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Articles

Metaphors in Shaikh Farid's Poetry and the Play of *Zāhir* and *Bātin*

Vivek Sachdeva

Roland Barthes says that narratives are everywhere. Similarly, it can also be said that metaphors are everywhere. Metaphors are an essential part of language, thought and communication and are found in all kinds of discourses. "Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language […] We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action" (Lakoff and Johnson 4). Metaphors can be found in our day-to-day conversations, as well as in literary and non-literary writings. Metaphors, making an implicit comparison between two things, stand for some other idea. By definition, a metaphor is when "one thing is made to stand in for another thing" (Punter 2). Earlier, it was understood that metaphors bank upon "intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilar" (Aristotle as quoted by Punter 11). Metaphors fill the gap between the literal meaning of a word and its intended meaning; the denotative value and the connotative value of a word. Metaphors operate in a space between the accepted conventional meaning of a word and the suggestive or creative new meaning invested in the word. Thus, metaphors become an essential component of communication to express a symbolic idea.

In Sufism, mystical experiences have always been expressed symbolically, making metaphors central to Sufi poetry. Metaphors in Sufi poetry encapsulate Islamic religious ideas with a cover of the aesthetic and "become changed and variegated, and yet not cut off from their religious roots" (Schimmel 4). Sufi poets borrowed certain metaphors from Persian poetry and invested them

with Sufi philosophical meaning. Sufi poetry, emerging from Iran, is replete with symbols of wine, beautiful locks of women and birds. Wine in Sufi poetry stands for the state of intoxication of love, union with the beloved stands for the union with God, and the beautiful flowing locks of the beloved stand for the flowing grace of God. Even while talking about the state of extreme love or *ishq* for a beloved or God, it is not confined merely to carnal passion. Similarly, metaphors in early Arabic Sufi poetry have been borrowed from Bedouin culture. "In their descriptions, the mystics used a rather simple, memorable style to describe not flowers, animals and wine, as worldly poets did, but rather the state of lovers who are distinct from everyone else" (Schimmel 19). As Amir Khursu sings- "It is nothing but Your goblet which the lovers drink in the taverns" (Schimmel 60). Carnal passion may be an expression of the state of extreme love when physical love is used as a metaphor for spiritual love. Nevertheless, Sufis or mystics have always believed in making a distinction between carnal desires and love.

The relationship between metaphor and idea entails a complex thought process, reflection, 'imagination' and knowledge on the part of the reader as well. A Sufi poet "constantly asks of his audience/readers to 'untie symbols,' 'grasp ultimate meanings,' and 'perceive allusions,' 'words,' and 'terms'" (Abou-Bakr 40). A metaphor acts as a bridge between the structural and conceptual content. The image-schema of metaphor is the medium to express thoughts and ideas embedded in the poem as there is a constant interaction between form and content in metaphors. Sufi poets in general were more concerned with the *ma'nā* (meaning) of their poetry than the *sūrah* (form). Patrick Laude quotes George Cave,

> *Sūrah* means the appearance of the poem, and comprises all that is not inherent in meaning of the poem. By this is meant structure, metrical arrangement, rhyme scheme,

> rhetorical devices, etc., in other words, all that can be concretely viewed and objectively treated. *Ma'nā* simply means "meaning" or that which must be subjectively treated or intuited.

"Subjectively treated or intuited" is not to be confused with arbitrary and impressionistic interpretations of poetry or metaphors; rather, it has to be comprehended by "the intelligence or the sensibility" (Laude 51) of the reader or the listener. *Sūrah* is more like the outer shell or form through which *ma'nā* is manifested. Meaning in poetry lies not in what is stated; rather, it dwells in what is suggested. Poetry finds its form, nature and meaning in the dynamics of *zāhir* and *bātin***.** In Islam and Sufism, *zāhir* and *bātin* correspond to exoteric and esoteric meaning. Every word has its *zāhir* and *bātin* dimension, "an external and interior sense, which holds true for mystical poetry in the whole Islamic world" (Shimmel 23). Messages in Sufi poetry are encoded in metaphors that operate through *zāhir* and *bātin* – the outer form and the hidden meaning, the visible and the invisible. The journey to grasp the 'metaphorical sense' of the *bātin* expressed through *zāhir* may begin from grasping its literal meaning first, which the reader extends, depending on the context, to its implied or extended meaning to decipher the abstract knowledge. The relationship between *zāhir* and *bātin* is similar to "two kinds of exegetical interpretation: the first is *tasvir*, the external interpretation of the Quran that seeks to explicate the outer level of revelation" (Aboul-Bakr 41) and the "second kind, initiated and practiced of Sufi exegetes, is the *ta'wil*, the internal interpretation that seeks the inner level of meaning" (41). Decoding the play of *zāhir* and *bātin* is central to understanding the form and function of metaphors. This paper analyses metaphors used by Shaikh Farid in his poetry to understand how *zāhir* and *bātin* operate in his poetry.

To understand the nature and function of metaphors in Shaikh Farid's poetry, it is important to understand the philosophical foundation of Sufism from which the ideas spring. There are different theories about the origin of Sufism, but all theories agree on one point that Sufism represents the mystical side of Islam. One school of thought believes that the word Sufi is derived from Suffa, which means cotton. As the Sufi saints used to wear rough cotton attire, they were called Sufis. Another school believes that Sufism is a mystical and spiritual tradition that exists outside religion. The mystical practices were later adopted by the followers of Islam. Another school believes that Sufis were directly associated with the Prophet Mohammad. This school believes that Sufism emerged from the forty-five companions of the Prophet Muhammad called *Ashab-e-Suffa*, People of the Bench as they used to sit on a bench outside his house. These people were ascetics who had shunned all worldly pleasures and comforts. Despite different theories about the origin of Sufism, all thinkers agree on the point that present-day Sufism, despite some differences with institutionalized Islam, represents the mystical side of Islam.

Balwant Singh Anand brings out the basic difference in the philosophies of Islam and Sufism. To quote him, "Islam makes a clear, complete and clear-cut distinction between the Creator and his creation. They live and have their beings in different worlds: God in heaven and man on earth or, after death, in paradise or hell. There is no meeting or merging of the two; the finite does not merge into the Infinite" (2). However, the doctrine of *wahdat-u'l-wujud* constitutes the philosophical foundation of Sufism, which understands the relationship between the microcosm of the human body and the macrocosm. The belief is that whatever exists in the outer world also exists in the inner world - within man's consciousness.[i] Sufi thought rests on the idea of merging the finite into the infinite. The link between man and God as his spiritual

Master or *Murshid*[ii]. The structural base of an organized religion and its mystical dimension constitute the difference between Islam as a religious institution and Sufism. The ultimate aim of a Sufi is to realise *mohabba* (Love), *ma'rifat* (Gnosis) and *wasl* (Union), whereas Islam as a religion is based on the principles of *shariat*. There are different stages or *maqamat*[iii] that a Sufi traverses during his spiritual journey. This decides their *tariqat* or the path to attain *wahadat-ul-wajud*, the unity of being. In Sufism, it is through love and devotion that one attains God. Thus, there is a strong emphasis on *ishq* or love in Sufism.

As with organized religion, Sufism's relationship with poetry is also quite ambivalent. Patrick Laude's essay 'Islam: Sufism and Poetry' begins with a cautioning note against poetry in Islam, which the author substantiates by giving reference to *Sūrah* 26. Later, the author makes a distinction between the "wandering" (Laude 48) poets, who do not have any "sense of the Ultimate Reality" (Laude 48). However, Annemarie Schimmel opines that "this criticism was directed against pagan-soothsayers with whom the Prophet Mohammad was sometimes compared by his adversaries" (Schimmel 11). Prophet Mohammad also criticized poetry as *nafth ash-shaitan* or "what Satan has spit out" (Schimmel 11), but this criticism was directed against the poetry brimming with indulgence and echoing with sensuality without any spirituality therein. Despite discouraging remarks against poetry, Sufism has a tremendously rich poetic tradition. Sufi poetry "is expressive of profound interconnections between the individual self and the aesthetics, the philosophical and political dimensions of lived reality" (Panjabi 2). Poetry to Sufis has been an essential part of their discourse. Sufi poets entered into a dialogue with their audience, speaking to them through poetry and all mystic poets have sung poetry when inspired. On the one hand, Sufi poetry takes expression from a heightened state of consciousness, an extreme state of love or the most poignant pangs of separation

from the beloved God; on the other, Sufi poetry also shows the path to young seekers, guides and instructs them how to follow the path of righteousness. Both strands are present in the poetry of Shaikh Farid.

Shaikh Farid, also known as Baba Farid or Shaikh Farid-ud-Din or Farid-ud-Din Ganj-i-Shakar, was a Sufi saint of the Chisti *silsilah* in Punjab. For a long time, his "*khanqah*[iv] at Ajodhan, the modern Patpattan (now in Pakistan), was a place of pilgrimage for millions of people belonging to different faiths, castes and walks of life. The life and works of Baba Farid are important components of "the spiritual history of medieval India during its most crucial socio-political upheavals" (Siddiqi 183). He was born to Jamal-ud-Din and Qarsum Bibi circa 1173. It is believed that Jamaul-ud-Din's father, Shu'aib, was a learned scholar and belonged to a noble family of Kabul. Farid received his early education in Quaran at Khotwal, where he also learned Persian and Arabic. At the age of eighteen, he went to Multan to study the Quran, where he studied with diligence and devotion. It was while studying at Multan, he met his future *murshid*, Khwaja Qutb-du-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, who belonged to the Chishti *silsilah*. After finishing his studies at Multan, he went to Kandhar and also visited Iran, Iraq and paid a visit to Mecca. After the completion of his journeys and education, he went to the *khanqah* of Khwaja Qutb-ud-Din Bhakhtiyar Kaki, where he was formally initiated into Chisti *silsilah* and trained in high mystical practices.

Shaikh Farid wrote in Persian, Arabic and some local languages like *Hindavi* and Punjabi. One important source of Shaikh Farid's poetry is Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of Sikhism. Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the first Sikh guru, preserved some of Baba Farid's writings and handed them over to his successor, Guru Angad Dev, which were later included in the Adi Granth, the first draft of the holy book of Sikhism. Guru Nanak

visited Pakpattan twice and entered into colloquies with Shaikh Ibrahim, one of the spiritual successors of Baba Farid. It is during the debate and dialogue with Shaikh Ibrahim that Guru Nanak was introduced to the poetry of Baba Farid (Anand 35 and Hussain 120). In most of the poetry written by Shaikh Farid, a strong influence of folk tunes and rural imagery can be seen. The use of Multani or also called *Lehindi-Punjabi*[v], a dialect of Punjabi, establishes him as one of the earliest poets of Punjabi. "Many consider him as the father of Punjabi literature and others consider him as the 'father of Sindh-Sagri poetry.' Sindh-Sagri is meant here to convey the link language spoken in this part of the country, which was a broader version of Lehindi-Punjabi" (Hussain 121).

Baba Farid's poetry is "pure, unalloyed and undiluted" and "away from *aparbhransha* tradition of love, romance and feudal heroism" (Hussain 122). He weaved the philosophical and mystical truths of Sufism with the mundane metaphors and the rustic language of the masses. Identifying with the rustic and to make his ideas accessible to the ordinary people, he wrote in Multani, a dialect of Punjabi and employed "images and symbols of rustic life" (Anand 45). Metaphors in his poetry are not merely literary devices, but a way of thought. In a famous anecdote associated with Shaikh Farid, he is said to have "boldly told "Do not give me scissors" to a visitor who had presented him a pair of scissors, "give me a needle to stitch, since I do not cut (injure)" (Siddiqi 183). The metaphors of scissors and needle are best understood keeping in mind the social-historical unrest of "the imperial rule of the Sultanate" (Siddiqui 183). Baba Farid's strength lies in his ability to weave deep spiritual thoughts and mystical experiences with the ordinary objects in his surroundings. His poetry helps in comprehending the deep truths of life through observation of natural happenings around him. He expresses deep philosophical thoughts and the Sufi way of life in simple diction. "Baba Farid adopted very simple and practical similes and metaphors in poetry

which kindled the imagination of the peasants and scholars alike" (Muhamad Masu'd Khalid[vi] quoted by Siddiqi 187).

"Sufi philosophy is classified into three stages – *Sharia,* the outward law, *Tareeqa,* the Way, and *Haqeeqa*, the Truth" (Sadia Dehlvi 27). Sufis from the Chishti *silsilah* believed in the *shariat*[vii] of Islam, but would not confine themselves to a strict implementation of *shariat* in their lives. Shaikh Farid's poetry is marked with the voice of *shariat* (the Law) and *tariqat* (the Way). Although he has also used the metaphor of conjugal love in his poetry, Shaikh Farid has frequently used rustic and agrarian metaphors to emphasize the values one should observe on the path of spiritualism. He is more didactic in nature and guides his followers or the listeners of his poetry on the spiritual path, which he compares to a double-edged sword.

> *My way is fearsome and terrifying;*
> *it is sharper than two-edged sword*
> *And is very narrow*[viii]

Shaikh Farid expresses his longings for God and yearning for union with Him through the metaphor of marriage: "Love cannot be planted by one, even if one tries hard / This cup of love is His, He gives it to the one He likes".[ix] In Sufi philosophy, *wasl* (union) with God has been given extreme importance, which has been conventionally expressed through the metaphor of conjugal love. God, like the beloved, is behind the veil (*bātin*); the lover waits for the beloved to remove the veil, to come out in the open (*zāhir*). Shaikh Farid has used conventional Sufi metaphors of conjugal love for spiritual love and the metaphor of a cup of wine for God's love in this verse. In the original Punjabi version, Farid has used the word *khasam* for God, which in Punjabi means husband.

On another occasion, death is understood as a moment of union with God. Death is not parting with life; rather, it is the

moment of passing on to the other world. The end of one's journey in the mortal world signifies the beginning in the divine world. Through the metaphor of the wedding and conjugal night, it beomes the moment of the union of a Sufi's soul with God.

> the wedding day approaches
> the moment of departure arrives
> the messenger of death appears
> the light of life dims
> the bone crackles
> nothing can stop the inevitable march of Time
> the bride of life will marry bridegroom of death
> the wedding ritual will follow
> none can hold the destined hour![x]

Similarly, there are *salokas* written by Shaikh Farid which use the conjugal relationship as the central metaphor to express his love for God. The sweetness of God, the beloved, is asserted by comparing God's sweetness with sugar and honey.

> Sweet are candy and sugar and honey and
> Buffalo's milk
> Yea sweet are all these, but sweeter by far is God's
> name.

Dr. Gurmukh Singh writes that in Sufism, "God is the ultimate reality or the supreme power of the world" (my translation) (528). A metaphor borrowed from the mundane everyday world is used to describe the highest entity, God. In another verse, Shaikh Farid compares God with "ripe dates" and "a rivulet of honey." Using the objects of sweetness for God also reflects his attitude toward his beloved, God.

However, Shaikh Farid's poetry cannot be narrowed down to the expression of love for God. He has also laid a lot of emphasis on the importance of following a strict discipline in the

path of spiritual quest. The image of a river flowing within its banks highlights the importance of following a discipline. Shaikh Farid advises people to "flow within thy bank." Shaikh Farid reminds people to follow discipline strictly in life if they wish to attain their final destination. In Sufism, the ultimate destination of a seeker or *murid* is the union with God, the Supreme Being. The journey of every river (seeker or *murid*) is the final union with the ocean (God). So, "mysticism is a practical life process, in which the One is the subject of love, and a living union with this One is the goal of the mystical path" (Schimmel 3).

> O river, break not thy banks, for, Thou too has
> To render account to thy God
> So flow within they banks, as is Lord's will

Shaikh Farid suggests that a follower (the river) needs to flow within its banks to reach its final destination (the ocean). The same metaphor of river and tree standing on its banks has been used to highlight the transience of human life. "*How long can the tree stand in peace/ At the river-bank."* The transience of life has been expressed through a tree, a vessel or a pitcher and a bird in different verses.

> Pray, how long can the water remain
> In a vessel that is unbaked.

In one of his other verses, Shaikh Farid has used the same metaphor to signify human life. The tree has been invested with different connotations.

> Farid, perform the service of Lord, dispel
> the doubts of thy heart;
> Derweshes require the endurance of trees

In the above verse, the tree stands for qualities such as patience and endurance that a Sufi *dervish* is expected to possess. The tree

becomes a common metaphor for life for various reasons. A tree braves all weathers to become strong; it endures all seasons to grow mature and be fruitful. In this schema, at the *bātin* level is the human journey, expressed through the *zāhir* form of a tree. The way of life in which suffering, pain and distress are stoically tolerated without complaining was central to Sufi philosophy and to Shaikh Farid in particular. The abstract knowledge of Sufi values constitutes the basis of why Shaikh Farid has compared a *dervish* with a tree. Farid talks through the metaphors of trembling trees, forests and leaves in "Farid, the season changeth, the forest trembles,/The tree sheds their leaves". Everything being subject to change is the primary thought that Shaikh Farid wants to stress upon.

> The beauteous pitcher (of the body) is
> shattered; snapped the strong rope of breath:
> Whose, O whose guest is today the Angel of Death.

The metaphor of the pitcher evokes an image of a day-to-day object. The pitcher is sustained in the well and can fulfil its duties as long as it is tied to the rope. Using the same metaphor, Shaikh Farid criticizes those who do not fulfil their duties in life. They have been called a burden on the earth. To a Sufi, union with God is the ultimate purpose of life. Those who do not fulfil this duty are no better than a burden on the earth.

> The beauteous pitcher breaks; snaps the
> tight rope of breath:
> They who were a burden to the earth,
> why did they come to life, O why?

Using the bird imagery, Shaikh Farid reinforces death as the eternal reality of life. Man, lost in his worldly pleasures, becomes oblivious of the inevitable truth of life. Unexpectedly, one day, the man realises that his final moment has arrived.

Farid, the crane sitteth on the bank of
the river and sporteth;
While it is sporting the hawk suddenly striketh it;

A forgetful man does not realize "for whom the bell tolls?"[xi] Shaikh Farid tells him that "it tolls for thee." Shaikh Farid reminds the man living in a state of amnesia of the eternal truth – the transience of life. In another verse, morning has been perceived as a beacon of death, as when the morning hour strikes, the bird will have to fly away from the garden where it is staying as a guest.

The bird is a guest in the world's garden
of beauty
When the drum of morn is struck,
prepare thyself to fly

Shaikh Farid reflects on life from the "vantage point of death" (Singh 143).[xii] The poet's constant awareness of the presence of death in life is indicated through metaphors like "snaps the/tight rope of breath", "While it is sporting the hawk suddenly/striketh it" and "When the drum of morn is struck,/prepare thyself to fly." While talking about death, Farid is neither melancholic nor entertains a depressing outlook; rather, he is aware of the ultimate reality of existence. His being aware of the transience of life becomes the fulcrum of his contemplation, philosophical moorings and values. The objects/creatures referred to in his poetry stand for a hidden philosophical meaning. The conceptual metaphor in the above verse is of the soul flying away from the body i.e., death, an inevitable and eternal reality. The bird sitting unknowingly at the riverbank, or as a guest in the garden of the world, suggests that human life is subject to death. If life is a journey, death is its final destination. Owing to the migratory nature of birds, Shaikh Farid uses the metaphor of birds to emphasize the idea of leaving the mortal world on a fixed day. In both Christian and Islamic cultures, birds have been seen as metaphors of souls and messengers of God

(Maria-Angles Roque). Annemarie Schimmel discusses how the metaphor of the bird (in the form of dove, falcon and nightingale) has been used in the Quran as well as Persian Sufi poetry (Shimmel 71-72).

> According to the Koran, the "language of birds" is spiritual knowledge and is related to the souls. The Christian tradition of the dove, the angels or the Holy Spirit is maintained in Islam: the migrating birds – such as those of Attar and those of Avicenna's Recital of the Bird – are souls launched on an initiation search. (Roque 99)

Sufi poets have also used poetry to propagate the doctrines of Sufi thought. Sufis constantly contemplate on life and death, the inner self, love and their path. In the continuum of contemplation, Sufis traverse the vast infinite space from emptiness to fullness. Poetry becomes a medium of contemplation for them. "The relationship between poetry and contemplation may therefore be understood from two standpoints: one that conveys a sense of continuity between words and experience; the other, on the contrary, pointing to the apophatic dimension of contemplation" (Laude 76). Shaikh Farid talks of the virtue of simplicity and humility through the metaphor of a tattered blanket that Sufi saints used to wear.

> Farid, tear thy coat into tatters and wear
> a blanket instead
> Adopt a dress by which thou mayest
> obtain the Lord.

In "Farid, my bread is made of wood, hunger is my condiment," the bread of wood is the metaphor for abstinence, sufferings and hardships that a seeker has to face on the spiritual path.[xiii] Abu'l Atahiya, an Arab mystic poet, also advises his readers "to be content with a loaf of bread and a sip of cold water instead of

dwelling in luxurious mansions and enjoying things prohibited, for this brief pleasure will certainly end in Hell" (Shimmel 15). Shaikh Farid used to bless his followers by saying, 'May God bless you with poverty!' Prophet Mohammad also said, '*Al fakhru fakhrii'* meaning 'Poverty is my pride' (Sadia Dehlvi 33). In Shaikh Farid's poetry, the "bread of wood" refers to the state of poverty and self-control, which have been considered essential in one's spiritual progress.

In another verse, using metaphors of nature, such as *Kikar*[xiv] and grapes, Shaikh Farid makes people aware of the inherent contradictions in their lowly actions and high expectations. The same idea is reinforced through the metaphors of wool and silk. One image is invested with multiple connotations.

> Farid, the Jat planteth Kikar, yet he
> wanted the grape tree of Bijaur
> He spinneth wool, yet he wanted to wear silk

The tree in one of the verses quoted earlier was used as a metaphor of endurance; however, in the above verse, the Kikar tree becomes the metaphor of ordinary actions. The tree has been given multiple connotations in different contexts-a metaphor picked from nature makes it particularly clear for the community of agriculturalists in medieval Punjab to grasp the message Shaikh Farid is trying to convey. In order to make his ideas comprehensible to ordinary people, it was essential to capture people's imagination. Shaikh Farid's poetry establishes a connection between his contemplative self and his audience, without alienating them. He borrows his metaphor from a world that a farmer in an agrarian society can identify with. While writing for the ordinary, he uses images from the mundane world to convey a profound message.

Owing to its philosophical depth and non-elitist approach, his poetry Baba Farid's poetry is enjoyed by the erudite and the

masses alike. He has woven mystical truth, his contemplations and profound Sufi thoughts with metaphors chosen from the culture of ordinary people, which enabled him to capture their imagination and establish a communicative bond with his audience. His metaphors are borrowed from nature, animals, vocations of people, household items and other matters of day-to-day life. He has used grapes, wood, trees, rivers, ponds, bride and bridegroom, tattered cloak, Jat, blacksmith, pitcher, rope, well, swan, crane, hawk and crow as metaphors in his poetry. In his poetry, image and thought are yoked together to express deep philosophical thought symbolically. His poetic imagination, starting from the ordinary, embraces the divine, the philosophy of Sufism and mystical experiences. His poetry weaves the mystical with the mundane, whereby the mundane ceases to be mundane and becomes a part of the divine. It is through the dynamics of *zāhir* and *bātin* that his metaphors can be understood. *Zāhir* and *bātin* are so closely intertwined in his poetry that one cannot be divorced from the other. It is essential to understand the play of *zāhir* and *bātin* to understand the relationship between the idea and its expression, the form and the content in his poetry.

Through the metaphors discussed above, it becomes evident that Shaikh Farid has succeeded in bringing in the "underlying conceptual mappings" (Tendahl and Gibbs 1825), the conceptual "vague, abstract domain of knowledge" (Tendahl and Gibbs 1825). Birds and trees are structural metaphors through which deep philosophical concepts have been mapped; whereas sugar, candy and buffalo milk, along with the two-edged sword for the spiritual path, are the metaphors that acquire their meaning through the direct ontological correspondence between the nature of the object and the thought. The trajectory of mapping in his metaphors begins from a common material object and extends up to the most divine. His metaphors are pregnant with his

philosophical worldview, mystical experiences, principles of Sufism and ideological politics of the poet.

To conclude, metaphors cannot be understood independently of the context in which they are used. Metaphors are carefully chosen by the poets, which may either reflect the literary tradition they identify with or their worldview. The use of urban or rural metaphors, nature or machine metaphors, the fantastical or the real is associated with a poet's vision, worldview and ideological position. Sometimes, a poet invents new metaphors and sometimes re-invents the existing metaphors to comment on the present. In different ages, metaphors are invented, reinvented, reinvested with new meanings and rediscovered to comment on changing reality. Metaphors act as a lens; metaphors make us see by suggesting the *bātin*. Metaphors become effective through their cognitive content by bridging the gap between the idea or emotion and its expression. Reconciling the conflict between two opposites, the most abstract ideas are expressed through highly tangible images.

