The liminality of borders facilitates encounters with multiplicity, hybridity, and transformation. Ma's movement across domestic, national, and psychological thresholds occurs within these liminal zones, emphasising that identity thrives in spaces of negotiation and intersection rather than rigid confinement. In this context, borders function simultaneously as sites of rupture and spaces of possibility.

The novel's engagement with queer identity, exemplified by Rosie Bua, amplifies its challenge to normative categories. Rosie's fluid gender expression destabilises conventional notions of selfhood and community, enriching the novel's discourse on marginality and inclusion. Scholars such as Kareem Khubchandani, in his studies on queer South Asian performance, observe that marginalised sexual identities often navigate social norms through performative negotiation and adaptive expression (45–67). Rosie vividly embodies this dynamic, revealing the interplay of personal agency, social constraint, and affective community formation. Through her character, Shree reconceptualises kinship and relationality, envisioning modes of connection that transcend traditional patriarchal frameworks and conventional familial hierarchies. Familial dynamics further reveal the novel's interrogation of patriarchal structures. Bade, Ma's son-in-law, exemplifies the tension between tradition and evolving social norms. Although initially characterised by rigidity, Bade's gradual adaptation signals the potential for a reimagined masculinity. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, with its inherent vulnerabilities, offers a compelling framework for understanding his evolving trajectory (71–102). Through such nuanced characterisations, Shree interrogates the

interplay between social structures and individual agency, demonstrating that personal transformation remains possible even within systems that appear ostensibly inflexible.

Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* is a text of philosophical, emotional, and ethical depth. Its commitment to multiplicity, of memory, identity, and narrative form, positions it as a significant contribution to contemporary literature, both within India and internationally. By weaving together individual histories and collective trauma, and by interrogating social hierarchies through richly drawn characters, Shree affirms the capacity of literature to illuminate unseen truths and expand the horizons of human experience. The novel's refusal to be reduced to singular meanings underscores its thematic concern with becoming. Identity, in Shree's vision, is not a fixed inheritance but an evolving continuum, shaped by experience, memory, relationality, and the courage to transgress boundaries. Through *Tomb of Sand*, readers are invited into an immersive exploration of selfhood, an odyssey that traverses history, trauma, love, and renewal. By portraying life as a continuous process of transformation, Shree compels us to reconsider the parameters of identity, the nature of memory, and the enduring power of narrative to shape and reshape human understanding.

As a final reflection, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* stands as a masterwork that melds intellectual rigour with emotional resonance. Its experimental narrative structure, philosophical depth, and empathetic character portrayals render it a groundbreaking contribution to world literature. Through the intertwined journeys of Ma, Beti, and Rosie, the novel challenges readers to embrace multiplicity, confront historical and personal traumas, and recognise the transformative potential inherent in every life. By rendering the fluidity of identity, memory, and narrative, Shree not only affirms the regenerative power of human experience but also situates her work firmly within the global literary imagination as a testament to the enduring possibilities of storytelling.

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