Rooted in the teachings of the Quran and mysticism, Shaikh Farid lived simultaneously in two worlds. To an ordinary mind, these two worlds may seem contradictory, but Shaikh Farid reconciled them comfortably in his consciousness. He was formally educated in the teaching of the Quran, the strict discipline of life and Islamic *sharia*. Simultaneously, he was also trained in mystical practices, which helped him attain a direct and personal experience of divinity. As a spiritual Master and leader of a *khanqah*, he spread the message of God not merely through the Quran but through lived mystic experience. His concept of religion was not bound within the walls of the Mosque or the strict discipline of religion; rather, it was experienced within the human body, mind and soul, which he expressed through his poetry. To connect with simple-minded, lesser-educated masses of his time,

he distanced himself from the scholarly diction of the mainstream institutionalized religion and wrote in a people's language. Following the footsteps of his spiritual Master, Khwaja Bhaktiar Kaki, he was instrumental in spreading the message of Sufism among the common people. His use of Multani, a dialect of Punjabi, and metaphors picked from the ordinary world around him enabled him to achieve the purpose. He coined his metaphors from the day-to-day world to bring the attention of ordinary people towards the mystical and theological ideas embedded in poetry. By rejecting the idiom of the scholars, he took the mystical knowledge away from the hegemonic control of erudition and made it available to ordinary people.

Besides Punjabi, Shaikh Farid also wrote in Braj and Hindawi, two other languages of the people. To quote Balwant Singh Anand, "He is a serious writer and his diction is literary and dignified. It has to be admitted that the Multani Punjabi has a sweetness of its own and Farid exploits it significantly. Braj too has a delicacy and turn of phrase which gives it a musical quality […] he brings out the music and subtle charm of the language" (88). "It is largely thanks to them that languages like Panjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, etc. grew into vehicles of poetry and literature. The rhythmic power, freshness and simplicity of many of these poems often appeal to the Western reader more than the all too perfect later Persian verse" (Schimmel 8). Another interesting aspect of Shaikh Farid's poetry is that the "bulk of folk poetry written by Sufis was sung by village women engaged in various household chores" (Eaton 71). What Richard M. Eaton said about the relationship between the popularity of Sufism or Islam in the Deccan and its folk culture reveals how Sufi thought had captured the imagination of the ordinary people and become an integral part of their lives in other parts of India as well. The success of Shaikh Farid's poetry lies in the fact that it continues to exist in the popular imagination of people in contemporary times, especially

through Punjabi Sufi singers. The rustic simplicity and metaphors chosen from everyday reality enable his poetry to reach the ordinary masses, which validates the existence of Shaikh Farid's poetry in the popular consciousness of his own times.

Shaikh Farid imagined the ordinary objects and invested them with a new meaning that transformed them into the extraordinary. It is by undergoing the process of transformation that one object acquires various meanings. Thus, defamiliarization of the familiar is not merely a formalistic device, but is connected with his vision and worldview. Since poetry is an expression of distilled emotions and thoughts, metaphors become a tool of expression by suggesting what cannot be stated. The anxiety to express the inexpressible is central to poetry, where "a concept, an idea, an emotion may be hard to grasp in language, then a metaphor, an offering of perceived resemblances, may enable us the better to 'come to grips with' the issue in hand" (Punter 13). The range and scope of metaphors in his poetry vary from small images to extended metaphors. As a poet, Shaikh Farid is able to communicate through the interplay of "what is" and "what is not". The gap between "what is" and "what is not"; the sayable and the unsayable is filled by metaphors, what Max Black calls *catachresis*. Shaikh Farid's metaphors also operate between the zone of the 'sayable' and the 'unsayable'. Shaikh Farid's structural and conceptual metaphors establish a strong communicative bond with people, the learned and the ordinary. Shaikh Farid's poetry is lyrical and simple yet profound, dignified and suitable for expressing the exalted and mysterious truths of Sufism. He wrote in an idiom that even illiterate people could easily understand and used images that they could easily identify with. Decoding his metaphors is the way to understand the play of *zāhir* and *bātin*, the visible and the invisible, to reveal the hidden message in his poetry.

Notes

[i] Similar thought has been expressed by Bhagat Peepa Ji whose verse has been included in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs. The verse begins as *Jo Brahmande Soi Pinde, Jo Khoje So Pave*. It means the one God, who pervades all around, also exists in human body. Whosoever searches Him within human self, finds him.

[ii] Spiritual Master is called *Murshid* and the disciple is called *Murid.*

[iii] Shaikh Sahib-ud-din Ssuhrawardi in his guidebook has given 10 stations that every Sufi has to cover. They are- *Tauba* (Repentance), *Wara'* (Abstinence), *Zuhd* (Piety), *Faqr* (Poverty), *Sabr* (Patience), *Shukr* (Gratitude), *Khauf* (Fear), *Raja* (Hope), *Tawakkul* (Contentment) and *Riza* (Submission to the Divine Will). For detailed conceptual understanding of these terms, kindly see Khali Ahmad Nizami's article. Details can be found in the references.

[iv] Hospice

[v] *Lehindi-Punjabi* is a dialect of Punjabi which was used in some parts of Punjab including Multan and Rajasthan.

[vi] It bears reference to an Urdu book by Muhammad Masu'd Khalid titled *Baba Farid* published by Fiction House, Lahore.

[vii] Islamic laws based on the Quran

[viii] Most of the translation of Shaikh Farid's verse has been borrowed from Balwant Singh Anand's book. In case, there is another source it has been mentioned.

[ix] Translation is mine.

[x] Translated by H.S. Gill

[xi] The phrase has been borrowed from John Donne's poem with the same title

[xii] The article is originally written in Punjabi by Dr. Manjeet Singh. Translation has been done by the author. Its details can be found in the references.

[xiii] This idea has been mentioned while discussing different stations of a Sufi. Kindly refer to end note number vii.

[xiv] *Kikar* is a shrub or small thorny tree which belongs to the Genus of Acacia.

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Children as Environmental Envoys in *Leave the World Behind*

Musarrat Shameem

Introduction

This article studies Rumaan Alam's 2020 novel *Leave the World Behind* broadly from an ecological view point, associating it with the novel's omniscient narrator's speculations about children-ecology interaction. These speculations can be loosely connected with the predominant ecological concern of the present essay as part of the ripple effect of the untold disaster with which the novel tantalizes the readers. The vulnerability of the internet-addled characters, racism, and capitalist decadence are all different nodes stemming from distancing nature as only a perpetual provider of human needs. An eco-conscious reading of the novel probes Alam's ploy of the age-wise divergence of the characters and his emphasis on children's intuitive superiority over adults when it comes to the matter of adapting to changes of a grand scale. Children and ecology are intricately mingled in a complex dimension in the present-day world. Behind the façade of a simple plot, this novel weaves a mysterious pattern in which humans and non-human nature interact in an elusive, yet inescapable way. With pertinent prompts from a few theories involving children and the environment, this article studies how Rumaan Alam postulates that children have a more profound perceptivity of nature than adults.

Leave the World Behind is an indeterminate apocalyptic novel with a potential for variegated interpretations. Published before the Coronavirus attack, it certainly secures the status of prophetic writing. However, the pervasive hint of disaster in the text reminds the readers of a more sinister, primeval repetitive pattern of natural renewal due to some human failure. By renewal, the book suggests nature's mutation to cope with changed

situations, to regrow, and to be able to survive, despite the transformation it requires. The narrator, along with the coping mechanism of animals such as deer and flamingoes, registers the survival instincts of Rose, whose advantage of being a child empowers her to accept change and move on.

From the very beginning, through an intruding narrator, Alam creates an ambiance of hushed-up tension and anxiety impregnated with a pending sense of unknown terror that agonizes the characters. There are endless questions, without any definitive answers. The plot of the novel involves six characters; four adults and two minors. Among the adults, there is a perceptible tension based on a combination of racial prejudices and an overarching sense of xenophobia. Forced to live under the same roof, the black couple GH and Ruth, the real owners of the house that the white family of Amanda and Clay rented for vacation, try to overcome the awkwardness of the situation while sharing food, drinks, and other amenities. Alam deftly observes how the four adults are experiencing a constant psychological battle to make sense of a baffling phase they and the world around them are going through. The whole novel is interspersed with narrative intervention in the form of ominous, fragmented reports of human catastrophe, accompanied sometimes by ecological disasters. There are also presages about mutations that the earth and its inhabitants will experience in the future. All these scraps of images create an inexplicable sense of fright, augmented by the mention of an unprecedented noise loud enough to crack glasses and leave people terrified beyond words.

The concept of children's vulnerability in the wake of environmental hazards, coupled with climate change, has been relevant in recent socio-economic discourse. Children-focused studies on ecology endeavor to find the possibility and extent of damage children might have to endure because of ecological crises. Before going into theories related to this discourse, it is pertinent to

observe how Rumaan Alam presents the child characters in *Leave the World Behind* as the unfathomable 'something' is engulfing everything around them. He suggests that somehow, maybe through instinct, children knew more than adults. They believed that the answers were hiding out there, in nature. Alam's description of the siblings, Archie and Rose, Amanda and Clay's children, takes a significant turn as they walk across the woods. He describes them as part of the forest, their bodies melting into the physical surroundings. "Peach-colored, fuzzed, sticky, their bodies dissolved into the foliage; they couldn't be seen, heard, spied, as they investigated" (Alam, ch.19).

Leave the World Behind describes how two families are stuck in a Long Island holiday home because of a power outage in the city and how the failure of the internet and TV broadcast has left them in an ignorant state about the crisis. In such a situation, whereas the adults pass time mostly indoors, the children, Archie and Rose, take a tour of the surrounding woods to escape the boredom of not having any internet or even TV broadcast inside the house. As they go deeper into the forest, they discover an abandoned shack and also the existence of another house on the other side, the Thornes's, although deciding not to visit it. It is interesting to note that in Chapter 13, Rose sees many deer, more than a hundred but does not tell anyone about them until Chapter 19. She deems it more appropriate to share the incident with Archie when they are inside the woods. In the context of the siblings' bafflement about the inexplicable agency of the woods, the narrator foretells how one day the changes in nature will sway their life: "It would, of course; the world belonged to the young" (Alam, ch.19). A reflection of this proposition is echoed inchildren-ecology theories that emphasize how young people consider the significance of nature preservation as personal since their future is inextricably linked with the earth's wellbeing.

Theoretical Framework

Although the relationship between children and the environment is very significant, there is little anthropological exploration of it in the considerable body of literature on environmental education. In the ecological studies of the present era, a cluster of theories set forth concerns about justice and equality as prerequisites for ensuring nature preservation. For example, Burns H Weston mentions a principle of "intergenerational ecological justice" that is founded on three basic premises: conservation of ecological options, conservation of the quality of the planet, and conservation of equitable resource access (254). Ecological justice cannot be claimed to have been achieved until it can be ensured that people of all ages, classes, races, and genders have equal stake-holding rights in environmental decision-making. Ecofeminism, as a branch of ecocriticism, has always dealt with the oppressiveness of patriarchal thinking. Karen J. Warren establishes a connection between the domination of both women and nature in her essay "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism" where she devises the idea of an "oppressive conceptual framework" (125). This oppressive conceptual framework clarifies, defends, and sustains relationships of domination and subordination. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai attempts to tie children's subordination with Warren's theory in a combined approach that includes children, women, and people from other disadvantaged groups. She observes that although children have to bear "the heaviest burden" of the negligence of the biophysical world, their concerns, lacking political power, are consistently overlooked (197). Kurth-Schaicontends that Warren's proposed themes of "relationship, pluralism, inclusion, and transformation… taken together, provide a more appropriate conceptual and ethical framework for addressing the needs and interests of children… (201).

The inclusive approach recommended by Kurth-Schai is not adequate to study how *Leave the World Behind* approaches, in addition to concerns such as racism, capitalist decadence, and geophysical changes, the way children perceive and respond to ecological changes. The novel also hints, with prescient narration, at the process of evolution as well as how people of different ages, races, and genders react to it. When talking about *Leave the World Behind* in an interview, Alam said it was harder for him to write about children's psychology as he found them "a little magical…a little more unknowable". He appended this observation by suggesting that children, unlike adults, are often propelled by instincts like animals. As these instincts usually do not make sense to adults, they fail to see anything significant in them. Alam also proclaims how he treated the children and animals in the novel as parallels as he found the former's psychology indecipherable, just like nature. In many instances within the novel, the omniscient narrator invokes universal phenomena such as the migration and mutation of animals as well as the changes in terrain due to different geological occurrences. Several contemporary scholars indicate that there is a deep-seated connection between children and nonhuman nature that often goes unnoticed by adults who prioritize their interests over the concerns of young people. Louise Chawla, Bridget Stirling, and Caroline Hickman are some of the thinkers whose works pose questions on children's rights to know and enquire about the earth and the environment.

Contemporary ecological theory amplifies the inclusion of children, along with women, in the decision-making process regarding the sustenance of the environment. Bridget Stirling, a Canadian scholar and writer, insists that children should be considered as "distinct environmental citizens," instead of vulnerable persons, thus enabling them to actively respond to environmental concerns (222). While commenting on Canadians' ambivalent attitude towards climate inaction, reflected in the

conflict around the balance between environment and economy, Stirling argues that only a few groups such as the indigenous communities as well as Canadian children stand out in their demands for climate action. She labels a children's school strike as more than a protest. To her, it's showing "resistance to a system that isn't responding to their demands" (224). Since this article's predominant leitmotif takes prompts from the burgeoning literature on children and the environment, it's imperative to draw more on Stirling's research.

Stirling voices her concern over not treating children as subjects with agency and having participatory as well as decision-making power regarding ecological issues. She holds that adults impose a relationship between children and the environment that depends on their "futurity as human becomings" instead of human beings at present (226). This apparently protective gesture, adapted to shelter childhood innocence, is actually "taken up to serve adult needs" (229). On a cautionary note, she states that adults' consideration of children as "problem-solvers for our present-day harms" will not only lead to environmental injustice but also burden the children with environmental responsibility (230). Stirling emphasizes that including children in environmental discourse as both stakeholders and "very real present-day citizens" is significant because their life is affected more than the adults by environmental injustices and they will have to live with those influences long after the adults are gone.

Analysis

The concepts studied in the two previous paragraphs can be synchronized with Rumaan Alam's deft depiction of parent-child interactions in *Leave the World Behind*. In the novel, Amanda and Clay play the role of protective parents through the suppression of knowledge from their children and also by keeping their worries within the adults. There is a clear divergence in the plot between

the adult and the children's worlds that is almost insurmountable. When at midnight the black Washingtons first knock on the door of their own house, now rented to white Clay and Amanda as a weekend getaway place, the latter couple is frightened as they can't trust them, thinking that black people cannot be the owners of such a fancy house. Although Amanda is anxious about the children's safety, neither she nor Clay wakes them up. They want to keep them in blissful ignorance. This motif of two different realities, one for the adults, and another for the adolescents, is maintained throughout the novel, with the Washingtons later joining in. All the uncanny things that keep happening and the adults' endless conjectures about them take place within the four of them, leaving the children out. In Chapter 14, Amanda makes it clear that she wants to "keep… things between the adults. I don't want the kids to panic over nothing."

On the other hand, Rose also has her secrets to keep. Despite seeing the flock of numerous deer in Chapter 13, she chooses not to share it with her parents. She knows that others will not believe her since she is a child. They will think she is either lying or exaggerating. However, only she understands that something is off: "The morning was too quiet. It was telling her something. She tried to hear that" (Alam ch.15). The narrator of *Leave the World Behind* several times repeats the conviction that children perceive more about the ecological changes around them than adults. As Archie and Rose venture through the forest, narrative introspection comments on the instinctive knowledge children are born with, that gradually fades but eventually returns to them at a very old age. The narrator comments that despite knowing about the imminent changes that are going to take place, the children are not afraid, unlike the adult characters of the novel. The nonhuman nature is also aware of the changes and is waiting to embrace them. In Chapter 21, the narrator creates a bridge between youth and nature as to their mutual understanding of the

grand pattern of things. This connection is revisited and given a sort of tentative closure in the last chapter of the novel.

Archie and Rose's disposition toward nature, as depicted in the novel, is ambivalent in that the woods both frighten and fascinate them. There is a reflection of this feeling in the psycho-social theory of the environment. While commenting on children's concern for the natural environment, Louise Chawla mentions three bases for environmental anxiety: fears for self-preservation; responsibility for the welfare of present and future generations; and a sense of the intrinsic worth of the natural world itself (14). Summarizing a considerable amount of relevant literature, Chawla notes that both rural and urban children "were simultaneously tantalized by the woods and afraid to enter them" (15). This disposition, however, gradually changes as they grow up to become young adults. Pastoralism reaches its peak when they are sixth graders but it declines particularly for boys after that. Chawla observes that caring dispositions toward nature, not for nature as a caterer to human health and comfort, but for its intrinsic value, has to be learned through the development of a combination of human empathy and sympathy (16).

Chawla perceives that joint social teaching involving both men and women, fostering the nurturing demands of childcare, will instill a sense of nurturance, connection, and action toward nonhuman nature in children of both sexes (18). She proposes to see nature through a combined approach of empathy and sympathy, deploring the fact that our society does not allow us to consider nature as having intrinsic value, an existence of its own, like an alive entity. She suggests that imbuing children with sensitivity concerning nature needs a restructuring of "human relationships with the physical world" (19). In *Leave the World Behind* nature exudes life as an overarching entity: both magnanimous and awe-inspiring, even menacing at times. The children, especially Rose, seem to comprehend that mystery to

some extent. Thus, she knows better than adults the survival techniques, primal knowledge that is shared by trees, other animals, and insects.

One remarkable aspect of *Leave the World Behind* is itsintrusive omniscient narrator who gives bits and pieces of terrifying information about the present and the future while remaining astonishingly distant and suggestive. However, the last few pages of the novel take a more direct turn in terms of the narrative tone. The last chapter of the novel registers the lonely sojourn of Rose at the house across the forest, the house she did not know was abandoned, and she did not mind when the knowledge came to her. She was determined to explore how much was viable for her, to search for new resources necessary for living in a changed world. The omniscient narrator is particularly unreserved about the ingenuity of children in this chapter by stating that "Kids knew something, and the knowledge they had was tacit or unspeakable" (Alam, ch.40). The narrator's conviction in children's knowledge resonates with his belief in nature's power that enables the earth to be reborn after every life-changing catastrophe, such as the great flood in the time of Noah.

Rose's reticence about seeing the deer confirms the idea that children, even young people, often choose to be silent about things they do understand, which the adults do not. The narrator of*Leave the World Behind* implies, or portends, that the future of the earth is not going to remain the same. The narrator affirms in Chapter 21 that trees know better than humans as they are "alive" and feel "like Tolkien's majestic creatures", advantages that enabled them to mutate and survive, in the form of mangroves, for instance. This chapter is particularly portentous of menacing threats of ecological imbalance that have been looming large over humans for hundreds of years. It mentions "the seismic reverberations of bombs far distant" and the death of trees because of the ocean's detachment from the land. The narrator predicts that

trees and animals will not only sustain the imminent evolution, but thrive without human interference. The following extract is a long quote, but its inclusion is inevitable to reinforce this article's main focus:

> 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 unswerving tone in stating the imminent environmental risk the earth faces is remarkable as it is unlike the restrained approach he mainly assumes in the rest of the novel. *Leave the World Behind* creates an intricate connection between its characters and plot from the onset, however, the magnitude with which it merges children with nature stands out as an obvious feature of the novel's basic concepts. It is an attribution that evokes contemporary ecological theories' engagement with society, culture, race, economy, and people.

In the last chapter of the novel, as mentioned earlier, the narrator becomes more eloquent about the superior knowledge of children that empowers them to survive when change is imminent: "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). In the final pages, Rose travels through the woods alone to reach the other house she saw before. Though she travels to the house where she might find other people, her attachment to nature is an equally vital

part of the venture. It is noticeable that after consuming the nectarine, she drops the stone hoping that it will yield tree years later. 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). With this kind of manifested utterance, the omniscient narrator imbues Rose with more wisdom than her parents, or the Washingtons, or any other adults for the matter.

In the preceding paragraphs, it is noteworthy how Rose withholds the knowledge of the inevitable change from others thinking they might not believe her. This conviction of the young that nobody will take them seriously causes a kind of anxiety in them. Caroline Hickman talks about “eco-anxiety” in her 2020 essay “We need to (find a way to) talk about . . . Eco-anxiety”. Eco-anxiety can roughly be defined as a sense of anguish ensuing from an emergent consciousness of environment and bio-diversity crisis. It focuses more on humans’ emotional response to the risk posed by large-scale abuse of non-human nature. Hickman, as a practicing psychotherapist, has discovered that children and young people consider the abuse of nature as “personal” (412). They feel that since the people with agency do not care for the young people’s lives, they have no work plan to preserve ecological balance for the future. From interviewing children on this issue Hickman found that the children feel abandoned by a world that is “cruel and indifferent” (412). However, there are strong debates about the participation of children in ecological awareness programs or even for them to be anxious about such causes. Starting from parents, some policymakers also tend to suggest that involving children in such causes exposes children to unnecessary anxiety. Scott Morrison, for example, advised Australian schoolchildren to be less active in protesting inaction on climate change. Faced with this kind of dilemma, many young people,

notes Hickman, feel afraid of "being judged and criticized" if they talk about the climate crisis (413).

Conclusion

Rose in *Leave the World Behind* chooses to overcome her anxiety by sharing with others her strategies of survival in a changed world. The novel concludes on a note befitting to all its previous chapters. It refuses to give any resolute closure to the menacing events conjured up all along. The novel concludes with some unsettling questions that nevertheless make sense in the gradually built-up uncanny atmosphere. Rose learns to depend on small, everyday pleasures, and togetherness. She realizes that there are larger designs beyond the grasp of people, over which they have no control. A certain kind of submissive, shared, and humble life can give some meaning to otherwise absurd human existence. This idea is comparable with Louise Chawla's theory of building connection and hope where she notes that the study of ecology and natural history "needs to be combined with learning how to protect the natural world. It highlights the importance of social trust, of believing that one is not alone in taking action for nature because individual actions are amplified by the contributions of other people" (635). Ecological studies should assist young people in letting out their feelings about environmental conversion. One way of doing it is to help them find optimistic meaning in facing challenges. By finding a simple way to survive, Rose tries to achieve what Chawla terms as"finding value in voluntary simplicity" (635). It is something the adults of *Leave the World Behind* need to learn from children. This article has attempted to synthesize children-focused ecological theory with the novel's persistent emphasis on the correlation between youth and nature. The final chapter, therefore, can be interpreted as an appropriate ending with one of the child characters' efforts to find meaning in the middle of chaos and anxiety.

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Reimagining Motherhood: Analyzing Identity and Agency in Kalpana Lajmi's *Ek Pal* and *Daman*

Luku Morang and Meena Sharma

Introduction

The commercial film industry in India, commonly referred to as Bollywood, has long been characterized by male-dominance. Women professionals and characters often occupy a marginal position in this century long journey. This gender imbalance is notably emulated in the cinematic narratives, whereby patriarchal authority is reproduced and women are conventionally assigned peripheral roles. Film scholar Tejaswini Ganti posits that Bollywood film industry is truly patriarchal, as most narratives focus on "a male protagonist and his quest, goals, conflicts, and dilemmas" (159).

Bollywood movies primarily focus on the aspirations and objectives of the industry's male directors. As such, women characters mostly play supporting roles in commercial Bollywood movies. In addition, Bollywood's commercial movies position women as the "other" through male-dominated storylines. In such male-dominated storylines, women are consistently assigned conventional and stereotypical roles. In their book *Indian Popular Film: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake argue that women in popular Indian cinema are depicted in four distinct roles and archetypes: the ideal wife, the ideal mother, the vamp, and the courtesan.

However, in recent decades, there has been a rise in the participation of women in the film industry. There is a substantial increase in the number of female film professionals, such as directors, choreographers, costume designers, film editors, and screenwriters, among others. Besides, the representation of women in new wave, parallel, and middle cinema significantly diverges from conventional stereotypes of commercial Bollywood movies.

It started in the 1960s, when Indian cinema witnessed the emergence of a new era with "realist aesthetic" films. The movies produced under the influence of these movements had a significant focus on realistic concerns of the marginalised class and the plight of women. These movies were free from the melodramatic aesthetic of commercial movies. In these movies, there was an attempt to explore realistic sociopolitical and aesthetic themes with a focus on the genuine concerns of women. The films of Mani Kaul and Kumar Sahani significantly contributed to this emerging new cinema movement. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake assert that the new cinema movement in Indian cinema was instrumental in reimagining the position of women in Indian society.

> In the artistic cinema, directors associated with the New Cinema sought to present a very different image of women - women not as objects of male desire, but as products of diverse social formations and seeking to transcend their sordid circumstances. These directors are interested in capturing the plight of women as they are caught in the contradictory pulls of tradition and modernity, past and present, and individuality and community. (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 80)

The middle cinema movement emerged in India during the 1970s, marking the advent of a distinct and innovative approach to filmmaking. The unique genre in Hindi filmmaking was introduced by Basu Chatterjee and Hrishikesh Mukherjee. This filmmaking technique effectively blended elements of new wave and mainstream cinema, incorporating melodies, dance sequences from commercial films, and innovative techniques and aesthetics commonly associated with the new wave movement.

The women-centric films directed by women filmmakers have also been instrumental in drawing attention to women's issues

in a realistic manner. Women filmmakers such as Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi, Deepa Mehta, Vijay Mehta, Kalpana Lajmi, and Aruna Raje have explored women's struggles and addressed the issue of female identity in their films. These women filmmakers have challenged the stereotypes of women created in commercial Bollywood films. They have depicted strong female characters with agency, identity, and individualism. These female directors have portrayed strong female characters rebelling against patriarchy, exploring their sexuality, and creating self-identity despite the constraints of a male-dominated society.

Kalpana Lajmi, an independent filmmaker, producer, and screenwriter, directed six Hindi films, which primarily addressed realistic concerns about human existence. Lajmi's films belong to the middle cinema genre and are characterised by the prominent portrayal of female characters in the narrative. Her films explore the social and sexual identities of women, as well as the challenges they encounter when navigating between patriarchal norms and cultural constraints and their quest for self-discovery and empowerment. Most of her movies effectively convey the subjective experiences of women, challenging their objectification and presenting them as individuals with agency. According to Manish Gaekwad, "Lajmi explored the themes of female sexuality and women's empowerment in her films. In her career spanning four decades, she remained focused on putting women in the centre of her stories. She considered herself as a humanist filmmaker, highlighting women's issues…" (Gaekwad).

In this context, the films of Kalpana Lajmi can be said to present a "female gaze" through the women-centric narrative. The "female gaze," in its broadest sense, is the female point of view or viewpoint on concepts and issues characteristic of human experience. Feminist film theory defines the female gaze as the viewpoint or perspective of a female film director towards the film's protagonists. Lisa French argues that the female gaze in

cinema genuinely expresses the experience of women in the world and offers women agency and subjectivity in film.

> The experience of gender, of living as a woman or as a man, is likely to affect any individual's subjectivity. The key marker of the 'female gaze' is the communication or expression of female subjectivity—a gaze where female agency is privileged and which is shaped by a female 'look', voice and perspective—in effect, the subjective experience or perspective of someone who lives in a female body. (French 54)

In contrast to Laura Mulvey's masculine gaze, in which female characters in a movie are rendered powerless and objectified, the female gaze discusses the portrayal of women as subjects with some degree of agency. Hence, the term "female gaze" refers to the absence of objectification of women in a film's narrative and the subsequent emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of the film's female protagonists.

Motherhood in Hindi Movies

Motherhood is considered a crucial experience for women. The idea of motherhood has a significant impact on diverse schools of thought. Motherhood is most often attached to the biological process of childbirth and pregnancy. However, the concept of motherhood brings up diverse issues of women's rights, roles, and responsibilities as well. In feminist theory, the concept of motherhood is discussed along with the rights, identity, and agency of women in patriarchal society. Feminist theorists are often critical of how patriarchal societies romanticise women as mere caregivers and nurturers of children rather than an independent being with autonomy and agency. American poet and feminist thinker Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Women Born*: *Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) opines that motherhood can sometimes limit a woman's journey towards freedom and identity.

She is quite critical of the ways in which institutionalizing motherhood can lead women to accept treatment as a "body for sex and procreation" rather than a complete being with agency, identity, and enlightenment. She writes, "The institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children…Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (Rich 42).

In Indian society, the idea of motherhood is somewhat sacred and divine. A mother in Indian society is someone with divine energy and a source of feminine power, who upholds traditional Indian family values and makes ultimate sacrifice for the wards. This ideology of motherhood is inspired by religious scriptures such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The concept of motherhood has been a significant thematic aspect in Bollywood Hindi movies. Bollywood movies are quietly drawn to ideologies of motherhood from these Indian scriptures. Since its earliest days, the Bollywood film industry has created narratives based on the theme of motherhood. The mother in Bollywood movies is someone with feminine might a godly figure, self-sacrificing, who sacrifices everything for her children. Most often the mother serves as a holy figure and representative of the mother nation. This has come from the concept of "nation" as a mother in Indian ideological tradition.

In Bollywood movies, the mother is also equated with the mother goddess, a cultural icon, whose prime duty is to uphold Indian cultural and societal values in every aspect. Furthermore, Bollywood movies have throughout the ages portrayed mothers as encountering oppression from age-old patriarchal traditions. Mehboob Khan's 1957 released *Mother India* (1957) was one of the first Hindi movies which immortalised the image of an

idealised and self-sacrificing Indian mother. Other Hindi movies which have represented the idealised Indian mother include *Roti Kapda Aur Makaan* (1974), *Deewar* (1975), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), Baazigar (1993), *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994), *Karan Arjun* (1995), *Vaastav* (1999), *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999) etc. Iconic actors from Bollywood Reema Lagoo, Nirupa Roy, Rakhee, Jaya Bachchan etc. have immortalised the iconic mother image in Bollywood movies.

Film semiotics is the project of understanding and analyzing cinema as a particular kind of sign system or as a language through exploring signs, codes, and conventions in the narrative. Christian Metz, in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, published in two volumes in 1968 and 1972, contends that the language of cinema contains short circuit signs and a film signifies meaning through specific semiotic codes unique to the cinema such as the arrangement of shots possible in a narrative sequence. Semiotic analysis of a film proposed by Metz looks at how a collection or group of short circuit signs creates specific cinematic codes in its discourse and how film communicates meaning through denotation. Metz concludes with the observation that the smallest unit in the cinematic expression is the shot which works as a sentence in the language of cinema.

As such the narrative and cinematic techniques of the film enable us to understand the meaning of the film. The shots of a film as the smallest unit of the film language, have a lot of significance in communicating the meaning of the narrative. In Bollywood movies, motherhood is represented with a series of semiotic signs and symbols. In most Bollywood movies with the iconic image of motherhood being a theme, there is a constant representation of red *sari* (a drape cloth for women) and *sindoor* (vermillion) as a symbol of fulfilled womanhood. On the other hand, the white sari is a symbol of widowhood and suffering in a

woman. However, modern films are challenging these stereotypes, presenting complex, independent, and multifaceted representations of mothers and motherhood in the narrative.

Motherhood in Kalpana Lajmi's Movies

Kalpana Lajmi, a filmmaker hailing from Mumbai, had a close association with Assam through her enduring companionship with Bhupen Hazarika. The first film she directed, *Ek Pal* (1986), translated as "A Moment", was set in Jorhat and Shillong. She directed the movie *Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence* in 2001, also with Assam as its setting. The incorporation of song sequences (typical of commercial cinema) and the portrayal of strong, independent women are two hallmarks of middle cinema, both of which are present in these two films. Both show two married women struggling against patriarchal norms in Assamese society but ultimately emerging as strong individuals who are not afraid of defying conventions. Because of her enduring association with the esteemed Assamese music virtuoso Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, she developed a profound connection to the region, its inhabitants, and its cultural heritage. As a result, the two films she produced about Assam portrayed Assamese female protagonists as empowered individuals with their independent subjectivity and agency within the narratives. Both films strive to express the agency of women through motherhood acting as a means to rediscovery and empowerment of women. Lajmi's films challenge the traditional narrative of Hindi movies where mothers are merely shown as self-sacrificing and suffering women.

The concept of "agency" is relevant to discuss in relation to the two films. In feminism, "agency" refers to the capacity of women to make choices, make informed decisions, and pursue objectives without interference from patriarchal societies. Women's agency is defined by Louis McNay as the act of resistance, subversion, and liberation from patriarchal dominance.

According to her, agency is "the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities (McNay 10)." In her discussion of the identity issues of black women in the United States, black feminist Maria Del Guadalupe Davidson defines women's agency as resistance to oppressive systems and the ability to act and be recognised as actors. "Agency is reflective of a multiplicity of actions undertaken by black women with the intention of defying systems of oppression and domination" that defies western knowledge systems based on hierarchical order (Davidson 5)."

Ek Pal (1986)

The domestic drama film *Ek Pal* features renowned actors including Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, Farooq Shaikh, Shreeram Lagoo, and others in prominent roles. The film was shot in the picturesque locales of Jorhat and Shillong, highlighting the picturesque landscapes of Shillong and the tea plantations of Jorhat. Bharat Ratna Dr. Bhupen Hazarika composed the score of the film. Kalpana Lajmi drew inspiration from Maitreyi Devi's short story for this film. In this middle cinema genre Bollywood film, Kalpana Lajmi broke new ground by exploring the taboo topic of extramarital affairs and female sexuality. In an interview with Nasreen Munni Kabir, Kalpana Lajmi says the following regarding the film: "It shows an Indian woman breaking away from the traditional mould of a 'Sati Savitri'… *Ek Pal* is the story of a woman who expresses her sexuality openly (*Kalpana Lajmi Archival Interview*).

The narrative of the film is based on an extramarital affair and the subsequent pregnancy of the female protagonist Priyam Chaliha (Shabana Azmi). However, the narrative does not show extramarital affairs and subsequent pregnancy as a taboo and moral burden. The film shows extramarital affairs as a departure from patriarchal tradition. It has been depicted as an empowering

experience for the female protagonist of the film. As such, motherhood through extramarital affairs has been shown as a transformative experience that enables the female protagonist to assert her independence, identity, and agency in the patriarchal society.

In the narrative, Priyam Chaliha, the daughter of middle-class parents, is married to Ved Hazarika (Naseeruddin Shah), an engineer employed in a tea garden. During Ved's one-year deputation to Kenya for official work, Priyam enters an extramarital romantic relationship with her former boyfriend, Jeet Baruah (Farooq Sheikh), and becomes pregnant. Jeet denies the legitimacy of the child and suggests that the woman consider having an abortion, which she denies. Ved returns from his official travels to discover that Priyam is pregnant. However, Ved is quite progressive and he accepts both the child and her mother.

According to Jasbir Jain, the female protagonists in women-centric Bollywood films are portrayed as victims, rebels, and transgressors. She argues that the transgression of women in Bollywood women-centric films is portrayed as a violation of "traditional morality" and a departure from "socially approved moral norms of sexual relationships." "Women in these movies trespass into zones not acknowledged as legitimate and define a new relationship with their body and self...they call into question issues of fertility, mother-right and right to body (Jain 122)." In this film, the female protagonist Priyam has an extramarital liaison despite being a legally married woman in Assamese society. However, the film's feminist narrative attempts to link her conjugal infidelity to her journey of self-discovery and pursuit of identity, rights, and sexual exploration resulting from an unromantic, loveless, and stifling marital union characterised by her husband's neglect of her emotional and physical needs. Therefore, her extramarital affair becomes an act of defiance against the

patriarchy's stringent code of conduct, morality, and gender-restricted rules that govern women's positions in society. Priyam's action in this context converts her from a submissive wife to a transgressor in a patriarchal society. Her dissatisfaction with her marriage led her to adopt a rebellious attitude. To alleviate her feelings of emptiness and isolation, she embarks on an illicit romantic relationship. This extramarital romantic affair becomes an experience of empowerment, freedom, and agency.

The narrative initially portrays Priyam as a happily married and content woman. However, she soon finds herself trapped in the mundane household chores. She is devoid of conjugal love and bliss due to her husband Ved's busy schedule in the official duties. Besides, the experience of a miscarriage adds more to her loneliness. However, the narrative does not project Ved as an oppressive patriarch at all. Ved is a workaholic and does not pay heed to what Priyam desires. Her deepening loneliness becomes unbearable for her. In a number of scenes, Priyam is portrayed participating in solitary activities, including sitting in her room, sitting alone on the front veranda and in front of the mirror in her house, strolling alone in the tea garden, and consuming alcohol. Numerous pivotal narrative sequences showing Priyam spending sleepless nights next to her spouse also depict her claustrophobic life.

A significant scene unfolds in Priyam and Ved's bedroom. In the scene, Priyam expresses the following statement to Ved, which makes evident the increasing distance between them: "How could you forget to listen to the news on the BBC? You do not know anything about the people in the house. You just have time to listen to the English news." In a scene in which Ved ignores Priyam's attempt to become intimate with him, Priyam's isolation, alienation, and sense of confinement become apparent. The scene suggests that Ved is insensitive to his wife's emotional and

physical needs, exacerbating her sense of isolation. At this moment of isolation, Priyam encounters her long-lost beloved Jeet Baruah. She soon develops a sense of fulfilment in an extramarital affair with Jeet. This affair leads to Priyam's pregnancy. However, Priyam is shattered when Jeet denies fatherhood and suggests she get an abortion. She decides to give birth to the baby as it is her right to make decisions about her own body.

A woman's identity is closely tied to her reproductive rights, particularly her right to engage in childbirth. Motherhood for a woman is a right to her body and identity. Veena Singh expresses the right of motherhood in the following terms:

> A woman does not want the freedom to sleep with men but it is a woman's legitimate right to bear a child, the right that nature has gifted her with. A woman thus, has a right over her child: it is her flesh and blood; therefore, it is her decision to keep it or not. (104)

As a woman, Priyam's decision to give birth to the child is a "legitimate right" she possesses. Hence, the narrative implies that Priyam's decision to participate in sexual infidelity with Jeet is driven by her aim to explore her own identity and potential for motherhood. During a crucial dialogue sequence, she confidently asserts her lack of remorse regarding her extramarital involvement with Jeet. In the scene, she emerges as a strong and resilient woman who is willing to overcome her dread of disgrace and consequences.

> PRIYAM: I will not get an abortion.
>
> JEET: You have completely lost your mind. How could you think of this? Should you not feel ashamed for having an illegitimate child?

PRIYAM: It may be illegitimate for you. Not for me. It is part of my body, soul, thoughts, hunger, and thirst.

JEET: Do you have any regrets?

PRIYAM: I'm not sorry for what I did. I see nothing wrong here. If I had offended anyone, it would be my husband, Ved. You don't have to feel sorry about it. You are free, and you can leave. (01:46:04-01:47:04)

Priyam, being a married Indian woman, is subject to the stringent moral standards imposed by patriarchal norms. Nevertheless, she defies conventional moral norms and engages in an extramarital liaison which patriarchy considers as an act of transgression. She prioritises her desires over the strict moral expectations and obligations enforced by patriarchal norms, thus expressing rebellion through sexual expression. Priyam's character exemplifies the portrayal of assertive female figures in Bollywood Hindi movies that challenge patriarchal conventions. She is a woman with "agency" who rebels against the stringent moral standards set by patriarchy. She finds her agency through motherhood. Irrespective of the identity of the father, Priyam's motherhood becomes a journey for personal fulfilment and independence, despite the choice contradicting the patriarchal notion of morality.

The film showcases the creative use of colour palette, space, and lighting. In most of the scenes set where Priyam is at her home, the scenes are set in the confined space of her bedroom and living room. The colour palette here is more with darker hues and most often there is low-key lighting. However, when Priyam is with Jeet, the scenes are set in open spaces and outdoor locations. The colour palette also becomes warmer. A number of scenes are set where Priyam is seen sitting in front of the mirror. These mirror

scenes reflect her moment of self-reflection, identity formation, and assertion.

Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence (2001)

The film *Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence*, whose title means "domination," depicts the plight of a rural woman who endures domestic violence in a patriarchal society and exacts revenge on her oppressor husband. The film also belonging to the middle-cinema genre does not follow a linear pattern, and it uses flashbacks to show the subjugation of women by the patriarchal Assamese households. The setting of the film is Jorhat and Guwahati in Assam. Raveena Tandon, Sayaji Shinde, Sanjay Suri, and others comprise the film's cast, while Bharat Ratna Dr. Bhupen Hazarika composed the score. For her portrayal of an Assamese woman, Raveena Tandon won the National Film Award for Best Actress.

The plot revolves around Durga (Raveena Tandon), a young and attractive woman who experiences domestic violence and oppression at the hands of her husband, Sanjay Saikia (Sayaji Shinde). The narrative depicts Durga subsequently transforming herself into a rebellious figure after being trapped in an abusive marriage. Her rebellion comes when it is a matter of protecting her daughter from the same perennial patriarchal abuse she has experienced. Through her rebellion, she ultimately succeeds in avenging and eliminating her oppressive husband. Here, her motherhood becomes one of the motivating factors to defy gendered violence and raise her voice. It is her love for children which propels her to break the cycle of abuse and find agency. Subsequently, Durga's motherhood becomes a way towards self-determination.

According to Gita Viswanath, the depiction of women in Bollywood films has been stereotypical: "The long-suffering, Sita-

like woman is a permanent fixture in Hindi cinema (46)." The character Durga initially serves as the archetypal image of a suffering woman and the conventional ideal of a submissive wife under feudal patriarchy. She embodies the image of a woman encountering repression within traditional Indian family homes with no personal autonomy. The narrative portrays the female protagonist, Durga, through various flashback scenes, highlighting her encounters with patriarchal oppression, domestic violence, confinement, and physical and mental abuse inflicted upon her by her sadistic husband, Sanjay. Durga is not allowed to use the telephone or have visitors at her residence and is often treated as a housemaid. In addition, Sanjay does not find his formally married wife, Durga, physically attractive.

In a scene depicting their wedding anniversary, Durga calls Sanjay while he is in the middle of a card game. He visits her, accuses Durga of causing disruption, cautions her against reaching out to him during his card game, and brutally hits her. This scene illustrates Sanjay's abusive and domineering behaviour towards Durga and reveals his malicious mindset.

> SANJAY. Take my shoes off. If you invite your spouse early, you will have to do what I say and do things that women do. Really? Then you must be Sati-Savitri. Have you ever seen yourself in the mirror? You have put on a lot of makeup. You're my wife, right? Not a prostitute. Remember that you shouldn't bother me if I'm in the middle of a card game. Understood. (00:34:29-00:35:37)

In this scene, a close-up shot employing a low angle effectively captures Durga's vulnerability, whereas a shot taken from a high angle effectively captures Sanjay. The dim lighting contributes to the gloomy atmosphere. The double shot of Durga and himself further demonstrates Sanjay's command of the situation. Sanjay is placed in the centre of the screen, while Durga

is on the right edge of the screen. The positioning of the characters hints at the power structure. Durga's emotional anguish is consistently captured through close-up shots.

According to Jyotika Virdi, Bollywood films have used the theme of "rape" as a "rhetorical trope to conjure images of power, coercion, and humiliation in conflicts between the culturally powerless and powerful (Virdi 175)." In the narrative of the film, the female protagonist Durga endures patriarchal discriminatory subjugation in the form of marital rape. Durga, as the epitome of an ideal wife, initially perceives marriage as a sacred ritual despite experiencing discriminatory subjugation and oppression. She demonstrates patience by putting up with her husband's physical and emotional abuse as her destiny. She accepts, in silence, Sanjay's scandalous accusation that she had an affair with his brother-in-law, Sunil. However, Durga's defiance arises when her daughter's life and identity are at stake, prompting her departure from Sanjay's residence. Here, her motherhood becomes a means to finding her voice, identity, and agency.

In the narrative, it is shown that when Sanjay decides to marry off her minor daughter to an elderly man, she decides to rebel. She runs away from her husband Sanjay's house. However, one day Sanjay finds both the mother and daughter and threatens to kill. It is at this moment Durga transforms from a passive victim of domestic violence into an assertive vigilante, emerging as a powerful woman with agency. In the final scene of the narrative, Durga kills her oppressive husband and takes revenge. The act of assassinating Sanjay can be seen as a representation of her liberation and triumph against patriarchal subjugation. Here, Durga's character exhibits agency, portraying her as a rebellious woman. During the denouement, Durga takes on the role of a rebellious woman and agitator through her act of murdering her husband. Thus, the narrative depicts the metamorphosis of a victim of patriarchal oppression into a vigilante seeking vengeance by

eradicating her oppressive husband to protect her daughter. As such, motherhood becomes an empowering experience for the female protagonist in the narrative.

Vrinda Mathur asserts that the prevalence of the mother-goddess tradition in Indian culture may be attributed to the perception of Indian women as embodying the collective energy of deities, capable of wielding weapons and engaging in solitary battles against oppression. Indian women embody the beneficent aspect of the divine feminine energy known as "*shakti*." "She is the benevolent '*shakti*'- the actualizer of Gods latent power…(Mathur 66)." The Bollywood film industry often incorporates cultural imagery by depicting women as "vengeful goddesses" who use weapons to eliminate their oppressors. In the narrative of the film, Durga's character undergoes a transformation from a victim of domestic violence to a vengeful goddess seeking retribution against her abusive spouse. The film's narrative establishes a parallel between the character of Durga and the divine mother goddess Devi Durga. The female protagonist's name, Durga, carries symbolic meaning, as it represents the powerful and omnipotent goddess Durga Devi, who defeated the demon king Mahishasura. The film's opening scene showcases a sequence of shots depicting the ritualistic invocation of the deity Durga's idol. The scene features shots where it is captured applying kohl to the eyes, a wrist bracelet, and a necklace to Devi Durga's idol. The shots of Durga's character are juxtaposed with the idol being decorated with a red saree, necklace, and other decorative items. In the scene, Durga's abandoning of her married life and embracing widowhood is depicted through her actions of wiping off her vermilion, removing her bangles and necklace, and wearing a white saree. The scene features a background score comprising a continuous chant of hymns that praise the majesty of the goddess.

The film's conclusion draws parallels between goddess Durga and the female protagonist Durga. The final sequence

juxtaposes Durga with the immersion rituals of Devi Durga's idol. In the final scene, the setting shifts to the riverbank, where goddess Durga's idol is to be immersed amid a ritualistic procession and dance performance of devotees clad in traditional garb, accompanied by a folk religious hymn and the beating of drums. In the concluding scene, Sanjay approaches the immersion site where both Durga and Deepa are participating in the ritual. Durga finds that Sanjay is carrying a revolver and approaching them. To thwart the imminent threat, she stabs him to death with the trident of the goddess Durga. In this final scene, the lady protagonist Durga is captured for the first time with a low-angle shot, while Sanjay is captured with a high-angle shot. The scene juxtaposes close-ups of both Durga and the goddess Durga, drawing parallels between the two. In the low-angle shot, Durga appears majestic and intimidating, whereas in the high-angle shot, Sanjay appears vulnerable and insignificant. The scene's concluding freeze frame depicts both the female protagonist Durga and Devi Durga's idol in a single frame. It denotes that Durga, who suffered from her cruel spouse, has changed into a divine mother and powerful deity. The slow motion in the final scene heightens the tension in the narrative. All of these tend to reinforce the moment of empowerment of the oppressed female protagonist, Durga.

Kalpana Lajmi has creatively used cinematography to display the journey of protagonist Durga from oppression to liberation. Durga's life of patriarchal oppression dramatized in the initial part of the film is shown with shadowed interiors. The scenes in this part uses less key lighting with more monochromatic, dull, and shadowy lighting. The scenes are mostly set in closed doors and interiors of the house which symbolizes her entrapment in the feudal patriarchy and loveless marriage. However, her liberation from patriarchal oppression is dramatized with more well-lit scenes, warmer hues, and wide-angle shots in the second half of the narrative. The scenes in the second half are

mostly set in open landscapes and outdoor locations. The scenes are well-lit and there is more colour in the colour palette. All of these becomes a creative rendition of protagonist Durga's journey from entrapment to liberation in the narrative. In a number of scenes, Durga is captured in front of mirrors which tend to signal her moment of self-reflection and awareness of her circumstances.

Kalpana Lajmi's films *Ek Pal* and *Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence* portray the plight of Assamese women who endure oppression from patriarchal customs and traditions. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Assam functions only as the backdrop of the narrative with a token depiction of the tea plantations, Bihu dancing, and bamboo huts. Even the representative Bihu songs are translated into Hindi. The filmmaker mostly Indianised the plot, catering to the needs of the wider audiences. The Indianised narrative fails to adequately represent the people and culture of the region.

The female protagonists in both films are independent and strong women with agency. The female protagonist in *Ek Pal* challenges patriarchal norms by engaging in an extramarital romance that is considered taboo in patriarchy. In *Daman*, the lady protagonist, Durga, liberates herself from patriarchal oppression by annihilating her oppressive husband. Both films address significant women-centric themes such as the journey of women from age-old oppression of patriarchy to freedom, independence, and agency. The female characters in both films are initially depicted as confined within the boundaries of patriarchal Assamese family homes. However, they gradually confront and surpass the limitations imposed by patriarchy to assert their own agency. As such, both films aim to communicate a powerful message on the issue of gender insensitivity and women's oppression and finally assert the agency of women in patriarchal family homes.

Conclusion

Kalpana Lajmi's films offer a radical departure from conventional portrayals of motherhood in Indian films. By depicting motherhood as a space of both empowerment and struggle, *Ek Pal* and *Daman* critique patriarchal expectations and highlight the complexities of female agency. This paper argued that Lajmi's films contribute significantly to feminist discourse in Indian cinema, using the language of film to articulate women's subjectivity and resistance. Her works challenge dominant patriarchal narratives, advocating for a reimagined understanding of gender, power, and identity through the lens of motherhood.

Her films show us that women do not want our sympathy for their oppression by feudal patriarchy. The narratives of both movies do not ask us to sympathise with the plight of women. The female characters are initially portrayed as oppressed by the patriarchal structure. However, the female protagonists of both films finally emerge as strong women with agency, empowerment, and identity. In both films, motherhood plays a significant role in the attainment of empowerment, identity, and agency for women in patriarchal societies. In this context, both films can be said to have a "female gaze" to challenge the patriarchal tradition in Indian society.

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Beauty Aesthetics and Consumerist Masculinity in *The Beauty Myth* and *The Edible Woman*

Hemant Kumar Sharma and Aateka Khan

Introduction

Humanity has always set a high premium on the beauty of the female form, irrespective of time and place. Narratives from different cultures since millennia have similar stories to tell of matchless, perfect and ideal 'beauty'. Nevertheless, the aesthetic pleasure derived from the female form has always remained elusive by virtue of differing racial and geographical criteria and the resulting difference in perception and appreciation. This leads inevitably to the complicated and inhibiting question as to who appreciates and who is appreciated? The relationship between beauty the abstraction and woman the reality – gendered and biological – is a very intriguing one. Like all binaries, beauty too exists in a disconcerting pairing with its opposite – ugliness; and is like all other binaries governed by the principles of privilege and exclusion. What is privileged as beautiful and by whom, is as much a question of politics as of aesthetics, perhaps more so of the former. To make matters worse, there are within the category of the 'beautiful', sub-categories and hierarchies that seem to multiply exponentially. One, however, needs to never lose sight of the sheer subjectivity of these categories, whose only object is the 'notion' or the 'ideal' of perfect beauty, never to be known, realized or attained.

As with the idea of 'Truth', it is impossible to do away with the ideal of 'Beauty', however unfair the circumstances it creates. One only wants a fuller understanding of its working, its politics, its subjectivity, and its demands. This paper tries to investigate the constructedness of beauty standards and their effects on women's lives in a world obsessed with these standards by taking up for study, Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* written engagingly from a

feminist perspective and Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman*. The latter is about women caught up in their respective, sometimes extraordinary, negotiations with the status quo and the beauty myth. The choice of the texts is based on the concern for drawing out the tensions within the woman–beauty relationship not as mere trivialities but as contributing significantly and sometimes finally, in the shaping of women's identities (even careers and decisions). Aesthetics itself as a secular discipline cannot be taken at face value and needs to be examined with respect to the dialectic of gender and civilization. A discussion on ornamentation, detail and fashion as aspects of the culture of beauty and their relationships – historical, cultural and political, with women is also relevant here.

Literature Review

Susan Brownmiller, a feminist pioneer of 1970s, recalls her confrontation with the beauty myth in her book *Femininity*:

> An unadorned face became the honourable new look of feminism in the early 1970's, and no one was happier with the freedom not to wear make-up than I, yet it could hardly escape my attention that more women supported the Equal Rights Amendment and legal action than could walk out of the house without eye shadow… A more complete breakdown and confusion of aims, goals, and values could not have occurred. (Craig 7)

Even in the early 1960s when Betty Freidan led a tirade against the "perpetuation of housewifery, the growth of the feminine mystique" (Craig 4), there were other feminist critics who "began to focus on advertising's use of sexual innuendo and feminine allure to sell products and the term 'sex object' entered everyday vocabulary" (Craig 4). Though the culpability of using the woman's body - as Detroit journalist Kathy Sudomier put it in her charge against the advertising industry- for "using chicks to

peddle damn near everything" (Craig 4) was felt by many, the concept of feminine beauty remained intact and continued to oppress while it's material manifestations in symbols, images and beauty products were rejected and attacked. This did not work given the Protean nature of the beauty myth, which as Wolf very perceptively comments "is always prescribing behavior and not *just* appearance(s)" (14, italics mine). The dissolution of the "feminine mystique"- which based itself not only on the "romance", "science" and "adventure" of homemaking but also on the 'beauty' of the idealized home and all its associations with the idyllic and prelapsarian beauty of Eve and Paradise- gave way to a new women's work ethic i.e., "beauty work" in place of the traditional notions of housework. It was made evident as early as 1971 by a member of the radical feminist group in an enlightening argument:

> For women buying and wearing of clothes and beauty aids is not so much consumption as work. *One of a woman's job in this society is to be attractive sexual object and clothes and make-up are tools of the trade*" (Craig 6, italics mine).

The relationship between beauty and women began to get strained and far more demanding as the mounting pressure of being or becoming beautiful was felt increasingly when technology in the 19th century made possible the rapid and continuous circulation of beauty images en masse in the form of "fashion plates, daguerreotypes, tintypes, and rotogravures" (Wolf 15). Indeed, the role of technology in propagating the beauty myth cannot be overestimated. The tremendous adaptability and immunity of the beauty myth will become clearer after a mention of the views of early modernist architect and cultural critic Adolf Loos relating to ornamentation and adornment in women's dresses. In his 1902

piece on "Ladies Fashion" Loos writes:

> No longer by an appeal to sensuality, but rather by economic independence earned through work will the woman bring about her equal status with man. Then velvet and silk, flowers and ribbons will fail to have their effect. They will disappear. (Schor 53)

Loo's enunciation seems positively proto-feminist if not prophetic. This was belied, when even economic independence of workingwomen, 1960s onwards could not and has still not been able to dismiss the "appeal to sensuality", that binds women in the shape of "a brief-case sized neurosis that the working woman could take with her to the office" (Wolf 66).

Schor and Loos could be attempting a theoretical history of eroticism, wherein the growth of the body as an erotic terrain by the complex interplay of concealing and revealing both the body and its many coverings (clothes in all their detailing, undergarments which conceal in a manner so as to reveal) is alluded to. Though Loos sees clothing, ornament and adornment as perversion (much as Wolf sees beauty work), it is Hegel who associates bodily ornamentation to the "ontological need man experiences to annex *physis* to the domain of culture" (Schor.51). Nature is often referred to as 'Mother Nature' in literary and cultural discourses. Hegel, it seems, is overwhelmed by the 'aesthetic' to the extent of missing the 'political': "This is the cause of all dressing up and adornment, even if it be barbaric, tasteless, completely disfiguring or even pernicious like crushing the feet of Chinese ladies, or slitting the ears or lips" (Schor 51).

The relationship between the ornamental and the woman(ly) is an old one. The ornamental or that which adorns is only a kind of detailing, characteristic of even the most primitive societies. Loos's piece on fashion is again valuable – "No period of culture has known as great differences as our own between the

clothing of the free man and the free woman. In earlier eras, men wore clothing that was colourful and richly adorned and whose hem reached the floor" (Schor 52). Medieval and Victorian fashions confirm the truth of this statement. In her delightful cultural study of the "detail" Schor states, "the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine" (4). This shift of the detail or the ornamental to the "woman-detail association in idealist aesthetics" (5) finds a parallel in "trivia", again, in the context of the women in the beauty myth. The 'beautiful' is at best a confused category in that it is torn apart between the particular and the 'sublime'. According to Aristotle, "matter longs for form for its fulfillment as the female longs for the male" (Schor 16). Biologically speaking, one could argue that the reverse is true for the role of man in propagation is precisely that of providing 'matter' or sperm. The female gives physically (physiologically at least) within her own body, a form to the lifeless 'matter' of life. Ironically, the post-natal female body is repulsive to most men. The feminine then, becomes a set of uncontrolled particularities (read trivialities) longing for universality to be endowed by the masculine. In other words, the female body or 'matter' (*physis*) longs for fulfillment in the aesthetic 'form' that the male gaze will and can supply.

Sir Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses* recommends in painting the "great style" which consists in avoiding details, particularities and particular objects" in favour of the "attention at once to the whole" (Schor 12). Schor takes up the example of Aristotle and Reynolds to show the gendered nature of art history and idealist aesthetic theory. For her the "feminization of the detail is in Freudian terms *over determined*" (17). The beautiful for Reynolds bifurcates (in the Venetian and the Roman schools) into the 'elegant' and the 'sublime', the latter being relatively superior owing to its greater claims to permanence, wholeness, truth, and reason (read masculinity). However, it is the identification of

"crowded ornament with feminine taste" that does the greatest damage (19). In short, whenever, men ventured close to the ornamental or what had perversely come to be perceived as the 'feminine' the patriarchal forces in society reminded them of the old myth in order to distance the two sexes. This happened only in the absence or weakening of other patriarchal systems Wolf remarks - "when material constraints on women are dangerously loosened" (14). This confusion of the word 'beautiful' then has an explosively varied history – the Classical age's Sophoclean high seriousness (Antigone), Homeric grandeur (Helen), Euripidean dissonance (maenads), Renaissance imagination (Shakespeare's Cleopatra), Victorian femme fatale (Becky sharp), piety, decorum, industry (Dickens's Mary Barton, or George Eliot's Dorothea), Modern elegance (Greta Garbo and Martine Carol) and Post-modern sex-appeal, 'hot'-bodiness, more recently "attitude" (Marlyn Munroe and Samantha Fox) are all representatives of the various stages in this history.

Lynne Tirrell writes of erotica in an article on aesthetic derogation - "Erotic images may be powerful, but they are not about power" (Levinson 298). Modern pornography was created by and is a result of fulfilling the demands of the capitalist's and the advertiser's "consumer striptease" (Wolf 149). Erotica that fetishizes the body by artificial detailing (rouged nipples for instance), which in turn creates and uses a fixed normative of the 'sexy body' and the 'sexy face', ***is*** about power. In hard-core pornography on the other hand, one finds an aestheticization of masculinity as violence by perverting the sexual act. Gloria Steinem asserts with respect to pornography: "Its message is violence, dominance and conquest. It is sex being used to reinforce some inequality, or to create one, or to tell us that pain and humiliation (ours or someone else's) are really the same as pleasure" (qtd in Levinson 298). The frequent occurrence in such pornography of excessively pierced and tattooed bodies seem also

to confirm to a similar eroticization of pain incurred during these beautifying processes. Beauty thus moves from its older relative stasis into a more kinetic and violent aesthetic of oppression – that of the sexed copulating hyper-real body. Pornography like Disneyland, to use Baudrillard's term, is a *simulacrum* that masks the reality of the woman's body and her sexuality (and that of men too). Wolf quotes historian Susan G. Cole as suggesting that the way to validate social values (positive or negative) is to eroticize them (Wolf 142). The beauty myth has thus targeted one of the most basic human urges – the sexual urge- and eroticized it: "Images that flatten sex into beauty" (Wolf 143).

Speaking of tattooing practiced in modern society, Loos dismisses it as degenerate and having to do with a need he qualifies as "erotic" (Schor 51): "tattooed men who are not behind bars are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats" (51). Whatever the statistical worth of this view, it hints at a disturbing equation between the 'degenerate' and the 'erotic' which, stems out perhaps, from Loos's larger modernist aversion to any sort of ornamentation including the "velvet and silk, flowers and ribbons" of ladies' apparel. The shift from beauty to sex is hinted at even in Wolf's desperate question: "Is Beauty really sex?" (Wolf 271). That the beauty myth is still as potent as ever is evident from the following excerpt from a "resolutions" article in the Feb. 2001 issue of the Spirit magazine – "Resolution number 1: I won't leave the house without makeup".

Methodology

The paper relies primarily on a psycho-social approach combined with an essential feminist view of our social and gender identities. To this end it takes up for analysis theoretical, sociological, and literary texts and also delves into the question of women's body aesthetics and its relationship with male chauvinism, Capitalism, and orchestrated consumerism in modern

and post-modern societies. The paper uses the theoretical frameworks of the architectural and cultural theorist Adolf Loos, Victor Tausk, and that of the French sociologist and theorist Jean Baudrillard in order to examine and engage with Atwood's representation of female sexuality, beauty commerce, and women's body aesthetics.

Wolf's *Beauty Myth* and Atwood's *Edible Woman:* Consuming beauty and beauty that consumes

Naomi Wolf's *Beauty Myth* published during the early 1990s begins by challenging the existing idea of the beautiful. Quoting Germaine Greer, she introduces it as a "stereotype" and a "masquerade" (12). The quote makes an interesting suggestion regarding the word 'beauty' and its burdensome bond with the word 'woman' – 'beauty' is an illusion, a falsity, both as a signified idea and the signifying and embodying word/symbol. Wolf subjects the apparently incorruptible idea of beauty to a political analysis, thereby accusing it of thriving on another set of myths and discourses – naturalist, biological and evolutionary. Her dismissal of feminine beauty as a function of nature and evolution comes in favor of beauty as politics. She argues that" 'beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. Akin to economy, it is determined by politics and in the modern Western world it is the last, best belief system that keeps "male dominance intact" (Wolf 12). The 'constructedness' of beauty as a system to withhold female energies and substitute older hegemonic strategies and systems by a new one, centered apparently in the woman's body, is efficiently concealed in the banality of the system, in its acceptance and currency. The onus of 'beauty' lies explicitly on the woman to the extent that the idea of beauty replaces the reality of being a woman. The latter is lost to women themselves, trapped as they are in a matrix of beauty images comprising a stereotype described by Germaine Greer as follows: "To her belongs all that

is beautiful, even the very word beauty itself….she is a doll…" (Wolf 12).

Wolf tells us that with more women joining the work force during the Second World War and afterwards, the sales of clothing, beauty accessories, costumes and women's magazines dropped and "all that was left was the body" (Wolf 67). Nevertheless, the exorcised ghost of beauty now found a new asylum in the woman's own body. This justifies to an extent Wolf's attempt to theorize the very idea of 'beauty' as a construct, but one could go further in suggesting that beauty operates as a psycho-social and economic matrix that has lived and adapted almost like an organism. Of course, the matter is much more complicated. One cannot dismiss beauty as simply a patriarchal ploy. Loos's piece points incriminatingly towards "the fluctuation of sensuality" (Schor 53) and Schor remarks that "man is repelled by the naked female body" due to the inherent perversion of male desire" (52). Therefore, reasons Loos, "Woman covered herself, she became a riddle to man in order to implant in his heart the desire for the riddle's solution" (52). Loos's civilizational model sees greater affinity to ornament and adornment in women's clothing as a lagging behind in terms of development. All these propositions point towards some female agency in the making of the beauty myth. Loos's text is especially complex given his glorification of woman's "noble" desire to be man's equal (52).

Wolf perhaps wishes aesthetics to be redone from a woman's perspective though she chooses to leave out 'aesthetics' for another one and another time and focuses on the manipulation of the 'beauty' myth, which viciously and inextricably bonds with the word 'woman'. According to Schor "What Loos describes and deplores is the way in which the capitalist system has succeeded in placing the ornament in the service of consumption" (54). The same could be safely said of Wolf's hatred for the way in which the capitalist succeeds in placing the woman's body in service of

consumption. Both attempt a materialistic and political study of the different stages and aspects of beauty culture, though Loos does appear to subscribe to a kind of reductive economic aesthetic of modernism, whereby, 'Less is more'.

Speaking of "women's mass culture", Wolf points out the sheer limitation of perspective. A male-centred social history leaves for women only a culture of their bodily beauty – a culture inherently patriarchal and sustained by collusive strategies like advertising and setting high premiums on the necessity of meeting beauty standards – making adornment "an enormous – and often pleasing – part of female culture" (75). The women's 'magazine' serves the dual purpose of being both a "lisible" and "scriptable" text, where the printed page serves the function of providing "*plaisir*" in the act of reading about women's issues, while the fashion ads and the glossy reportage serve to provide "*jouissance*" which "carries connotations of ecstasy and sexual delight" (Cuddons 672). Barthes "offers an aesthetics based on the pleasure of the body" and goes on to suggest that "the focus of erotic pleasure is the place where the naked flesh meets a garment" (Cuddons 672). Barthes is obviously encapsulating a fetishist response to body imagery and Schor's comment becomes relevant here: "Woman is forced to fetishize herself because of the inherent perversion of male desire" (Schor 52). However, Barthes's structuralist interest in "*haute cuisine* and clothes" is worth taking note of; he interprets "social practices involving food and clothes as sign systems …. that there is a garment system which works like a language" (Cuddons 870). Garments, adornments and ornaments are then only "*paroles",* contained within each other and finally within the larger "*langue*" of (male-centred) aesthetics and "fluctuations of (male) sensuality". One could then argue that the women's and fashion magazine's reportage is actually (male) "*jouissance*" masquerading as feminine beauty. Wolf perceptively includes men as falling prey to the beauty myth though they have

had only less to lose. A large majority of men believe as much in the beauty myth as women do. Her major tirade is against the particular sterility and covetousness of the capitalist institution's version of beauty, which destroys the possibility of freedom of choice.

Regarding women novelists Wolf has many words of appreciation. The "true beauty" that Wolf sees emerging, as a new ethic in women's fiction becomes in the Victorian novel a delicious and welcome supplement to physical charm. The animated heroine is not the femme fatale *but neither can she be "ugly"*. In fact "she" serves to quell male anxieties regarding female sexual license (behaviour?). Nonetheless it is a step further in much the same direction. The relation of the women's novel to particularities like fashion, embroidery, child rearing, and housework (home 'making'); indeed the relation between any womanly endeavour (even one as main stream and serious as writing and not just translating and reading) and detail is strikingly brought out in the metaphorical description Jane Austen gives of her works: "That little bit (two inches wide) of ivory, in which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labour"(Austen 323; qtd. in *Emma*, Penguin Classics, Introduction). This brilliantly telling metaphor for the grandiose and originally masculine activity of writing has obvious hints of irony. William L. Courtney proposes -- "a passion for detail is the distinguishing mark of nearly every female novelist" (Schor, 20). Schor herself refers to Austen as the "master-miniaturist" but one needs to understand that left with the only choice of dealing with what was regarded as trivialities and details, women novelists tried making the best use of what was available to them as subject matter. The choice had little to do with some intrinsic psychological, emotional and physiological affinity to details.

It seems that women as well as men in general never had any real access to beauty. Women, moreover, were never subjected

to the object of beauty except as themselves. Always the objects of a 'gaze', women never fully understood the workings of a beauty always demanded of them and of other 'objects'. As per the fluctuations of men's sensuality, the created theoretical blueprint of 'beauty' changes partially with time and place. However, this blueprint is hypocritically privileged and celebrated till the apprenticed women start subscribing to it, even while detail and ornament are discarded as feminine and therefore inferior. The 'masculine' institution churns out (true to the fluctuation of sensuality) one beauty aesthetic after the other, simultaneously imparting to each, value and significance. A strange paradox operates in men demanding 'beauty' from women and then relegating the expressions (rather means) of this beauty to the sphere of triviality. This system of female aesthetic evaluation works quite well when women indulge in the 'trivialities' prescribed, recognized and sanctioned patronizingly by the male beauty culture (make-up, trinkets, lace, lingerie etc).

In a chapter titled 'Sex', Wolf deals with the final stage of commodification of the female body with the advent of pornography and high gloss photography. Information technology and the proliferation of hyper-real ad-images of super-models, beautiful not because of the detail of dress but because of the detailing of the female body leading to its eroticization and fetishization mark a shift Wolf fails to develop and pay adequate attention to. This new aesthetic of 'sex-appeal', far from being a free expression of a woman's sexuality restrains it by the forces of "beauty pornography and beauty sado-masochism" (Wolf 132). The damaging work previously done by the "80s rationalization of beauty" (Craig 12) in the form of "demi-make-up" or "the make-up that isn't", advertising cosmetics as clean, natural and in some cases as "invisible" (Craig 11) more than compensated for the economic liberation of women in giving up of the Victorian ornament in dress and also the deflating of the Feminine Mystique.

An editorial in the June 1972 issue had read: "She's looking great. She feels great" while the "remainder of the issue was of course devoted to fashion lay-outs and cosmetics ads" (Craig 10). The ad-men who advocated the new liberated pantsuit look of the 70s were coming up with a new, allegedly natural form of cosmetic slavery with a vengeance. Feminist books on beauty like those of Rita Freedman, Lois Banners and Valerie Steele in the mid 80s saw "women's reliance on fashion and cosmetics….as a form of women's empowerment" (Craig 12). Beginning with the aesthetically exploited coverings, fringes and margins (Tips and Toes, faces) of the female body the very form became the next target for developing an aesthetic that would replace what Barthes calls "the waning classical aesthetic" of beauty as captured in the photographed face of Garbo with one that is "eminently modern and mobile" (Schor 84). Thus the "vital lies" as Wolf calls them, of the beauty myth are replaced, in a modern world marked by dissonance and desublimation by the 'vital statistics' of the female body.

Wolf's beauty pornography image "expressionless in a rictus of ecstasy" (133) belongs decidedly to the new aesthetic and like Barthes's Hepburn has nothing of the 'essence' (read classical beauty) left in it but is constituted by an "infinite complexity of *morphological functions*" (Schor 84, italics mine). Beauty pornography is perceived via eroticization of two different realities. The eroticization of the body takes place in soft pornography where the contours of the body and the expressed ecstasy of the sex object is shared by the voyeur/viewer whereas, the eroticization of violence done to the sex object/victim by the sadist/doer in hard core pornography and the resulting expressions of experienced pain and violence done are shared by the sadistic voyeur. Given that sexuality is more a matter of learning than instinct, soft pornography or erotica subtly corrodes and distorts sexuality by deliberately emphasizing and exaggerating the details

of the human body and its responses to coitus: "*the reader understands from them that she will have to look like that if she wants to feel like that*" (Wolf 133, italics mine).

Wolf's acceptance of beauty that makes one "desirable and feel beautiful" is one that is free of the myth of a normative notion of beauty produced by male desire.

> A woman loving definition of beauty supplants desperation with play, narcissism with self-love, dismemberment with wholeness, absence with presence, stillness with animation ….it is sexual (not sexy), various and surprising. (Wolf 291, parenthesis mine).

The above definition is not free from ambivalence as 'variety', 'surprise' and 'animation' have always been primarily aspects of the male imagination regarding the female form and can also be said to feature in cyber pornography (animated erotica and exotica on the internet). Adorno stresses "the dynamic life inherent in the concept of beauty"; he goes on… "Actually, this concept is only a moment in the totality of aesthetic reflection", while dismissing Hegel's "static definition of beauty as pure appearance of the idea to the sense" (Adorno 75).

The *Edible woman* is Margaret Atwood's first published novel written in the year 1965 at an early age of 24 and published much later in 1969 by the publisher who, the author tells us, good-naturedly published it out of "sheer embarrassment" of having lost the manuscript. The book is, asserts Atwood, "proto-feminist rather than feminist…though like many others I'd read Betty Freidan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors" (Introduction, Atwood xiv–xv). The opening of the novel assumes an air of normalcy with the "heroine" (Atwood xii) Marian McAlpin, a regular office-goer informing the reader "I know I was alright on Friday when I got up…." (11). Her roommate Ainsley is a quick-change artist (14) and liberated as far as her carefree

attitude, sleeveless pink and orange dress "too tight across the hips" can suggest. Already in Ainsley we meet the average working white Canadian woman apparently freed of the Feminine Mystique. All her quickness in applying makeup fills the narrator with awe: "I could never put myself together in such a short time…. Though you could never tell with Ainsley" (14). The prosthesis of the female body is already evident in the "put(ting) myself together" through makeup. Marian appears to be a conformist in her reflections on her not so "normal" and "respectable" roommate (13).

Atwood deals in a very complex way, highly metaphorical and suggestive, grotesque (as she herself accepts), ironic, with tremendous sensitivity to modern maladies and urban myths, and the repressive demands of beauty standards and gender inequality. The book is disturbing in its characterization as much as in a relentless and harrowing experience hidden beneath an apparent normalcy. Marian's workplace is hardly a choice that an education should lead a woman to – a hierarchy with consuming men at the top and consumed housewives at the bottom – while she herself is squashed between the two. The housewives are not the consumers in a high capitalist society as in the *Feminine Mystique* but ironically also the most heavily worked part of a machine, whose work they are totally unaware of. The "office virgins" on the other hand present a sorry picture of hypocritical middle-class morality leading to sexual repression and finally "desperation" which is "pathetic" as Marian muses later in the book (238). They are reliable for Seymour Surveys as they have their personal reservations about getting pregnant before marriage, besides pregnancy being seen by Mrs. Bogue as an act of disloyalty to the company. In a radical demystification of the maternal, Atwood shows the predatory - parasitic in the least - relationship of the child with the mother in Clara's reference to her child as "the little leech" and "an octopus" (31). Clara advises Marian not to believe

in nursing of children by mothers as a free choice resulting from a "maternal instinct" (33). This is presumed to be true for the sake of advertising and selling maternity and childcare products as in the ad with the nurse, which Marian sees while on the bus, reading "Give the gift of life" (101).

The commodification of the maternal takes place in the presentation of the "wholesome" nurse in the ad who contrasts starkly with Clara's "so thin body" (31). The use of the word 'instinct' is a strategy to naturalize maternity and nursing by beautifying it with the figure of a "wholesome" woman/nurse/therapeutic sex object. Ainsley backed by her psychological jargon and cosmetic charge is no less a prey to this mystification of maternity as deepest femininity. Anthropology fetishizes 'primitive cultures' and presents childbirth as a metaphor for a return to nature and essential femininity, which in turn is fetishized as 'deepest', distantly pure, and Edenic. Obviously maternity too is at times used as a ploy to keep female sexuality at bay. Ainsley reads straight out of her anthropology book -- "It's even more important than sex" (41). Clara's disillusionment with the maternal aesthetic renders her strangely "hollow" despite her university education (236). This is noticed by her husband Joe who states rather plainly: "She gets the *idea* that she has a mind…. when she gets married her *core* gets invaded" (235, italics mine). A culture thriving on the objectification of the woman's body shatters the "idea" and reinforces the 'woman-matter' and 'male-form' theory.

The "alignment of woman and (devalorized) nature" according to social anthropologist Sherry Ortner is a "universal phenomenon", for which "woman's physiology" and "social role" are offered as reasons (Schor 16). Clara in her own passing manner dismisses the necessity of this "universal phenomenon" being sacrosanct: "Never believe what they tell you about maternal instinct" (43). Dissecting the negative effects of the maternal

aesthetic further, Atwood makes Clara wonder, "why women are so morbid?" (130). The "positive gloating in pain" is a result of the premium set by patriarchal culture on femininity as the ability to bear pain (during childbirth and masochistically during sex). The latter largely explains the importance attached by almost all cultures to virginity). Joe's resigned acceptance of the failure of a woman's education in marriage (236) and Len's angry outburst on being outwitted by Ainsley are two extremes of men's response to women's education. Women's education however is of two types leading to what Wolf calls a "double vision" (61). Formal education at the school and university is likely to get frustrated in the goals of an alternate informal education in the beauty myth – marriage and the maintenance of the status quo. However, Atwood's broad view on education is not very optimistic considering the intellectual wasteland in which Duncan sees himself standing "trying to squeeze the last pimple of significance" (98) and in Joe - the teacher of philosophy – shuffling about the house in his undershirt" (236).

Atwood's tirade against advertising is almost as potent as that of Wolf though much more subtle and implicit. The relationship between the woman's body and the advertiser's campaign is critiqued in various instances. The sanitary napkin according to Lucy had been rendered a "respectable product by having full-page advertisements in some of the best magazines…and not being so Victorian and repressed about it" (109). Marian though cannot fail to notice how capitalists and ad-men who bothered only about their money, made unwilling housewives conduct surveys by kindling a womanly aesthetic of "the embryonic noble nurse" (109). Later in one of her forays into the super-market, which rendered products "respectable", she feels "distaste" for the "fancy printed toilet paper – flowers and scrolls and polka dots" (174). The implications are more than obvious. In the gradual process of "rejecting" her "femininity" (80), Marian finds nothing "wrong with plain white"

(174). In its fleeting touch with the human body, the toilet paper becomes almost a 'garment' – feminine in its ornament and detail – and "the equivalent of a sentence" as expounded in Barthes's *Systeme de la mode* [i] (Cuddons 870). According to Tim Armstrong, "Advertising posits a body in – crisis – a zone of deficits in terms of attributes…a phantasmic version of the "lit up" body …. we are always just failing to be" (98). "Human unpleasantness" as Marian calls it is not only "use(d)" by the cunning capitalist's even shrewder aide - the advertiser - but also created. The way human sexuality is mystified, and com(modified) and the female body made 'edible' by conversely using adjectives normally used to describe a woman's body for describing food e.g. the "sexiest looking tomato" (*Edible Woman* 173) all point towards the bane of advertising in its excesses and "body-as-display" (Armstrong 99). The "semi-nude girl in a grass skirt and flowers" besides the "small sign: PINAPPLES" and the cash girl with "a paper garland around her neck, her orange mouth" (*Edible Woman* 175) all point towards a complex of consumer itch, unfulfilled promises, physical inadequacy, and ad-hypnosis based on "areas of concern in relation to a normative body" (Armstrong 99). The "elegant mannequins" (169) Marian sees at the stores are one of the several ploys used for "stressing the body as ornament" transforming the woman's body into "décor just as the house is - a zone of embodied virtue" (Armstrong 111). The use at the window shop is the totality of fetishization and objectification of the female body. The earlier instance of the "semi-nude girl" in the grass skirt traps the "feminine body in a double blind" which is sustained in advertising, forcing women to achieve (even if surgically) perfection of form while remaining 'natural' (110). Of Lucy, Marian says - "nail polish and make up…become a part of her… *while"* on her own body they "looked extra ….like patches or posters" (209). Tellingly, Marian's dislike of her own body and her awe of other bodies are implied also in her comments about Ainsley's makeup which one "can never tell" (14). This is true

regardless of how she feels about "frivolously feminine decorations" (209). Schor's comment regarding the 'detail' being "doubly gendered as the feminine" and its feminization being "over determined" become relevant here (4,17). Marian's unconscious remark on seeing the gilded and 'decorated' mummy case – "she's beautiful" – becomes relevant when Duncan retorts "I think its' supposed to be a man" (187). The glamour magazine at the hair saloon that reads "Girls be successful… Develop your bust" (210) is an example of "violent zonation of the body" paradoxically resulting from the unequal demands made of the female body by the beauty myth, which implies "a whole body (meaning)… which is constantly deferred" (Armstrong, 100). If the woman's body were to be seen as a text (signifier of beauty) one could argue that there is bound to be a deferral or deferment (from the Derridian *diff'erance*) of meaning in every act of re-reading given that there is nothing outside the [con]text [ii] of a word's use and its place in the lexicon. Atwood even sees the male voyeur as a "victim of society" and the beauty myth of the advertiser who "flaunted the slender rubberized women before his eyes… and then refused to supply him with any" (117).

Conclusion

Marian's sexual identity fashions itself somewhat inconclusively through near pathological vacillations and meditations on marriage. Her relationship with Peter is non-committal and her movement towards marriage is marked by a move away from food and appetite. The perversion of the relationship between food and body is at the heart of the novel which is full of food and body imagery representing psychotic urban sexuality ruled and doomed by predatory capitalism, media excess and advertising. The three parts into which the novel is divided are developed on the basis of a near pathological rift within the personality of Marian McAlpin who shifts from a first-person narrative to the third person and back. The first person of

part one is normal (though it is difficult to define) as far as eating habits are concerned. Clara even thinks that Marian is abnormally normal. In the second part where Marian starts referring to herself as "she" we meet the fragmented subject on the verge of complete psychic breakdown and severe anorexia. Her growing repulsion with food initially could be seen as an extreme sensitivity and a reaction to violence kindled by Peter's account of a rabbit hunt in Part one and the fiendishness that went on in kitchens" (155). It seems not to be stemming out of some kind of dietary obsession with thinness and appearance but culminates in the word "fat" (166). Her situation is complex. The repulsion for food (dead flesh) becomes a repulsion for all flesh, particularly women's bodies and female flesh –"the ham like bulge of the thigh, the creases round the neck …" (167). In this "thick Sargasso-sea of femininity" she looks for something "solid, clear a man" (167). It is this perversion of the food as flesh and flesh as food equation, especially so in the bodies of women sized up, aestheticized, meant to be violently consumed, by she cannot see whom, that she needs Peter whose male body is free of this disgusting aspect of female flesh, read and edited continually for consumption. This could explain why Marian finds Duncan's thinness so fascinating, besides being seen as sign of a pathological obsession with flesh. Her ignorance of who (or what) causes all this makes her rush into marriage with Peter as an escape. This obsessive repulsion qualifies Marian's anorexia as that of an unusual kind. Anorexics usually avoid food to stay in tune with the beauty standards by maintaining a lean figure to look beautiful. Marian's avoidance of food is more of a sub-conscious revulsion for the systematic beauty culture expressed in contoured female flesh, which she pathologically sees as food and is nauseated by both.

This repression or diseased state is caused in Marian by a "thing" (206), which could be read as an "influencing machine"[iii]. In Marian's case the machine comprises of the means and

mechanisms that produce 'beauty'. We often read and hear of the beauty 'industry'. It is this immense contraption, unspelt, unseen that does lead to "the manipulation of thoughts" (Armstrong 102) in the parodying of the Aladdin's lamp story and suspecting it to be "an elaborate plot" (*Edible Woman* 107); to the production of "unexpected motor phenomenon" in her kissing Duncan at the Laundromat (100); to "sickness" and "strange feelings" (Armstrong 102). The climactic eating of the woman cake is the final release for Marian's diseased ego. This comes with a recognition and displacement of her dilemma in and onto her woman cake (which is "delicious", "appetizing", and "elegant") iced and shaped as per the beauty standards. Atwood takes over the "diabolical machine" in an act of shamanistic ingestion. The machine as beauty/flesh/food is recognized and destroyed (The shaman must become sick to understand sickness. When the shaman overcomes her own sickness s/he will hold the cure to heal all that suffer) in the eating of the cake. Peter no longer matters. There is real self-knowledge in the remark, "That's what you get for being food" and Marian shall no longer be or desire to be "edible" for the sake of Peter or 'beauty'. She has (as Ainsley still trapped in the beauty myth accuses her of) rejected her 'femininity' in favour of an identity: "Now that I was thinking of myself in the first-person singular again, I found my situation much more interesting than his" (278). In her gradual and choosy dismemberment of the body cake she has parodied the advertiser's prosthetic beauty act – that of breaking up the woman's body into different eroticized zones –"Prosthesis is connected to advertising" (Armstrong 98). One could argue however, that 'Beauty' "like the libido itself" is lamellar - "a surface-organ" that is "indestructible, infinitely proliferating… (Barnard 179). The lamellae of beauty then constantly spread out in a bid at "materialization across the gap between symbolic and real…" (Barnard) through the agency of what Lacan calls "*merely* its representatives, its figures. The breast…the placenta…" (Lacan, Seminar XI, 198/180). The

'breasts" are obvious extensions of the umbilical cord lost as the "placenta". These, and numerous other "figures…symbolize the most profound lost object" (Lacan, Seminar XI). One wonders if this "most profound lost object" haunts the 'lamella' of beauty constituted by the zillions of "figures" or "*objets petit a"*[iv] We have then a Protean and un-re-movable veil riddled with "hole(s) at the center of the symbolic order, the mere appearance of some secret to be explained, interpreted…"(Slavoj Zizek). Beauty becomes thus, man's best kept secret an element called 'unobtainium'.

The beauty myth still operates; in fact, it never did as potently as it does now. It has only moved far deeper into our persons, now encroaching upon women's very bodies as "vital stats". Looking at the variety of skin tones and features on the fashion ramp – English, French, African, Chinese, Indian…. White, Yellow, Brown, Black; it seems the beauty myth is over. It is very visibly not, if one sees the ruling uniformity in the apparent sea of diversity – vital stats. The diversity on the ramp is meant not to broaden one's perspective on the 'beautiful' female form but to 'expand' like some imperial territory, the Market for designer clothes and cosmetics. Who can still tell – as they watch an *haute couture* fashion show – beauty from fetish? In a world of technology, cosmetic engineering and beauty surgery, the myth has attained a new high. An ad for a skin clinic in today's newspaper shows a young woman's profile (fully made-up as 'natural') fitting snugly into Wolf's description of a beauty photograph: "the face is visible, it is expressionless in a rictus of ecstasy" (Wolf 133). It reads "Tonight, slip into something truly stunning: Beautiful glowing skin". One wonders – What is a woman? "A woman is some*thing* you can make" (Armstrong 159) – not only with make-up, self-imposed starvation, belts, strap-ons (Boa constrictors?) but also with silicone, forceps and blades. Can forks and knives be far behind?

Notes

[i] Sassure and Chomsky relate the same to *parole* and *performance* respectively.

[ii] Derrida in his essay on *differance* asks: "How to conceive what is outside the text"? By extension the structural hermeneutics or the ontological unity of the image-text "unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions" of the Lacanian "objects a".

[iii] In patients diagnosed with schizophrenia. The delusion often involves their being influenced by a 'diabolical machine', just outside the technical understanding of the victim, that influences them from afar. It was typically believed to be operated by a group of people who were persecuting the individual, whom Tausk suggested were "to the best of my knowledge, *almost exclusively of the male sex*".

[iv] Lacan's unobtainable object of desire; also referred to as the 'object cause of desire'. The 'a' represents '*autre'* or the 'other'. This need not be simplified into 'beauty as otherness' though the aphorism is more than often true.

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Between Memory and History: Reading Postmemory in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

Manisha Gangahar

While the initial discourse on the Sri Lankan civil war comprises journalistic writings, political analysis and eyewitness accounts, literary narratives and texts have increasingly become significant and imperative sites for understanding and reimagining the conflict. Moving away from official history and documented statistics, literary novels accentuate lived experience, emotional truth, and moral ambiguity. These texts might not be wrought out of first-hand experience but shaped from inherited memory and second-hand experiences.

In fact, the manner in which societies and communities remember violence is not merely confined to direct experience but extends to the realm of inherited and mediated recollection. In this context, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory offers a crucial framework in comprehending the transmission of the experience of a traumatic past across the generations:

> [I]t reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture. And yet postmemory is not a movement, method, or idea; I see it, rather, as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove. (Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory" 106)

In other words, postmemory refers to the way the later generations relate to the experiences of those who lived the catastrophes and violent conflicts. This relationship is established through stories, anecdotes, photographs and even silence. It is this form of memory, being both emotional and imaginative, that blurs the boundaries between the lived and the representation. As Hirsch

writes: “Postmemory describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (*Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* 22).

In the aftermath of conflicts, like the Sri Lankan civil war, postmemory becomes significant in affecting cultural expressions, shaping narratives and configuring identities. It becomes a potent prism through which to examine how the past permeates into the present, not as direct recollection but as an engagement with one’s tragic and violent history. This paper, through the reading of Sri Lankan novel *Anil’s Ghost*, studies how postmemory becomes a tool to engage with the experience of past conflict and violence. Drawing upon Marianne Hirsch’s conceptualization of postmemory, this paper explores how the fragmented narrative of the novel, the diasporic angle and reconstruction of the past bring about the affective inheritance of war and trauma.

The paper attempts to expand the understanding of the Sri Lankan conflict beyond merely archival research and underscore the crucial contribution of silence, representation and absence in shaping and formulating an experience of trauma which is not directly lived. Postmemory is especially useful in interpreting the fragmented and often silenced narratives that emerge from Sri Lanka’s conflict. Due to political tensions, cultural constraints, and unresolved grievances, many experiences of the war remain partially told or deliberately suppressed. As viewed through postmemory, these absences and gaps are not seen as limitations but as meaningful markers of trauma. It also allows for a reading of literary and cultural texts as mediated reconstructions of the past, where writers who may not have directly witnessed the war imaginatively engage with inherited histories, thereby preserving and reshaping collective memory: “Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep

personal connection. It is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation." (Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory" 106)

Furthermore, postmemory plays a key role in identity formation and ethical engagement with the past, particularly among the Sri Lankan diaspora. Communities shaped by the conflict continue to negotiate belonging through memories of a homeland mediated by familial narratives and cultural representation. At the same time, postmemory raises important ethical questions about representation, voice, and ownership of trauma. By enabling an imaginative yet critical engagement with inherited histories, it opens up possibilities for empathy, dialogue, and even reconciliation, making it an especially powerful framework for rethinking the afterlives of civil war in Sri Lanka.

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* is set during the Sri Lankan Civil War and follows Anil, a forensic anthropologist who returns to Sri Lanka to investigate human rights abuses. Along with archaeologist Sarath, she discovers a skeleton—"Sailor"—that may expose political killings, pushing her into a dangerous search for truth. As the investigation unfolds, the novel presents fragmented stories of individuals affected by the war, showing different responses to violence, fear, and loss. In the end, Anil's pursuit reveals the difficulty of uncovering truth in a conflict-ridden society, emphasizing ambiguity, trauma, and the lasting impact of war.

The tangent of postmemory becomes functional through the motif of forensic reconstruction, where the past is literally excavated from bones. Anil, having lived abroad for several years, returns to Sri Lanka but without any emotional attachment to the country or its past and being indifferent to the violence that the place has witnessed. She is the true and exact emblem of

postmemory: she has not experienced the war or the trauma but engages with it through mediated evidence. The skeleton "Sailor" becomes a central figure through which collective trauma is reconstructed. As the novel suggests, "one victim can speak for many victims" (Ondaatje 176). This statement encapsulates the logic of postmemory: the singular body stands in for an entire history of suffering that cannot be fully narrated. The dead body becomes a site of projection, where meaning is not recovered but imaginatively produced. The identified victim would serve as a surrogate site of memory, enabling subsequent subjects—removed from the original violence—to access, interpret, and imaginatively reconstruct the collective trauma of those who remain absent from the archive. In this sense, Anil's investigation is less about uncovering objective truth and more about negotiating the ethical burden of understanding and representing trauma that she has not directly lived.

In *Anil's Ghost*, trauma is not shown as something that can be fully explained or clearly narrated. Instead, it appears in fragments—through bones, silences, and scattered memories. This reflects Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma is not just about destruction but also about what remains unresolved and continues to haunt the present. In the novel, the past does not return as a complete story but as partial traces that need interpretation. This connects with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, where later generations do not directly remember trauma but inherit it through images, stories, and emotional impressions. Anil's attempt to recover truth from bones shows this struggle—she seeks clarity, but what she finds is incomplete and open-ended.

This difficulty in fully expressing trauma can be better understood through Dominick LaCapra's idea that trauma creates a gap between feeling and representation. In *Anil's Ghost*, the emotional impact of violence cannot be easily turned into clear historical accounts. As a result, truth becomes fragmented and

uncertain. Sarath's doubt about truth reflects this reality—he understands that revealing truth in such a context can be risky and even harmful. From a postmemory perspective, this means that what gets passed on is not a clear history but broken pieces shaped by fear, silence, and memory. The novel shows that in a traumatised society, history is never complete; it survives through gaps, absences, and lingering emotions.

Thus, even when the experiences are not lived through, they are passed down from earlier generations with such poignancy and intensity that they almost transform into personal memories. The very act of imagining, reckoning and constructing the past becomes an act of recollection: "These experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." (Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* 22).

In *Anil's Ghost*, creative and imaginative reconstitution of the past is explicitly carried out through and in the act of identifying the "Sailor". Though it involves scientific analysis, yet the narrative construction involved cannot be dismissed. Anil and her colleagues must imagine the life and death of the skeleton, trying to fill in the gaps with assumption, conjecture and construal: "And who was this skeleton? In this room, among these four, she was hiding among the unhistorical dead… Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (Ondaatje 56). In the sections where Anil and Sarath examine the skeleton they call "Sailor," the narrative dwells on the careful reconstruction of identity through bones—measuring, observing marks of labour, and situating the body within a historical timeline. The skeleton can no longer be treated as an isolated object but as a trace of a life embedded in social and political violence. As they work, the act of identifying Sailor

becomes symbolic: uncovering one body gestures toward exposing an entire network of hidden deaths, suggesting that each recovered fragment holds within it the possibility of narrating a larger, suppressed past. The examination of the skeleton gradually expands outward, suggesting that uncovering one site of violence inevitably leads to the discovery of many others, each connected through a hidden network of deaths and disappearances.

At this point of the narrative, Ondaatje moves from the singular to the collective, showing how the effort to identify "Sailor" cannot remain confined to one body or one location. What was initiated as a concentrated forensic investigation soon develops into a grander recognition of systemic violence where individual killings are part of larger pattern of civil conflict. Moreover, the spareness of the sentence — "They would find one village, then another" (Ondaatje 57)— reflects the fragmentation of memory itself. Rather than presenting a continuous narrative, the text gestures toward a series of disconnected yet linked sites, emphasizing how the past survives in scattered traces. The act of moving from "one village" to "another" mirrors the process of reconstructing history in the novel: piecemeal, uncertain, and always incomplete. In this way, the line underscores how the recovery of truth is both cumulative and elusive—each discovery revealing not closure, but the vast, unresolved scale of loss. In other words, the past emerges not as a coherent story but as a series of fragments that must be pieced together, each new discovery deepening both understanding and the awareness of what remains irretrievably lost.

In fact, the absence becomes more palpable than presence:

> There was always the fear, double-edged, that it was their son in the pit, or that it was not their son—which meant there would be further searching. If it became clear that the body was a stranger, then, after weeks of waiting, the

> family would rise and leave. They would travel to other excavations in the western highlands. The possibility of their lost son was everywhere (Ondaatje 5).

The lines capture how grief does not remain confined to a single, identifiable memory but diffuses into the fabric of everyday life: the missing son is no longer located in a specific past moment but is continually reimagined in the present. Every unknown face, every rumour, every distant report becomes a potential site of recognition. In this way, loss is not static—it is mobile, speculative, and hauntingly alive. For families of the disappeared, the boundary between reality and possibility blurs. The son exists not as a confirmed memory but as a persistent "maybe," a projection that infiltrates daily perception. The parents are unable to mourn conclusively because there is no closure; instead, they inhabit a suspended state where hope and grief coexist. This transforms absence into a living presence—something that is repeatedly encountered, imagined, and emotionally relived.

A reading through the lens of postmemory would show how such unsettled and unresolved losses surpass being merely subjective experience and become collectively shared. The "possibility" of the lost son is not only carried by the immediate family but circulates across communities, entrenching itself in stories, silences, and everyday encounters. Memory here is not based on direct recall but on affective transmission—on imagining what cannot be fully known. Thus, the novel portrays absence as generative: it produces a continuous, inherited mode of remembering shaped by uncertainty, longing, and the impossibility of closure.

Furthermore, in a landscape marked byviolence, there is bound to be a historical rupture. An exchange between Sarath and

Anil hints at a quiet but disconcerting mediation on truth:

> Well, kings also caused trouble in those days,' he said. 'Even then there was nothing to believe in with certainty. They still didn't know what truth was. We have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones.'
> 'We use the bone to search for it. "The truth shall set you free." I believe that.'
> 'Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion.' (Ondaatje 102)

Sarath's reflection that "kings also caused trouble in those days" stretches the present conflict into a longer historical continuum, suggesting that instability and deception are not anomalies but enduring conditions. His claim that "we have never had the truth" does not merely express cynicism; it gestures toward a historical consciousness shaped by repeated betrayals, where official narratives—whether royal, colonial, or modern—have consistently failed to deliver certainty. In such a context, history itself becomes suspect, less a repository of facts than a shifting terrain of power and interpretation.

It is precisely within this fractured historical field that Anil's faith in forensic science emerges. Her insistence that "we use the bone to search for it" reveals a desire to locate truth in the material remains of the dead, to recover a form of evidence that cannot be easily manipulated. The bone, in her view, becomes a counter-archive, a silent but enduring witness capable of resisting distortion. Her invocation of "the truth shall set you free" reflects a belief in the redemptive power of truth—an almost moral commitment to the idea that uncovering what really happened can restore justice and meaning. Yet, even as she speaks, the novel subtly questions this confidence. The bone does not speak on its own; it must be interpreted, reconstructed, and narrated, and in that process, it becomes entangled in the same uncertainties that haunt history.

Sarath's final assertion—that "truth is just opinion"—intensifies this tension, exposing the epistemological fragility that trauma produces. In a society marked by fear, censorship, and competing political interests, truth loses its stability and becomes contingent, shaped by who speaks and who is silenced. This is where the perspective of postmemory becomes especially illuminating. As articulated by Marianne Hirsch, postmemory describes how the aftereffects of trauma are transmitted to those who did not directly experience it, not as clear, verifiable knowledge but as fragments, impressions, and affective inheritances. Sarath's skepticism and Anil's insistence can both be read as responses to this inherited uncertainty: one retreats into doubt, while the other clings to the possibility of recovery.

The dialogue thus captures a central paradox of trauma and its aftermath. There is an urgent need to seek truth—to name the dead, to document violence, to resist erasure—but this search is always shadowed by the recognition that truth itself is unstable, mediated, and contested. What is passed down, therefore, is not a coherent historical narrative but a sense of absence, a persistent awareness that something essential has been lost or obscured. In this way, the novel does not resolve the tension between truth and opinion; instead, it inhabits it, showing how history, memory, and trauma remain entangled in a continuous, unresolved struggle to mean.

A similar deliberation on the perilous entanglement of truth, history, and inherited trauma is exposed through the following passage:

> Half the world, it felt, was being buried, the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush.
>
> Anil would not understand this old and accepted balance. Sarath knew that for her the journey was in getting to the

> truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you. As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use (Ondaatje 155-156).

The opening image—"Half the world…was being buried, the truth hidden by fear"—immediately situates history not as an accessible archive but as something actively suppressed. The act of burial suggests both literal mass graves and metaphorical erasures, where violence is concealed under layers of silence. Yet, paradoxically, truth appears not through orderly historical recovery but in sudden, almost accidental flashes, illuminated by destruction. This oscillation between concealment and revelation mirrors the structure of postmemory, where the past is not fully known but emerges in fragments, images, and affective intensities rather than coherent narratives.

Sarath's awareness that Anil "would not understand this old and accepted balance" marks a crucial divide between different relationships to history. Anil, as an outsider trained in forensic empiricism, represents a belief in linear recovery—the idea that truth can be uncovered, documented, and made to speak. Sarath, however, inhabits a world where history is negotiated within conditions of fear and survival. His notion of an "accepted balance" suggests that silence and partial knowledge are not simply failures but necessary adaptations in a violent political landscape. Within the frame of postmemory, thus, this difference reflects how proximity to trauma shapes one's philosophical functionalism: for those embedded within it, the past is not

something to be cleanly retrieved but something that must be carefully managed, often at the cost of full disclosure. Thus, "postmemory signals an imaginative investment and creation that is at once deeply personal and yet mediated by broader cultural archives" (Radstone 11).

The metaphor of truth as "a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol" intensifies this tension. Truth here is not inherently liberatory; it is volatile, capable of igniting further violence. This complicates any idealistic notion of historical revelation. In a traumatised society, exposing truth may not heal but instead reactivate cycles of vengeance. Sarath's observation that truth has been "broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press" underscores how history is mediated, fragmented, and instrumentalised. What reaches the global audience is not the complexity of lived experience but curated fragments, often detached from context.

At the same time, Sarath's position is not one of simple relativism. His statement that he "would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use" reveals a profound ethical dilemma. He believes in truth "as a principle," yet questions its practical consequences in a world structured by violence and misrepresentation. This gap between ethical commitment and political reality is central to trauma studies. It suggests that the problem is not the absence of truth but the conditions under which truth operates—conditions that can render it dangerous, ineffective, or complicit in further harm.

Ultimately, the past persists, but not as a stable, recoverable entity; it survives in fragments, flashes, and contested narratives. The past circulates through representations that can distort as much as they reveal. Postmemory inhabits this unstable terrain, where what is inherited is not certainty but a charged awareness of absence, distortion, and risk. In this world, the pursuit of truth is

both necessary and fraught—an ethical imperative shadowed by the knowledge that its revelation may not bring resolution, but rather deepen the very wounds it seeks to expose.

The fragmentation of narrative in *Anil's Ghost* further reflects the structure of postmemory. The novel does not follow a linear progression but moves through disjointed episodes, mirroring the fractured nature of inherited trauma. The pervasive climate of fear is articulated in the depiction of a society where "public sorrow was stamped down" (Ondaatje 56), and where loss remains "unfinished." This notion of unfinished mourning is central to postmemory: the trauma has not been resolved or fully articulated, and thus it persists across generations. The inability to publicly grieve creates a vacuum that is filled by indirect forms of remembrance—through art, forensic work, and narrative reconstruction. Ananda's act of reconstructing the face of the dead is particularly significant in this regard. It represents an attempt to restore individuality to anonymous victims, yet it also underscores the imaginative labour involved in postmemory. The face is not a recovery of the past but a creation shaped by affect and empathy.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that in a context like Sri Lanka's civil conflict, memory is always mediated, incomplete, and haunted by loss. By foregrounding gaps, uncertainties, and the persistence of absence, *Anil's Ghost* demonstrates how postmemory operates not as a recovery of the past, but as an ongoing engagement with its traces—where the act of remembering becomes both a moral responsibility and an acknowledgment of what can never be fully known.

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Hardcovers and Hashtags: Reading Saadawi, Shafak, and Satrapi as Neoliberal Spectacles

Priyanka Das

Introduction

To speak of feminism today is to speak of a movement that lives simultaneously between the printed page and the scrolling feed. New-age Islamic Feminism is as likely to appear in Penguin or Zubaan Paperbacks as in Instagram reels. The 21st century Muslim Feminist has moved from the footnotes of political theology into the mainstream global culture. She now narrates defiance through both faith and filter. This paper addresses the contradictions that arise from this newfound visibility, as in how does dissent survive in a world that rewards visibility but punishes critique? When rebellion trends, does it still resist? When trauma becomes a visual commodity, doesn't it lose its insurgent power? Because the question is no longer who *speaks* for women, but who *circulates* women's stories. Islamic feminism occupies this particularly volatile space. It unsettles binaries by defying both conservative patriarchy and Western liberal feminism by speaking from *within faith* rather than outside it. But the Western literary market and digital capitalism have learned to sell the idea of "difference" quite profitably. Veils, deserts, oppression: these are all aesthetic vocabulary for consumption.

Nawal El Saadawi, Elif Shafak, and Marjane Satrapi stand as resonating figures in this cultural loop. Each began as a dissident within national contexts: Egyptian, Turkish, Iranian, and each has been absorbed and sterilized by global markets. Their works show how Islamic feminism mutates under capitalism's spotlight. Saadawi's prison memoirs are now trending reels, Shafak's mystic feminism fuels the self-help economy, Satrapi's black-and-white defiance lives through memes and animation. Yet,

the politics of their writing refuses erasure. Each transforms female subjectivity into public testimony. Saadawi's Firdaus, Shafak's Ella and Asya, Satrapi's Marji – all confront patriarchy as both social system and epistemic regime. In my aim to dissect the uneasy alliance between literary market, academic space, and digital media, I am reading these women as transnational archivists of female defiance, and using their works to track how Islamic feminist voices are moderated and marketed, while also critiquing newer forms of misogyny on digital platforms that fracture feminist solidarity.

I. Islamic Feminism and the Literary Market

The literary marketplace is the testing ground of 'acceptable' rebellion. A Muslim woman writing about her body or belief must sell not only her story but her *difference.* Western readers adore stories of women liberated from the veil, female bodies escaping *namaaz*; in short, exoticized tales that defy religion. Even book covers tell stories of marketing desire.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, first published in Arabic in Lebanon (1977), was later translated into English in London by Zed Books (1983). The English version had a sepia-toned cover with a veiled face of a woman amidst desert hues, something that fed the Western appetite for Muslim women's captivity stories. Saadawi's 1980 interviews reiterate that her "feminism was not born in the West but in prisons" (Interview with Radwa Ashour, 1980). That statement undercuts the neoliberal packaging that later surrounded her legacy. She herself later lamented that the West "fetishizes the Arab woman's suffering but never funds her liberation" (Saadawi, 1986). The market fetishizes her trauma, not her politics, because it reassures the liberated reader that the society still needs her/him as the savior. The market paradox, therefore, is quite blatant: the more a woman bleeds on the page, the better her book sells. Saadawi's

refusal to romanticize either East or West positioned her as a literary outsider. She repeatedly articulated this dislocation in interviews, noting in a 1993 BBC Arabic segment that "a writer is dangerous when she refuses to obey." Her warning gestures toward the structural unease surrounding Muslim women authors whose works critique both domestic patriarchy and global capitalism. In *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1986), she writes of being hailed, "for words, not weapons," a reminder that the state often perceives textual disagreement as more subversive than organized movements. This politics of fear is what later transforms her books into high-demand commodities: markets adore voices once criminalized, especially when repackaged as narratives of triumphant liberation.

Elif Shafak, on the other hand, mastered the market vocabulary. Not only through eyebrow-raising titles, but her books like *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), or *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) were packaged and sold as cosmopolitan texts. Her Ella Rubinstein, a middle-aged American woman inspired by the Sufi bond between Rumi and Shamz, creates what we might call consumable Sufi feminism: a spiritual ethics of love that goes against both patriarchy and patriotism. Özlem Güngör argues that Shafak's fiction "turns spiritual self-realisation into a lifestyle brand" (Güngör 22). Perhaps the marketing tag, *"Shafak's Turkish Magic"* softened her political edge, and amplified her reach. Shafak's visibility also stems from her public lectures. In her 2010 TED Talk, she remarked that "stories can demolish the walls that politics builds," a quote widely circulated online. Yet in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Asya counters this optimism with the cynical admission that "history repeats itself whether we like it or not," thus foregrounding the ironical tension between narrative hope and structural violence. The market gravitates toward Shafak's optimism, often sidelining these darker meditations that articulate the burdens of inherited trauma.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) closes this triad by changing the medium itself. Her black-and-white comics turned Iranian girlhood into a visual rebellion. The simplicity of her lines made her critique relatable, exportable, teachable, even animatable. Critics such as Hilary Chute see *Persepolis* as "autographics," where the self is inscribed through drawing (Chute 99). When *Persepolis* entered American classrooms and Film Festivals, it was embraced as "safe multiculturalism"; and its radical critique of Western imperial gaze diluted by its graphic charm! Satrapi's public interviews reinforce her refusal to be tokenized. In a 2014 conversation with French TV5, she insisted, "I am not a symbol; I am a storyteller," thus rejecting Western attempts to read her exclusively as an Iranian feminist exile. Yet *Persepolis* contains moments of startling political clarity, such as the panel where young Marji observes, "The regime had robbed us of our laughter." The starkness of these lines resonates beyond the graphic form, exposing the emotional infrastructure of authoritarianism.

The aesthetics of Islamic feminism, thus, becomes legible through constant choreography of marketing. Books that decry Islamic misogyny are quickly elevated as symbols of liberation, while the same texts if they critique Western patriarchy are sidelined. Publishers privilege stories that align with liberal feminist ideals: unveiling, sexual freedom, cigarette and alcohol rebellion, over those that interrogate Western capitalism or Christian or Hindu patriarchy. As Graham Huggen notes in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, difference becomes desirable when it is decoratively painful. Then comes digitalization of feminist intellectual labour: BookTok, Goodreads, online forums algorithmically reward universal pain." Comments read like ethnographic notes: "As a Muslim woman, it must have been terrifying/ She's so brave to escape her culture!" Algorithms, if I may personify, are the new age literary critics: endorsing Western liberal appetites over faith-based feminism.

II. Islamic Feminism in Classrooms

The Indian classroom is both a sanctuary and a minefield. Every time someone teaches Manto's "Khol Do", or Chughtai's "Lihaaf," the air thickens. Students hesitate between curiosity and discomfort, while teachers measure words. With Islamic feminist texts, the stakes are higher! Once when I discussed Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* as a part of World Literature, I gathered that students mostly read Firdaus as a victim rather than a theorist. On the contrary, her climactic declaration, "I prefer to die for a crime I have committed than to live under a system that kills me daily for things I have not done" (El Saadawi 101) should be read as a powerful rejection of the sovereign. *Persepolis* enjoys institutional safety in American classrooms, partly because it exists in comic form, and partly because it teaches revolution against both communism and Islamic fundamentalism while shadowing anti-American sentiments. Students laugh when young Marji lies to the Guardian of the Revolution about her veil (Satrapi 134); few notice the accompanying despair: "Every morning I had to put on my veil and shout Death to America.' It was just another kind of lie." (Satrapi 136). Islamic Feminism, thus, is often depoliticized under the mask of academic diversity, and pedagogic neutrality. On the other end of the spectrum, Indian syllabi often sanitize stories of subversion. Rokeya Begum's "Sultana's Dream" is taught as a quaint utopia rather than a radical satire of both colonial and religious patriarchy. Manto and Chughtai are celebrated as rebels, but their politics are often framed as literary courage, not ideological jouissance that needs to meet praxis. It begins in classrooms, and ends in Bollywood's version of an angry Nawazuddin Siddique, his white kurta, and blackboard.

As educators responsible for nourishing young minds, the most challenging part, while teaching these authors, is how to evoke empathy without allowing voyeurism, how to make students *feel* without appropriating or universalizing pain! When students

read Shafak's Istanbul, they encounter trauma that is historical, sexual, and religious. As teachers, we must steer these feelings towards critical dialogue, collective political consciousness, but never pity or sentimental consumption! Affective empathy should be adopted as the fundamental pedagogy, which is seldom the case. We need a shared awareness of pain that avoids trivialization. As Saadawi wrote, "They tell me, write about women but not about politics; as if women lived in a vacuum. (The Hidden Face of Eve xvi). Shafak's campus lectures, especially her Oxford Union address of 2017, echo this sentiment, "to teach literature is to teach multiplicity. To censor complexity is to betray literature." Similarly, Satrapi's presence in American or Indian syllabi frequently stops at the level of identity-based inclusion, whereas Satrapi herself urges her readers to see *Persepolis* not as an immigrant success story but as a record of a "childhood shaped by ideology," as she stated in her 2008 Cannes interview. The applause such quotes receive in elite halls only deepens the paradox, that the institution celebrates what it neutralizes. Clips of Saadawi's 2011 interviews, where she declares "I am not a Muslim in the way they want me to be" (BBC Hardtalk), resurface whenever online debates about veiling trend. The twenty-second reel isolates her sentence but omits the following clause: "Faith is freedom only when unpoliced." The algorithm loves the shock, not the nuance.

Elif Shafak's social media presence thrives on poetic brevity. Her Twitter posts recycle rules from her book, like Rule 7: "Whatever happens in your life, no matter how troubling things might seem, do not enter the neighborhood of despair" (Shafak 69). Thousands of retweets turn it into motivational quote, divorced from the novel's deeper dialogue about surrender and submission to divine love. Shafak acknowledges this split in her Guardian interview (2021): "social media amplifies emotion but shrinks context." She uses the platform to champion gender

equality yet critiques its empathy inflation, and the replacement of politics with sentiment. *Persepolis* meanwhile has become an entire visual lexicon for digital protest. In 2022, when Iranian women took to the streets following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, many posters had the frame of an unveiled Marji walking away. Satrapi publicly endorsed the protests by tweeting it as significantly different from previous movements owing to men supporting women's rights. This one, she calls a "proper revolution of the new generation". She even immortalized this uprising in her graphic anthology titled *Woman, Life, Freedom.* And this is where the comic returns to life as graphic solidarity.

III. Feminism on Social Media

Social media today constitutes the most volatile terrain of feminist expression, where ideology is not merely discussed but continuously *performed.* It functions as a digital *ummah:* a global congregation where hijab tutorials coexist with protest hashtags, and empowerment cohabits with harassment. Hashtags are now the new feminist archives, turning the personal into political; yet their visibility remains hostage to algorithms designed and owned by corporate systems that profit from emotional labour. The paradox is striking: digital feminism fights patriarchy using those very patriarchal structures; the same algorithm that amplifies women's voices also thrives on misogyny and objectification. Outrage increase engagement, and engagement translates to monetization; and feminist pain becomes profitable data in capitalism's empathy economy. The algorithm thus acts as the new capitalist patriarch, rewarding women with visibility while punishing them with trolling, shadowbans, and systemic erasure. Islamic feminist discourse online is deeply intersectional: addressing gender and faith simultaneously. Elif Shafak's Instagram essays on "the loneliness of liberal Muslim women" receive thousands of shares, yet also torrents of hate comments. The algorithm amplifies

conflict because outrage fuels engagement. Thus, feminist virality becomes both strength and trap.

Contemporary misogyny mutates rapidly in the digital space. The rise of "Pick-Me Girl" influencers, who mock feminism to gain patriarchal validation, dominate TikTok and Instagram trends. These micro-celebrities trivialize feminist movement, reinforcing what Sara Ahmed calls "the politics of happiness," where feminism is dismissed as negativity (Ahmed 65). Meanwhile, Islamic feminists experience double policing: denounced as blasphemous by religious conservatives and rejected as mimics by western secularists. This double bind mirrors the contradictions Saadawi faced decades ago but now unfolds in digital timelines. The *hijab* becomes both a shield and a spectacle, reclaimed by Muslim women influencers as aesthetic agency yet simultaneously eroticized by algorithmic voyeurism. A 2023 *Feminist Media Studies* report by Nadia Mahmoud observes that posts blending religiosity with lifestyle glamour receive the highest engagement metrics, showing that visibility, not voice, defines digital value (Mahmoud 112).

Platforms monetizing this attention economy turn every tweet or post into quantifiable affective labour. Feminist activism risks becoming anesthetized: its emotional energy harnessed as spectacle rather than transformation. Yet, paradoxically, these same networks nurture unexpected solidarities. When Nawal El Saadawi passed away in 2021, tributes appeared in Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, Bangla, English, often shared by young women who had never read her books but discovered her via social media. This translingual mourning reveals the digital afterlife of feminism, where icons of dissent circulate through affect, long before they enter syllabi. Saadawi's words, "if my work helps even one girl feel less alone, then exile has meaning," reverberates more after she is gone. She had, in fact, embraced this new digital space despite criticizing its superficiality. Shortly before her death, she

remarked in an Egyptian news, “let my words travel further than my feet ever could.”

Despite this global connectivity, optimism demands caution. Platforms such as X and Instagram are far from neutral; their recommendation systems reproduce gendered, racial, and religious biases, curating visibility through commercial intent. Thus, Islamic feminism must learn to use the master’s tools without serving his market, which is to bargain with algorithms critically rather than conform to them. The current feminist moment therefore is defined by the tension between voice and virality. The tension between voice and virality defines the present feminist moment. Islamic feminism thrives when it speaks collectively but suffers when it trends individually. Hashtags offer visibility but erase nuance; viral posts invite solidarity but flatten theology. The challenge is therefore to preserve depth in a medium designed for distraction. Thankfully, hope persists in hybrid spaces, like podcasts, online reading live streams, feminist study groups, and transnational book clubs. These digital sanctuaries suggest that faith and feminism are not opposites but cohabitants in a new digital-intellectual ecology.

Conclusion

In tracing Islamic feminism across literary markets, classrooms, and digital platforms, this essay attempted to reveal a pattern of strategic adaptation and invisible rebellion. The publishing industry converts trauma into commodity, yet unwittingly democratizes feminist critique, carrying Saadawi, Shafak, Satrapi and the likes of them far beyond their geopolitical contexts. The classroom, though haunted by caution and censorship, continues to cultivate micro-acts of resistance through dialogue and affective empathy. Social media, despite its algorithmic violence, democratizes feminist discourse in unpredictable ways.

Islamic Feminism today should therefore be understood not as a monolithic ideology but as an expansive network of existence and empowerment. From Saadawi's Cairo prisons to Shafak's Istanbul cafes and Satrapi's animated Tehran, its geography is transnational, and its language polyphonic. Each writer redefines faith, gender, and freedom in ways that outlive the print culture, migrating into podcasts, TED stages, and digital archives. What social media has done is not replace literature but perhaps amplify its parallel to create an afterlife where the text becomes a living conversation. Yet, the triad of market, classroom, and algorithm continues to police women's speech. Publishers commodify rebellion, classrooms sanitize dissent, and algorithms monetize rage. Islamic Feminism endures by negotiating these pressures: never fully accommodated, never fully silenced. The challenge for feminist scholarship now lies in developing frameworks that would understand emotion as political economy, would teach empathy alongside media literacy, and critique not only mainstream patriarchy but also the structures that profit from the gender wars.

Ultimately, the struggle is epistemic: *who defines liberation: the market, the institution, or the woman herself?* Islamic feminism reminds us that freedom cannot be solely outsourced to any of them. It is not a borrowed grammar from the West but an ethical reorientation that must begin within faith, within language, within self-authorship. As Satrapi insists in *Persepolis,* "Freedom always has a price." Today, that price is algorithmic exposure, where every act of speech risks becoming spectacle. Yet amid this turbulence of hashtags hijabs, and hyperlinks, Islamic feminism continues to write, teach, and tweet: not driven by virality, but vision.

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Mourning Nature: Colonialism, Environmental Degradation and Native Resilience in Select Bengali Literary Texts

Durbadal Bhattacharya and Tathagat Banerjee

> "I am a poet of famine,
> Everyday, I wakeup with nightmares, with vivid depiction of death
> My youth is pined away in the lines of Food camps
> My sleepless nights are punctured with the watchful siren sounds."
> Sukanta Bhattacharya – "In the memory of Rabindranath"

These lines by Sukanta Bhattacharya, resonate with the pain and suffering of the emaciated bodies thronging the cityscape like zombies in search of food. The air of Calcutta was stifled with the cries of "Phyan Dao", "Phyan Dao" (a little starch water please). The famines of Bengal starting from 1770 to 1943 have left a deep scar on the psyche of the common masses of rural Bengal. The prophetic dialogue in Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of Famine*) (1980) reminds us of the ubiquitous presence of famine even forty years after the great famine of 1940s: "The Babus of the city are here to film the famine. Famine! It is written all over us." In a land of river and water bodies, death due to starvation was unimaginable at a point of time. Kalicharan Ghosh in *Famines in Bengal* (1944) studied the trajectory of famines in the Indian subcontinent since the times of the Mughal empire. He deduced that in striking contrast to the Mughal empire, which was witness to three famines, under the British empire, the number scaled up to twenty-two. Tharoor argues that over twenty-five million people died in the famines between 1770 - 1900, in comparison to 5 million deaths that resulted from wars throughout the entire world between 1793 -1900 (2018). Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee argues

that even back in 1873, poets like Jamiruddin Dafadar had little doubt that the famine which scorched the lands of Bengal, a century back, was not entirely natural; rather it was invoked by the imperialist greed of the British colonial rule (29). Whereas the empire itself refuses to acknowledge famine as a resultant of its exploitative profiteering enterprises, the imperial empire always claimed itself as a palliative agent serving the natives afflicted by the disaster prone and disease prone tropical climate (Mukherjee 30). The present paper in its study of three vernacular texts intends to understand famine as a result of ecological degradation caused due to colonial enterprises and view the environment as both victim and witness to colonial exploitation. It also attempts intends to analyze native resilience in response to these crises and investigate the function of landscape and environment as sites of power struggle and resistance.

Colonialism and Environmental Degradation

Aime Cesaire in his deliberation on ecological impact of colonial policies writes:

> They dazzle me with the tonnage of cotton or cocoa that has been exported, the acreage that has been planted with olive trees or grapevines. I am talking about natural economies that have been disrupted – harmonious and viable economies adapted to the indigenous population– about food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries, about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials. (Cesaire 178)

Though disasters have long been perceived to be natural, spontaneous geographical or meteorological events, inscrutable and inevitable in nature, Cesaire here refers to the idea of

creation/manufacturing of disaster. Scholars like Rob Nixon and David Arnold attest and validate this idea however, disagree with Amartya Sen, who has discussed and debated the causes of the Bengal famine. Arnold contends that famines such as the one in 1943, should not be considered in isolation from the immediate historical factors of war, food scarcity, maladministration and other eco-political reasons. Rather they should be studied in larger contexts such as late colonial land policies, the decline of nature in the province, growing pressure of debt on peasants and subdivision of holding. Rob Nixon's formulation of 'attrition disaster' is also essential in this regard. Nixon categorizes violence through disasters into two marked segments such as 'spectacular' and 'attritional'. Disasters such as earthquakes, volcanoes, nuclear disasters are spectacular in nature; they are splendid, sensational and create immediate visible impression. Whereas most of the ecological disasters are attritional or incremental in nature, the incremental toxicity and degradation are often underrepresented in human memory and strategic planning, primarily due to its invisibility (2).[i] Nixon argues that "Attritional catastrophes overspill boundaries in time and space and are marked above all by displacements – temporal, geographical, rhetorical and technological displacements that simplify violence, and underestimate in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs (7). Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha while rendering their eco-critical views in a historical perspective emphatically state, "World ecology has been profoundly altered by western capitalism, in whose dynamic expansion other ecosystems were disrupted, first through trade and later by colonialism… for worldwide control they exercised over mineral, plant and animal resources (117). By 1860s Britain emerged as the leader of deforestation, denuding the earth of its vast green cover. In the 19th Century after its victory against the Marathas, the East India Company razed down vast acres of teak wood plantation in Ratnagiri. Henry Cleghorn, one of the early conservators of forest

observed that the English as a race has been most regardless of the value of the forest (119). Due to rapid industrialization, and vanishing oak forests in England, the empire depended upon the teak wood of the Indian forest to build its navy ships.[ii] Even in the 1880's, the Indian forest department received repeated requests from British admirals regarding shipments of Madras and Burma teak (119). The Colonial enterprise of the British considered the forest as an impediment in the road to development and revenue generation. Vast tracks of forest were wiped out to accommodate the imperial design of revenue generation and development.[iii] Ramchandra Guha asserts that the commercialization of timber affected the forest ecology severely. Moreover, the colonial state asserted its primary claim on the forest land with a management in place that contrasted sharply in respect to the practices observed during the pre-colonial times (147).

The transformation of forest land into state property contributed towards a spiraling ecological damage that caused famine and drought to become a common phenomenon. The irresponsible destruction of forests for creating railway tracks, fuel, sleepers, coupled with unmindful hunting, caused irreparable damage to the forest cover and the population of animals like elephants, tigers, and leopards. Added to these, the imperial agricultural policies consisting of the abolition of shifting cultivation or *jhum,* predative land policies forced peasants to perish under unprecedented debt and high taxation. Other than those discussed above, Binita Sarkar in her paper, "Ecology, Nutrition and Burdwan Fever" has fore grounded the issue of embankment of rivers as a major reason of ecological devastation and frequent epidemics. She writes, "The process of development began with the construction of the railway and roads. In order to execute the developmental works, embankments were erected on the banks of these rivers. The main motive behind the erection of these embankments was to fulfill the commercial interests of the

colonizers" (566). The decay of rivers was by no way a natural phenomenon, they were the primary channel of the developmental work of the Britishers.[iv] Cessation of inundations in many ways deteriorated the rural environment adversely affecting public health and agriculture. In a land which is replete with rivers, tributaries, lakes and natural water bodies, agriculture in the late years of colonial rule became massively dependent on artificial irrigation as the natural processes of flood, flush and replenishment of water bodies were hindered (567).

Compelling portrayals of famines in Bengal have featured in literature, art and movies. Margaret Kelleher in her book *The Feminization of Famine*, refers to Paul Ricoeur's phrase, "the quasi-intuitiveness of fiction" to talk of the aesthetic representations of *unspeakable* events like Holocaust, Partition of India and the Famines of 1943. Arguing against such representations, Primo Levi states that either the true witness never returns to narrate the horror of the unspeakable events, or even on their return, they stay silent. George Stenier, on the same note remarks that aesthetic representation trivializes the horror experienced. He further says that the act of uttering the unutterable puts the survival of language at risk, which is deemed to be the vehicle of humane and rational truth. However, Kelleher cites Ricouer, Lawrence Langer and Julia Kristeva, to argue that literary or aesthetic narrative serves as a mode of testimony to later generations; they wake up to the reality of the past through the imaginative lens of the narration. Literature, according to Kristeva, "represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and serious apocalypses" (3-4). Here, I would like to add that aesthetic or literary narratives are not merely a tangible site of remembrance; rather they are potent tools of political resistance. Chittaprosad Bhattacharya's political art is a veritable demonstration of this dialectic truth; Chittaprosad sketched the victims of 1943 Bengal famine in his journal, *Hungry Bengal*

during his tour of the Contai subdivision of Midnapore district. Anshuka Guin in her blog article writes, "Chittaprosad's journey discovered the trail of hunger and poverty from the streets – his accounts were built up with interviews and reports. These reports were matched with parallel sketches in black ink, together with in depth notes on his subjects and locations scribbled within the margins or on the reverse. He began exploring 'aestheticized' embodiments of resistance activated by conscious creative explorations, and dived into visualizing a body politic" (web).While artists such as Zainul Abedin, Chittaprosad and Somnath Hore have captured the harrowing images of famine through their paintings, Sunil Janah has used photographs and K. A Abbas the celluloid. Other than *Anandamath* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1882), writers such as Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopdhyay, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Gopal Haldar, Bijan Bhattacharya, Satinath Bhaduri, Bhowani Sen, Sulekha Sanyal, Bishnu Dey, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Krishan Chandra, Ela Sen, Subhash Mukhopadhyay, Sukanta Bhattacharya, Abu Ishaq and others have portrayed their anxiety rising from catastrophes. Barring *Anandamath*, the rest of narratives are on the Bengal Famine of 1940s. Later in the 1970s and 80s, famine was reimagined through the cinematic lens of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.

The present paper intends to scrutinize how the portrayal of the unspeakable ecological disaster in three vernacular texts, namely *Anandamath* (1882) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Intimations of Thunder* (1946) by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, and Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (1944) not only function to record it as a manmade calamity effected by colonial and capitalist violence but also as tools of resistance.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee is one of the first authors to chronicle the harrowing tale of the first famine of Bengal in the

1770s. However, the novel is mostly celebrated for its unequivocal patriotic fervour. The famine of 1769-1771 was one of the most devastating famines in the history of modern India. If Warren Hastings is to be believed, more than one-third of the population of Bengal and Bihar was wiped out.[v] The novel begins with the description of the year 1769-70. The opening lines are full of remorse and lamentation. The village of Padachinha is desolate. Due to poor harvest in the previous year, rice is already pricier and in 1770, when the crops failed again, people were forced to starve. Whatever little was produced, was purchased by the army. Coupled with an enhanced tax of ten percent, people were forced to flee their homes. Death, disease and decay reigned everywhere:

> First, people began to live by begging, but afterwards, who could give alms? They began to fast. Next, they fell into the clutch of disease. The cow was sold, plough and yoke were sold, the seed-rice was eaten, hearth and home were sold, land and goods were sold. Next, they began to sell their girls. After that, they began to sell their boys. After that, they began to sell their wives. Next girl, boy, or wife, — who would buy? Purchasers there were none, only sellers. For want of food men began to eat the leaves of trees, they began to eat grass, they began to eat weeds. The lower castes and the forest men began devouring dogs, mice and cats. Many fled, but those who fled only reached some foreign land to die of starvation. Those who remained ate inedible or subsisted without food till disease took hold of them and they died. (12)

Bankim's description has remarkable historical veracity. Even the wealthiest of the lot were not spared- Mohendra Singha, who used to be a wealthy man of Padachinha; was forced to desert his village along with his wife Kalyani and infant daughter due to the horrific famine. Bankim further describes how peasants turned robbers

were no more interested in money or jewellery, they craved for food, desperate, ready to feed on human flesh. Here I would like to employ Foucault's concept of 'biopolitics' in its deliberation and discussion on environmental degradation and the nature of famines in Bengal and the Indian subcontinent. Foucault expands his conception of population as the biopolitical target of governments. In his collection of lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978) he addresses the concern of social order. The lectures attempt to explain the practices of government in the exercise of political sovereignty. This Foucauldian concept analyses the regulative biopolitics of the population, where the Sovereign regulates the milieu and the population is no more neutral – it is now a political object. Foucault while describing biopower writes: "in a normalizing society, you have a power which is…a biopower, and racism is the indispensable precondition that allows someone to be killed, that allows others to be killed". He noted that by 'killing', the state rarely engages in the act of direct extermination, rather it encourages systematic killing of selected subjects (256). Thus, death becomes political. It can never be claimed to be caused due to natural causes. Hence, the population of the village is left to starve, die a death akin to wild, unwanted animals; instead of alleviating the suffering of the masses, hefty taxes were levied and heavily armed troops guarded them. Even an unsuspecting person was considered to be a threat, an object of suspicion – Bankim narrates how an anxious Mohendra, estranged from his wife and children, was attacked and imprisoned by the sepoys. The violence of death is accompanied by the violence of disease, displacement and subhuman survival modes. Bankim's narrative foregrounds resistance and revolt against its oppressor by fictionalizing the historical Sanyasi rebellion of the 18th century. Bankim's Sanyasis did not hesitate to kill and loot the imperial tax money; Bhuvan replies, "The King is no King at all who does not live in this country, and who rules this land with injustice" (52). Quite contrary to the claims of the colonial rulers, the Sanyasis of

Bankim's novel argues squarely against the profiteering enterprise of the British:

> Can you find another country on earth outside India where human beings are forced by starvation to live on grass? Here in India, famine-stricken people today are eating creepers, ant-hills, jackals, dogs, and even human flesh! And the British are shipping our wealth to their treasuries in Calcutta; and from there that wealth is to be shipped again to England. There is no hope for India, until we drive the British out (52).

These images of people eating the inedible are reiterated in novels of famine, written after a span of 170 years, depicting the famine of 1943 – the change in chronotrope does not change the nature of suffering. Bankim ruthlessly cuts into the imperial argument of famine being a natural and inevitable event.

The famines of 1770 differed from later famines that plagued India during the entire 19th and 20th centuries. Post 1770, the colonial government took upon itself to manage food scarcity and public health. However, as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee convincingly demonstrates, the colonial government always argued about limited intervention (33-34).[vi] The English man took up the burden of civilizing the native, reticently working selflessly to ease the pain of the uneducated, brute natives, who breed copiously. The idea of educating the natives recurrently figures in documents, narratives and reports. Like in the case of the Irish famine of 1851, the imperial government always referred to famine as "natural and inevitable".[vii] Hence, the aberrant or dispensable elements in a population need moral guidance, and reformatory discipline to improve their existing condition – it disciplines the subaltern bodies and stigmatizes them.[viii] The stigma was believed to have emanated from historical backwardness of the Indian society, with a homogenous past. Consequently, any impediment in the form of

climate, soil, people or custom belonged to an inscrutable pre-historic past. In the words of Partha Chatterjee:

> Empty homogenous is the time of the capital […] When it encounters an impediment, it thinks it has encountered another time – something out of pre-capital, something that belongs to the pre-modern. Such resistances to capital (or to modernity) are therefore understood as coming out of the humanity's past. (5)

At the other times, the harsh tropical climate, coupled with its poor soil quality was blamed for the chronic state of famine. The empire always presented itself as a progressive, scientific and humanitarian enterprise, working tirelessly towards the benefit of mankind. Ironically, in 1943, when the Bengal famine occurred, the imperial government was for a long time in a mode of denial. The colonial bias has been addressed in multiple research articles and volumes, available on the Bengal Famine of 1943. As Sen puts it in his groundbreaking book, *Poverty and Famines* (1981) around three million people succumbed to starvation during the drought in the late colonial period (5). Like B.M. Bhatia, Sen contends that the famine of 1943 had nothing to do with food availability decline (FAD).[ix] It, as the British colonizers would have liked to believe, was not at all a natural disaster.[x] Sen unequivocally declares the famine as an engineered disaster, which had irrefutable links with the war and wartime capitalism. Other factors such as 'boat denial policy'[xi], 'scorched earth policy'[xii], forcible confiscation of rice from peasants in fear of Japanese invasion, prohibition of export and import, and export of cereals and rice in particular, decline in demand of crafts and luxury products, huge imparity in purchasing are some of the other reasons for the famine[xiii]. The imperial government initially refused to accept the famine officially and, only in October 1943, the catastrophic event was acknowledged (Sen 79). The word famine was a bad word, as famine as a scourge

was officially vanquished by the developmental enterprise of the government.[xiv] Having delayed its recognition of the event as a catastrophe, the government also prematurely declared its end. Moreover, famine, for the empire, was always a natural event, a 'necessary disaster', thus providing a required relief to the land that was 'very sick indeed and needed a little breathing-space ere the torrent of cheap life should flood it anew" (Mukherjee 30) Thus, the 'cheap life' was also the expendable life. The above reference of Kipling is resonated in the infamous comments of Churchill decades later, referring to the natives as "breeding like rabbits". This instance of robbing the population of its human agency is also an instance of identifying it as exigency during the time of crisis. However, as Upamanyu Mukherjee in *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire*, approaches the element of catastrophe and disease during the colonial period in a nuanced manner, refusing to place these disasters through simple binaries (31). Similarly, the layered, complicated and conflicted narratives of the vernacular texts written during the few years of the Bengal famine of 1943 have tried to grapple with this difficult past.

Ashani Sanket (*Distant Thunder*) by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay is about the first few years of the famine, when the clueless people of rural Bengal are trying to gauge the reason behind the sudden scarcity of rice. Contrary to *Anandamath*, Bibhutibhushan does not depict the horrors of the famine at its peak, rather ends his novel with a symbolic death. The narrative begins with Gangacharan with his family in the new village who have been migrating from one village to the other for the past few years. Sustainable income and food scarcity are the primary reasons that forced Gangacharan to migrate time and again. *Ashani Sanket* is not merely a tale of suffering, rather it is also a saga of resilience. In spite of his societal position, Gangacharan is not immune to poverty and food scarcity. However, his days in this village begin on a positive note; being a Brahmin by caste, he is

respected by the village folks. The village being an agrarian community, Gangacharan is pampered with special treatment; they try to appease him with the produce of their garden or field. However, before he could settle his life in this new place, acute scarcity of rice sets in. As the scarcity is about to take monstrous form, Gangacharan is advised to stack rice in advance. No one including the protagonist takes the warning seriously. Later, in some other village, a famished Brahmin approaches him for a few handfuls of rice. He cannot afford the inflated price of rice, and it may rise further. A realistic narrative, unlike *In Search of Famine* or *Nabanna*, *Ashani Sanket* does not attempt to include journalistic reports to intensify the horror of the crisis. Mihir Bhattacharya in his essay "Realism and the Syntax of Difference", argues that the mode of realism employed by Bibhutibhushan is through the relation between 'motivation' and 'device' [construction of famine narratives largely through allusions, fragmentary discussion and sudden scenes of horror] (Bhattacharya 49). Moreover, Bandyopadhyay also attempts to portray the vulnerability of the illiterate masses of rural Bengal, who neither have access to daily newspapers, nor they have the ability to understand the complexity of the situation. Though Gangacharan is literate, he also lacks the understanding to gauge the cause of the current crisis. In a conversation with his wife regarding the sudden inflated price of rice, he says:

> I have heard people saying that price of rice may rise further.
> Rice is already six rupees. It will rise further!!!
> That is what people are saying. It is probably due to war-
> Who are at war?
> It is not for you. You will not be able to understand it. Our King is in war with Germany and Japan. All things will become dearer.

> Let it be, we do need to purchase half of the things, but if rice becomes dearer …(83)

The above conversation exposes Gangacharan's discomfort regarding the topic of war and mocks his wife to hide his ignorance on the topic. However, his ignorance is later exposed, when he locates Singapore somewhere close to Puri in the Midnapore district. Gangacharan is again warned about the looming scarcity; even with money in hand he could not buy Kerosene. To this, Ananga replies causally, "Hush! Leave those useless talks. With no rice, no salt, how will all these people survive?" This improbability of people dying without food is inconceivable in the world of Gangacharan, Ananga, Kapali *Bou,* Durga Bhattacharya. Bengal had one of the most fertile fields in the entire country, hence to die of starvation in a place of plenty was beyond comprehension for most of the unsuspecting dwellers of rural Bengal. But these naïve villagers had no idea of the intentions of their King; in the words of William Digby, "We are in India to make money, and all shadow of pretence at even making money honestly, was cast aside" (24). The craze of profiteering, the government's refusal to intervene in the grain market, insurmountable peasant debt, mindless exploitation of the natural resources of the country and the willingness to provide relief to dying multitudes of rural India made these horrific famines possible. Gradually the word of warning came true; houses in the villages became bereft of rice. By the middle of the year, rice suddenly evaporated from the market and Gangacharan too, lost his exclusive privilege in the village (though he was still treated with reverence), money or respect could no longer fetch rice. Reports of loot of rice started pouring in, people began eating everything on which they could lay their hands; spinach of every kind, both edible as well as non-edible ones, ponds and lakes turned muddy, women of the house started fishing for snail's meat, lotus stems or anything else that can be remotely considered edible. Bandopadhyay reports the horror of

famine as famished beggars from foreign lands started pouring into this new village:

> By the middle of *Shravan* (month of August), even one as optimist as Ananga was terrified. Rice vanished into the air from the villages of Bengal. Not a grain of rice is available in the vicinity. Nowadays, rice no longer comes to a market as big as Gobindpur…Every day the number of beggars is increasing. No one knows where they are coming from. They do not appear to be locals, they appear to be from foreign lands. One day, when Ananga Bou was busy cooking, out of nowhere few half-clad famished women, along with their naked children started crying – 'Starch water please… Starch water please'. (104)

The above description is an extremely common coinage available in most of the popular narratives of famine. But this starvation is no longer limited to beggars from foreign lands, even women such as Kopali *bou* are forced to trade their body for a few fistfuls of rice. Hence the corporeal violence of starvation and sexual exploitation transforms famine into a spectacular event. As Sourit Bhattacharya argues, events such as famine are both attritional and spectacular in nature (47). The compelling images of those dire times stupefy readers/audience with its grim representation. Bijon Bhattacharya, presents a similar image, repulsive and spectacular in nature, in his canonical play *Nabanna*:

> Radhika and Kunja searching for food among the rubbish. It is dark and nothing is visible. The growling of dog can be heard from around the dustbin…Suddenly a dog starts barking ferociously near the dustbin. Almost immediately Kunja responds in bestial anger. In a few moments, Kunja advances towards the light holding up his wounded hand-bitten by the dog and dripping with blood (91).

The famine has thus not only robbed people of their life, but also of their basic human dignity. They are reduced to beasts, fighting ferociously for a morsel of food. Kunja, like a dog, starts growling, and competes with it over leftover food in the dustbin. Both Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and Bijon Bhattacharya, time and again refer to the raid of the colonial government to rob these withering peasants of their leftover grains. They also refer to the apathy of the government officials towards the sufferings of these poor peasants. The death of Moti at the end of *Ashani Sanket* is the worst nightmare come true:

> After the death of Moti cobbler, staying back in the village became difficult. This is first death due to starvation, earlier nobody knew or believed that one could die out of starvation. With trees laden with fruits, rivers and ponds full of fishes, most importantly with so many people residing in a village, how can someone die of hunger? One or the other surely offer food. Surely no one will die of starvation. But the death of Moti proved that after all man can die of hunger. Something that people heard in tales, seems to be possible. Moti died out of hunger, and nobody offered her food. Why? Why no one could save her from death. Everyone became extremely anxious and fearful. Then people can die of starvation. (149)

The death of Moti cobbler is a symbolic death at various levels- the epidemic of death due to hunger begins with an outcast. Gangacharan becomes an object of pity, reverence, regard and fear for many members of the society. Members of his village and outside, still treat him with reverence; feed him in fear of sin or disrespect, help him with rice, or grain. Even the callous officer at the ration shop increases his share of ration because of his caste. The privilege of caste shielded Ganagcharan and his family even in such difficult times, but the Motis of the society had no such

comfort. They are destined to die without food, with no claimants over their bodies. People like Moti for ages have survived on the leftover fruits, dead fishes, and leftover grains. But the environment of rural Bengal could no longer sustain their famished bodies. Moti's death evokes bewilderment and horror among the inmates of *natun gram*. The signals were loud and clear, that nobody irrespective of their caste, creed and status is safe in such a precarious environment.

These narratives are not only the truthful depiction of those harrowing events, but they are also a vibrant testimony to the resilient spirit of these countless multitudes who do not succumb to the corporeal torture of colonial exploitation. These marginal entities, who were consideredprimitive, beastly, unethical, weak, and unhygienic, stood by each other even in these extremely tiring times. Vaughan Nash remarks: , "It is idle to try to imagine the feelings of people who are half comatose with famine; but the stupor and the silence are horrible, and you wish that the unspoken horror of these sapping months could be given some sort of voice" (47). Authors like Bibhutibhushan Bandopahdyay, Tarashankar, Manik Bandopadhyay, Ella Sen, voiced these voiceless subalterns through their narratives by presenting them as agents narrating their tales of suffering, resilience and resistance. Characters like Ananga *Bou*, Durga Bhattacharya, Gangacharan, Kapali *bou*, did not submit meekly- even in trying times, they helped each other, both physically and morally. *Ashani Sanket* is full of references where Ananga Bou, Kapali Bou, Moti and other women of the novel part with their share of food, to feed others. Human compassion such as that demonstrated in these canonical texts transform them into living testimonies of those times.

Nābanna (1944), a play by Bijon Bhattacharya, is a significant work in Bengali literature that captures the devastating Bengal famine of 1943. Set against the backdrop of colonial rule,

the play portrays the dire conditions of rural Bengal, focusing on the suffering of peasants, the failures of state mechanisms, and the broader socio-political landscape. . *Nābanna* serves as a poignant critique of colonial governance and its dehumanizing effects on Indian subjects.

In *Nābanna*, the colonial government's apathy and exploitative policies contribute to the famine, demonstrating a form of bio-political control where the lives of the rural population are deemed expendable. The play's depiction of starvation, displacement, and disease shows how colonial power structures fail to protect the lives of the people they govern, instead allowing them to perish. Though a part of the States' redeemable, alleviating activity, the refugee camp and the hospital contribute to their miseries of life. This neglect reflects a bio-political system that prioritizes economic and political interests over the welfare of the colonized subjects.

The play opens with the Ghatak family, representing the rural peasantry, whose livelihood is tied to agriculture. With the failure of crops and the wartime requisitioning of rice by colonial authorities, the family finds itself on the brink of starvation. The state's failure to distribute food or provide adequate relief during the famine illustrates how the colonial government, acting as a bio-political agent, decides whose lives are worth preserving and whose are not. The bureaucracy and profiteering middlemen, who hoard food for personal gain, further exacerbate the suffering of the population.

As the famine worsens, the Ghatak family is forced to leave their village in search of food and work, a migration that mirrors the mass displacement caused by the famine. The movement of populations, another aspect of bio-political regulation, is shaped by the state's failure to address the basic needs of its citizens. This displacement is not merely a physical relocation but it strips away

identity and dignity, reducing individuals to mere survival. Ghatak family's migration to Calcutta symbolizes the breakdown of traditional social structures under colonial rule, where individuals are rendered powerless and disconnected from their land, reinforcing the bio-political domination of the colonial state.

Through its portrayal of the famine, *Nābanna* critiques how the colonial regime's policies manage and discipline the population, creating conditions of life and death that are systematically unequal. The famine, an outcome of colonial economic policies and global war demands, becomes a site where the bio-political control over life is exercised through neglect, exploitation and indifference. By showing how the peasants are left to fend for themselves in a collapsing society, the play exposes the inherent violence of a bio-political system that treats its subjects as disposable.

Nābanna. thus serves as a powerful illustration of bio-politics in action, highlighting the devastating impact of colonial policies on the lives of the Bengali peasantry. Through the lens of bio-political theory, the play delineates how life under colonial rule is systematically regulated, exploited, and neglected, with devastating consequences for those who fall outside the scope of state protection.

Unlike the modern European narratives of the 1940s and 1950s, these Indian vernacular narratives conclude with a symbolic protest, reconciliation and rejuvenation. Thus, even after being the markers of such horrific violence of capitalist enterprise, they emerge as a beacon of hope, illuminating the darkest of the times. They rise above the narrow boundaries of caste, creed, and religion. The same space which rendered them homeless, robbed them of their identity, dignity, modesty, was transformed into a space of harmony, rejuvenation and compassion. In *Ashani Sanket*, when no comes forward for cremation of the dead body of

a lower caste woman, Moti, two higher caste men, Gangacharan along with Durga Bhattacharya, complete the process of cremation. Anaga *Bou* stops Kapali *bou* from migrating to the city with the pimp Jadu and offers to share her home and food. In *Nabanna,* the Muslims and Hindus come together to harvest their crops; they build a granary for the community. They come together and celebrate like there is no tomorrow. Dayal and Pradhan's words are prophetic:

> Dayal: There may be fear, Pradhan, but we have faced the famine. We did not perish. We are alive. Here, we are, all of us – Kunja, Niranjan, Barkat, Sakhicharan. Do you remember all of them? The famine could not kill us.
>
> Pradhan: No we did not die. We did not die. Good, good. But Dayal, what if the famine returns …right there a big trouble is looming over us. A big, dark trouble. A huge…
>
> Dayal: … No never again. If it wants to harm them, first it will have to face me, kill me. It will have to overthrow our solidarity. Only then it may succeed. There will be great resistance the next time. Great resistance. A great resistance. (157)

The peasants, an extended part of the pastoral world, the green world, are now united against the colonial machinery of profiteering and loot.

Anandamath, Ashani Sanket, Nabanna and other fictionalized depictions of the famine not only delineate the human ordeal of famine, they are also lamentations of ecological degradation of the Indian subcontinent, lamentations of those marginal people, who being an integral part of that space, died an untimely death. These tales serve both as sites of remembrance of a socio-historical event that characterize colonial rule and tools of political resistance that register ecological violence by the colonial

regime. Finally, these works also celebrate the spirit of resistance, resilience, and revolt of the masses, specificallywomen who demonstrate courage and resilience under extreme conditions.

Notes

[i] Refer *Slow Violence & the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011)

[ii] The Sutlej and Yamuna valley was greatly affected between 1865 and 1890, after the inception of the forest department. Reportedly around 6500000 deodar slippers were supplied from this region alone. (122)

[iii] In the early years of building railway network, countless trees were felled for railway sleepers, and fuel. Inconsiderate cutting of trees from the jungles of India, cycles of drought and flood was witnessed, and thus affected food production. The maddening space of railway expansion from 1349 kms in 1860 to 51658 kms in 1910 caused unprecedented destruction. Demand of only sal, teak and deodar trees magnified this crisis and destruction. (Webber xii-xiii)

[iv] The rivers were the main mode of communication for most of the development work related to railway and road construction. Most of the tree logs felled in the Himalayan terrain, was transported via river streams. Many of these logs even remained unclaimed.

[v] However, a survey by Nani Gopal Chaudhuri in his paper titled, "Some of The Results of The Great Bengal and Bihar Famine of 1770" (1949) concluded that this estimation was not far from truth.

[vi] Pablo Mukherjee cites the Indian Famine Commission of 1898, headed by J.E. O'Connor, who contended that official intervention by the Government in the grain market during the time of famine was a 'colossal error'

[vii] Refer to Mukherjee (34) and David Nally (41).

[viii] Indians were deemed to be pathological liars who exaggerated their sufferings to exploit the kindness of the benign empire (37)

[ix] The official study of the 1943-44 famine, compiled and published by Famine Inquiry Commission of 1945, cited poor monsoon, drought and cyclone as the determining factor of the famine.

[x] Refer to the Famine Enquiry Commission (1945). It has argued that natural disasters like Cyclone, poor monsoon, drought and insufficient production of food crops as behind the Famine of 1943

[xi] Boat denial policy refers to the prohibition implemented by the British empire regarding removal of boats with a capacity of 10 passengers or more from the rivers of Bengal strictly due to military reasons. The boats were removed to stall the progress of the Japanese army through water bodies.

[xii] Around 66000 boats were burnt down, thus affecting the livelihood of innumerable fishermen.

[xiii] It must also be noted here that people involved in military, defence related civil works, and defence related industries were covered by subsidized foods, and hence had access to abundant food in stark contrast to the general masses who roaming about in the streets of Calcutta with a famished body. More than one million military workers were housed in Calcutta during those famine years.

[xiv] Sen further explains the presence of the 'Famine Code', legislated in 1883, obligated the government to organise programmes and relief operations, and hence explains the delay in acknowledgement.

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Deconstructing Gender and Masculinity: Feminine Resilience in Reshma Qureshi's *Being Reshma*

Suresh Kumar

Gender and masculinity constitute central concerns in women's writing, as they not only perpetuate systemic violence and biases against women but also relegate them to a liminal and marginalized position within socio-cultural structures. In feminist studies, gender is understood not as a biological given but as a socially and culturally constructed identity that shapes individual experiences and societal roles. It refers to the norms, expectations, and power relations associated with being male or female in a given context. M H Abrams remarks: "While sex (a person's identification as a male or female) is determined by anatomy, gender (masculinity or femininity in personality traits and behavior) can be largely independent of anatomy, and is a social construction that is diverse, variable, and dependent on historical circumstances" (113). Simon de Beauvoir famously highlighted the socio-cultural foundations of gender, with her statement : "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (*The Second Sex* 267). Feminists argue that gender is a central axis of power that structures inequality and strengthens patriarchal control and authority. This constructed system systematically privileges masculinity while devaluing femininity, thereby placing women at a disadvantage across social, economic, and political spheres. The effects of gender on women are profound — it limits their access to education, employment, healthcare, and leadership opportunities, while also subjecting them to violence, objectification, and emotional labour. Feminist framework and theories, evolving from women's writings and activism, strive to deconstruct these gendered power dynamics and advocate justice and equality by challenging the norms and structures that sustain women's subordination in both private and public spheres.

The concept of masculinity denotes the social positioning of men within a gender hierarchy. It encompasses specific behaviours, discourses and practices, situated in cultural and institutional contexts, typically aligned with male identities and are culturally constructed as distinct from the feminine. R W Connell conceptualizes masculinity as a 'social meaning of manhood,' which is constructed and defined culturally, historically, and politically, rather than being biologically driven (67-68). Masculinity, particularly in its hegemonic form, has far reaching implications particularly its impact on women, both socially and psychologically. Rooted exclusively in patriarchal structure, hegemonic masculinity privileges traits such as dominance, control, emotional restraint and physical strength, which are often positioned in direct opposition to perceived feminine qualities. This dichotomous framework not only marginalizes alternative expressions of gender but also perpetuates gender hierarchies that disempower women. The internalization of masculine norms within institutions such as the family, workplace and media reinforces women's subordinate roles, often limiting their agency, autonomy, and access to resources. Women frequently bear the brunt of toxic masculinity, which can manifest in the form of gender-based violence, harassment and emotional suppression within relationships. The societal expectation for men to assert control can materialize as coercive or abusive behaviours, thereby compromising women's mental health and bodily integrity. The cultural narratives that valorize male authority often mute women's voices and experiences, contributing to systemic inequality. Women's literary narratives consistently highlight physical violence as the most prevalent manifestation of patriarchal aggression rooted in dominant masculine ideologies. Frequently, such violence – through acts of beating, sexual assault, or systemic suppression – is employed by men as a means to reinforce their perceived dominance and hierarchal power over women. In some cases, this assertion of control takes the form of an acid attack – an

especially brutal tactic used to punish women for perceived defiance, reject their autonomy, or retaliate against their refusal to conform to male expectations. These actions are not isolated or random but are often legitimized by socio-cultural structures that normalize male authority.

Feminist scholarship reveals how such violence functions both as a personal violation and as a political tool, wielded to silence, discipline, and subordinate women. The recurrence of these themes across diverse texts underscores the urgent need to interrogate how masculinity— when constructed through dominance and entitlement— perpetuates cycles of gender-based violence. In this context, Reshma Qureshi's widely acclaimed memoir, *Being Reshma*, serves as a crucial text for illuminating the gendered aspects and underlying dynamics of acid violence. This paper seeks to critically examine how Reshma's life story deconstructs the gendered foundations of masculinity and resists patriarchal norms that define women's value through beauty and physical appearance. It explores how Reshma not only survives an acid attack but also transforms her trauma into a powerful feminist stance against hegemonic masculinity and institutionalized gender roles. The paper highlights how she embodies a resilient femininity that challenges the subservient roles assigned to women and the patriarchal myth that physical disfigurement renders women worthless in a male-dominated society, where beauty is often seen as a woman's only route to respectability and recognition within gendered power structures. It further surveys how Reshma's narrative destabilizes essentialist constructions of gender and reclaims the female body as a site of resistance rather than shame and passive suffering. It situates *Being Reshma* within a broader feminist discourse that problematizes normative aesthetics and critically engages with issues of bodily integrity and the politics of visibility in a stratified social order. Reshma's memoir aligns with numerous socio-psychological studies that contend that an acid

attack is a form of premediated physical assault wherein an individual intentionally inflicts harms by administrating a caustic chemical— most often a concentrated acid or alkaline agent – on to another person's body, with the intent to disfigure, mutilate, torture or even kill. As stated earlier, all such assaults, primarily involving the victim's face, are markedly gendered, with women being the predominant targets. Various factors contribute to the perpetration of this form of violence, but the motivation mostly stems from personal vendettas, rejection, jealousies, or attempt to assert control. Such acts constitute a serious infringement of personal dignity and human rights, leaving profound medical, emotional, and social repercussions for the survivors. Francis Kuriakose, Mallick, Neha Iyer, and Deepa Kylasam state, "The most common motive that drove criminals to use acid as a weapon against women was to instill in her a sense of obedience, restoring the honour of the family, revenge for rejecting marriage proposals or any other long-standing disputes between families or groups" (71). Prasanna Udipikar also holds similar view and says that the acid attacks are deeply gendered acts of violence, predominantly perpetrated by men against women, and are closely linked to patriarchal norms and constructions of masculinity (104). Additionally, the perpetrators seek to deprive women of their dignity and render them worthless by disfiguring their faces through acid attacks. Historically, societies across civilizations have often marginalized women who did not conform to prevailing standards of beauty, denying them social visibility and respect. Aisha Siddika and Bipasha Baruah write, "In patriarchal societies, a woman's appearance is often assumed to be her only asset or resource; this may explain why perpetrators tend to target and disfigure the faces of female victims" (158). Similar to most Indian women's autobiographies, Reshma's life narrative opens with a graphic description of her family background as a Muslim girl in Hindu majority India. She recounts that she was born in a lower-middle class Muslim family in Bombay, where her father was a taxi driver

and her brothers undertook menial labor to sustain the household. Despite enduring severe economic deprivation and lack of material comforts, Reshma's early years were marked by emotional stability and a nurturing familial environment. She pursued her education alongside her sisters in a government school in Bombay. However, the family's circumstances deteriorated when her mother was diagnosed with abdominal cancer, precipitating both emotional turmoil and financial hardship. Unable to cope with growing challenges in Bombay, Reshma, along with her mother and sisters, was relocated to her ancestral home in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. Though her life initially seemed to regain some semblance of normalcy there, it was soon devastated when she became the target of a brutal acid attack orchestrated by her brother-in-law, Jamaluddin. The attack was prompted by the fact that her sister — Jamaluddin's wife, Gulshan — had fled his house and sought refuge in her parental home to escape relentless domestic abuse. Jamaluddin perceived his wife's departure, along with their children, as a profound affront to his masculinity. In a vindictive attempt to reassert his dominance and punish his wife, he planned to throw acid on her. But when she absconded, he hurled acid on Reshma which left her blind and scarred. This heinous act not only inflicted severe physical and psychological trauma upon Reshma, but also left her family grappling with deep financial and social repercussions.

Despite the indelible scars — both corporeal and emotional – left by this atrocity, Reshma demonstrated remarkable resilience, not only enduring the ordeals but also actively resisting the patriarchal structures that perpetuate violence against women. In collaboration with the NGO, Make Love Not Scars, Reshma emerged as a pivotal figure in the movement to end acid sale and liberate women from the entrenched constraints of patriarchal oppression. It is Reshma's distinctly feminine resilience and indomitable capacity for resistance that render her life narrative a

compelling text punctuated by episodes of extraordinary courage and unparalleled endurance. Besides, the articulation of global concerns within the text enhances its broader significance and relevance. John Swinney rightly says, "Her story is extremely relevant in today's world where acid attacks are becoming a global problem. With numbers rising across the world, acid attacks are a problem that must be tackled swiftly and fast. Reshma's memoirs highlight the brutal effects of surviving an acid attack and compels one to face the fact that acid attacks are not just a statistic— but a deeply personal struggle faced by thousands"(Afterword 226).

Reshma strictly adheres to received conventions of autobiographical writing by maintaining a coherent chronological framework and referencing specific dates, thereby augmenting the narrative's verisimilitude and credibility. Nevertheless, the text often assumes a fragmented quality, as Reshma omits crucial details from several significant incidents. For example, she chooses not to reveal the outcomes of the legal proceeding involving Jamaluddin, Gulshan, and herself. Additionally, she refrains from discussing her parents and brothers, as well as their financial and psychological conditions after she overcomes her pain and mental trauma. These narrative lacunae leave the readers with unresolved questions regarding the trajectories of key figures in her life. Admittedly, certain gaps exist within the narrative; however, by chronicling her lived experiences as a survivor of an acid attack, Reshma catalyzes a profound discourse on the politics of gender. She illuminates how such politics consigns women to the peripheries of society and exposes the ways in which toxic masculinity perpetuates their subjugation. Her personal testimony underscores the disturbing reality that men often treat women as their property and subject them to brutality. Reshma becomes the victim of a heinous acid attack, engineered by Jamaluddin's perniciously masculinist ideology. Jamaluddin intends to exact retribution upon her by dousing her with acid, not merely as an act

of vengeance against his wife and her family, but also as a means to reassert his wounded masculinity through their public humiliation. He deliberately selects Reshma as his target, recognizing her as the youngest unmarried daughter – the very embodiment of her family's honour. Reshma says, "By charring me alive, I think Jamaluddin believed he had insulted my entire family, especially his wife. By attacking me, I think Jamaluddin believed he had somehow tainted my social standing. That no matter where I went, people would shun me and my family, labelling me immoral, or why else would I have brought upon myself such an attack?" (143).

The acid attack on Reshma is embedded within the patriarchal logic and masculinist anxieties that pervades South Asian societies. While the immediate catalyst was familial discord – her brother-in-law's desire to punish his estranged wife by targeting Reshma – the method and symbolism of the attack are profoundly gendered. Another reason underlying the acid attack on Reshma is the deliberate intention to render her unsuitable for matrimonial prospects. This act underscores the calculated nature of such violence, as it is rooted in the patriarchal construction of female beauty as a vital social asset. Reshma herself says, "Jamaluddin probably knew how concerned I was with beauty and realized it would be the ultimate act of revenge to take mine away" (131). Reshma critically examines the origins of the violence perpetuated against her, emphasizing its inherently gendered and patriarchal dimensions. She incisively exposes the pernicious interplay between gender and masculinity, revealing how patriarchal constructs rigidly dictate and confine women's identities. Her narrative elucidates that masculinity, as valorized in her milieu, is synonymous with dominance, control and perpetuation of violence. Reshma's memoir dissects the insidious normalization of gendered violence, where women's worth is contingent on their conformity to prescribed roles – beauty,

marriageability, and subservience – while men's authority is rarely questioned. The vicious attack on Reshma is emblematic of a broader societal mechanism that polices female agency and enforces compliance through both overt aggression and covert psychological subjugation. Yet, through her resilience and reclamation of self, Reshma subverts these hegemonic paradigms, transforming her suffering into a powerful indictment of the structures that sustain gender inequality and toxic masculinity. Reshma endures intense physical pain and profound psychological trauma due to the acid attack, even contemplating suicide in an effort to escape her anguish, but she refuses to allow her suffering to consign her to silence or melancholy. She asserts her agency and voice in the face of adversity. She not only manages to transcend personal suffering but also musters strength to contest patriarchal structures and advocates for the rights of acid attack survivors at both national and international forums. In association with Make Love Not Scars, Reshma spearheads a comprehensive drive to prohibit the sale of acid. Additionally, she participates in short films and documentaries, articulating her resistance to the dreadful crime of acid violence against women, thereby emerging as a prominent face in # endacidsale movement. Eventually, the concerted efforts of Reshma, alongside numerous activists and Make Love Not Scars, culminated in the enforcement of prohibition on the open sale of acid in several Indian states in May 2016. Reshma expresses profound fulfilment in contributing to initiatives aimed at eradicating atrocities perpetuated against countless Indian women. She says, "For the first time, I felt proud to be a survivor. I had made several suicide attempts and suffered unimaginable pain, but I had finally overcome my trauma and become a part of something much larger than myself. The outcome of this campaign would result in saving and empowering thousands of women who fall prey to the abuse of over-the-counter sale of acid" (188).

Reshma exemplifies an extraordinary manifestation of feminine resilience as she surmounts adversities to become an internationally acclaimed anti-acid attack activist. Transcending the limitations imposed by physical impairment, she participated in a New York Fashion Show, disseminating the message that every corporeal scar is transient and the indomitable human spirit endures. The text's meticulous documentation of fortitude and resistance renders it an incomparable and profoundly powerful testament. Shashi Tharoor aptly says, "*Being Reshma* is a powerful story of courage, perseverance and triumph. This crisp yet emotionally grounded narrative not only enables the reader to connect with acid-attack victim Reshma but also brings to life the reality of violence and humiliation that many women in India continue to face" (qtd. in Roopa Rani G.S and K Charles Godwin 40). It is unwavering determination and courage that empower her to speak beyond herself and express indignation against all forms of injustice. Her voice is distinguished by an incisive critique of entrenched patriarchal norms and pervasive societal attitude towards women.

Drawing upon her own experiences, Reshma poignantly recounts the conspicuous lack of immediate support from those around her following Jamaluddin's attacks, thereby illuminating the broader societal apathy towards survivors. She writes, "What really shocked me was not that my attackers had got away, but the apathy of the onlookers. After the show was over, they turned their backs on me, the way I imagine they ignore injured stray animals every day" (78). Reshma further elaborates on how survivors of acid attacks are ignored and ostracized by the larger society and are often held responsible for their own suffering. She expresses distress at the pervasive culture of victim-blaming in Indian society. This is exemplified through an incident in which her brother approaches a relative for financial assistance, only to be refused on the grounds that Reshma is immoral and has provoked

the attack on herself: "He refused to help us and unleashed his wrath on my relative, his wife. He believed that I must have done something wrong to instigate a 'good man like Jamaluddin' to attack me. 'Girls nowadays are really *chalu*. I don't know why Gulshan isn't supporting her husband. The whole family must have twisted minds. He obviously knew something about her that we don't'" (142). It is evidently through this politics of victim blaming that patriarchal forces perpetuate their dominance on women. Ega Peter and Sijo C Varghese remark: "Victim-blaming is a form of social control to maintain the power relations over subordinated groups" (208). Other relatives also exhibit a similar attitude. They cease interaction with her family after the acid attack, likely because they wish to disassociate themselves from a family whose daughter has fallen and been assaulted with acid. Reshma asserts that Indian society perpetuates deep-seated prejudices and discriminatory attitude towards survivors of acid violence. These individuals are stared at and are rendered alienated and perceived as anomalous. Furthermore, they are systematically marginalized and ostracized from social networks, thereby exacerbating their mental anguish. Reshma says, "Many of us never leave our homes because of the hostile stares, gestures, comments directed at us, and because of how differently we are treated from everyone else. Only a handful of us ever find jobs and even if someone of us do, it is in government-sanctioned projects that require us to be hired under quotas" (218). In addition to widespread social indifference and biases, Reshma unequivocally critiques Indian medical system, police, media, and judiciary for their distant attitude towards the victims of acid-attack. Reshma reveals how police ignores odious crimes against women and holds them responsible for their misery. She astutely observes that the majority of cases involving violence against women in India remain unreported or overlooked largely due to entrenched biases within the Indian police system. Reflecting on her own experiences, she recounts how police exhibits marked hesitation and procedural delays when she seeks

to report the acid violence inflicted upon her. It is noteworthy that, rather than offering instant assistance to the victim, the police officials subject her to character assassination and moral scrutiny, thereby compounding her ordeal. Reshma states, "One of them asked why I had been attacked. Another wondered out loud if I was the one to blame. When Gulshan tried to explain that I was just seventeen, he responded with: 'So what? Seventeen-year-old girls are very clever nowadays. Who knows what she must have done to bring this on herself?' Yet another officer entered and began asking us the same questions" (83). In addition, Reshma's life story offers a powerful critique of both the media and the judiciary, as seen through her experience as an acid-attack survivor. She highlights how the judicial system, instead of offering timely support, often creates additional obstacles for victims through slow process and insensitive questioning, which feel as punishing and shaming as the crime itself.

Reshma's account reveals how officials sometimes prioritize paperwork and suspicion over urgent medical care, reflecting deeper systemic flaws and lack of empathy for survivors. Moreover, the judiciary's protracted adjudication process frequently results in delayed justice for survivors, as it tends to privilege documentary evidence and third-party witness accounts over the lived experiences and testimonies of victims. This evidentiary hierarchy not only undermines the credibility and agency of survivors like Reshma but also perpetuates a culture of skepticism and re-traumatization, ultimately impeding the pursuit of substantive justice in case of gender-based violence. It was precisely the result of judicial delay that Jamaluddin, despite having committed a serious crime, remained at large and was able to attempt to harm Reshma even within the supposed safety of the hospital. This failure of timely intervention not only exposes the inadequacies of the judicial system but also places victims at continued risk, underscoring the urgent need for more responsive

and protective legal mechanism. Reshma says, "Our laws are strong and just, but their implementation is nothing short of an embarrassment. Change is occurring, but it takes time and often comes from the least expected direction" (126). Reshma criticizes the media for its tendency to sensationalize such tragedies, focusing on her physical scars rather than her treatment, resilience or activism. This kind of coverage reduces survivors to mere objects of pity or spectacle, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and failing to address the root cause of gender-based violence. She rightly perceives a profound hypocrisy in the actions of the television journalists, who publicly referred to her as an inspiration while simultaneously obscuring her identity by blurring her face or deliberately concealing it. Through her story, Reshma calls for more responsible journalism and a judicial approach that centers the dignity and rights of survivors.

While recounting her experiences as a victim of acid violence, Reshma offers a pointed critique of the Indian medical system, exposing deep-seated prejudices and systemic failures that routinely confronts individuals in her position. She relates how, immediately after the attack, the hospital prioritized bureaucratic procedures – such as demanding a police complaint – over urgent medical care, valuing paper work over human life. She incisively observes that the inadequate physical infrastructures of hospitals—manifested in overcrowded, unsanitary wards and a pervasive lack of privacy and dignity for patients – not only impedes effective medical treatment but also significantly exacerbates the physical trauma experienced by acid attack survivors. She highlights how medical professionals often display insensitivity, treating survivors as mere case studies rather than individuals in pain, further dehumanizing them. She is deeply distressed to observe that government hospitals are severely under-resourced, thereby excluding impoverished population from essential medical care. In contrast, private hospitals – fully equipped with infrastructure

and amenities— exhibit a profound deficit in humanitarian ethos. Frequently, they refuse to admit underprivileged patients who cannot afford exorbitant treatment cost. Reshma says, "Our private hospitals are controlled strictly to the extent that people are petrified of doing their jobs. For example, many private hospitals refuse treatment to those that are supposed to receive free treatment under quotas set by the government" (100). Exposing the dehumanizing practices prevalent in private hospitals and among certain medical practitioners, Reshma details her experiences with Dr. Jain, the surgeon who operated on her in Bombay. She describes how he sought to objectify her and exploit her case for self-promotion, prioritizing his professional reputation over compassionate patient care. Dr. Jain exemplifies a broader trend among unsympathetic medical professionals who are more invested in advancing their own interests than in addressing the need of vulnerable patients. Reshma states, "The more I interacted with Dr. Jain , the more I realized that his sole purpose lay in winning accolades and boosting his public image" (196). Furthermore, he actively impeded her engagement with both national and internal media, as well as her participation in documentary projects. Through her expose of the flaws within the Indian medical system, Reshma endeavors to catalyze governmental and policy-level interventions aimed at rectifying these systemic issues. By laying bare the degrading practices rampant in private hospitals, her narrative serves as a critical commentary on the state of healthcare accessibility and ethical standards. This critique implicitly calls for reforms that would ensure improved patient care, particularly for vulnerable populations such as acid attack survivors, safeguarding them from preventable deaths and undue suffering.

In recounting her experiences of victimization and trauma, Reshma goes beyond mere self-expression. Adopting a radical feminist perspective, she systematically identifies the underlying

mechanisms of women's suffering and critically analyzes their impacts on both the female body and mind. Through her narrative, she provides a nuanced insight into the condition of Muslim patriarchy, elucidating the way in which women are relegated to marginal spaces in both domestic and societal spheres. Power remains concentrated in the hands of men, while women are systematically stripped of voice and agency. Any expression of dissent or defiance against male authority is strongly prohibited or met with grave censure. Sharing her own experiences, Reshma says, "Nargis, Gulshan, and I had never even dared to raise our voices around our elder brothers, let alone to strangle them. Grabbing them in a headlock would have been a self-inflicted death sentence, or so we were led to believe" (2). Reshma records numerous instances to show that patriarchal norms in Muslim societies manifest not only through the imposition of silence on women but also through practices such as veiling, which largely contribute to their marginalization from educational and employment opportunities and restrict their engagement with the broader world. Reshma provides extraordinary insight into the vulnerable position of women caught in the complex web of Indian Muslim society.

The complex issues involved, such as social conflict, the micro politics of power and dominance of sexual differences intersect in the lived experiences of Muslim women depicted in this memoir. Roopa Rani GS and K Charles Godwin write, "The memoir throws light on the status of Indian woman in modern India who is treated like an animal. It voices the plight of marginalized victims of gender violence and inequalities demonstrating vulnerable legal system of society which has made men dare to commit many heinous crimes against woman. There is a powerful urge for the need for woman to encounter the system" (41). Social evils such as dowry system are still prevalent among Muslims and women have to suffer severe tortures on this account.

Reshma's sister Gulshan is the prototype of Muslim women who silently undergo domestic violence and hostilities. Gulshan is tortured by her husband and his parents for dowry. She is subjected not only to severe physical and psychological violence but also to the systematic denial of food and medical care, all of which exemplify the broader pattern of depriving women of their fundamental rights and dignity. Gulshan and her daughter Riza were compelled to subsist on food remnants: "Gulshan and Riza were now allowed only leftovers from the family meals" (Reshma 50). Roopa Rani and Godwin write, "The subordinate status given to women leads to social sanction for men to exhibit physical aggression" (40). In many cases, Muslim women internalize experiences of violence due to fear of harsh religio-cultural sanctions — such as *triple talak* and *halala* – that reinforce social and religious control. Gulshan endures hostilities in silence for the same reason. She is well aware that seeking divorce is devastating, the price to pay is loss of custody of children, financial support, alienation from relatives and friends, and more than all these going against the Prophet's words. Reshma writes, "She never informed us because she feared if Jamaluddin found out she had reached out to us behind his back, he would divorce her" (51). This fear further exposes her to violence and brutalization. Here, Reshma suggests that although triple talaq was officially outlawed in India in 2017, the fear of unilateral desertion remains so deeply ingrained in the consciousness of Muslim women that they are unable to overcome it.

Muslim personal laws play a crucial role in reinforcing fundamental cultural practices such as triple talaq and in empowering men to exercise their patriarchal authority. These laws obstruct legal actions against male perpetrators, as religious doctrines are seen to grant men the authority to treat women as they please. Consequently, numerous Muslim women are murdered, as perpetrators are well aware that they are unlikely to

face any consequences. The attempted murder of Gulshan by her husband and in-laws stems from the absence of effective legal consequences for such acts. Reshma presents a harrowing account of the incident: "She reeked of kerosene. Then it hit me: she was drenched from head to toe in kerosene. They had tried to burn her alive" (47). Jamaluddin is deeply agitated when Gulshan turns to her parents for safety. He experiences intense shame due to his wife and her family having initiated criminal proceedings against him in the court of law, resulting in his estrangement with his son. In retaliation, he plans to throw acid on her – an act that violently reasserts his control and reinforces the traditional notion of masculinity and honor. Uma Chakravarti writes, "Honour is one of the most valued ideals in the subcontinental patriarchies whether Hindu or Muslim. Most communities pay constant attention to gaining and maintain honour. In general, honor or prestige – izzat – is measured by the degree of respect shown by others. No matter how much honour is ascribed to their particular caste, individual families can gain or lose honour through money or power. But since all families do not have money or power other aspects are also crucial. A family can gain or lose honour through proper or improper behaviour – most critically through the behaviour of its women" (151). Through the expression of dominance, Jamaluddin enacts a deeply entrenched patriarchal script and strives to reclaim his honour.

Reshma Qureshi's memoir, *Being Reshma,* is a compelling narrative not only because it chronicles her personal ordeal, but also because it critically situates acid violence within broader socio-cultural frameworks. The text challenges entrenched societal attitude toward acid-attack survivors and interrogates the gendered structures that perpetuate such violence.Indrani Bose writes, "The point of this autobiography is not only to narrate a tale of perseverance and courage, but also to highlight the fact that acid attack survivors in India are often shamed. In a society obsessed

with conventional ideas of beauty, acid attack survivors are looked down upon. They receive hostile stares, rude comments and are blamed for their plight" (Bose). Reshma contends that the acid violence against women must be viewed seriously and addressed with urgency. She advocates for the rigorous enforcement of existing legal frameworks and the formulation of new policies to safeguard women from gender-based violence. Furthermore, she calls for a more compassionate and rights-based response to survivors, demanding greater sincerity and accountability from policymakers, the judiciary and the media in addressing such crimes .She explicitly denounces patriarchal ideologies that equate gender with power disparity and sustain violence against women. She censures religious and cultural systems that uphold patriarchal dominance and marginalize women in every sphere of life. By documenting numerous instances of individual resilience and sustained resistance, Reshma encourages suppressed and silenced women to contest hegemonic power structures and claim their rightful place in society. Through her memoir, Reshma powerfully illustrates that courage, sanguinity, and strong will can surmount even the most formidable adversities. Drawing upon numerous episodes from her personal journey, she foregrounds an affirmative and empowering perspective, asserting that no scar or wound is irreversible, and that every obstacle can be transcended through fortitude and resilience. Her life narrative becomes a repository of lived experience that galvanizes and emboldens marginalized and persecuted communities. In the Epilogue, she asserts, "I hope this book inspires you to make a change in your own community, because my story is not mine alone, it's for the millions of people who are fighting oppression today" (223). The notion of the individual 'self' articulated in Reshma's memoir evolves into a representative collective identity, emblematic of the struggles and aspirations of Indian women at large. Revealing the purpose behind recounting her life story, Reshma says, "I have now made it *my* life's work to speak up for those who can't" (Epilogue). By

articulating an inclusive and impassioned voice, Reshma confronts the entrenched foundations of Indian patriarchy and asserts women's emancipation, rendering her a feminist icon and her life story an essential text for emancipatory discourse.

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"We can never have enough of Nature"- Exploring Nature and the Values of Minimalist Living Through an Eco-Critical Analysis of Thoreau's *Walden*

Shubha Dwivedi

Originally published in 1854 as *Walden or, Life in the Woods,* Thoreau's text became a great stimulus for environmental activists and cultural critics and acquired the cult status of an eco-text that raised awareness of ecological systems and gave an impetus to investigate man's ruthless exploitation of ecology. In light of the fact that humans have become more miserable as a result of their somewhat wanton and even predatory attitude towards nature, the text gives important leads to understanding the interconnections between "nature" and "culture" besides making practical suggestions towards the much desired 'ethical cohabitation'[i] between humans and non-humans. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (7) says Thoreau, in reference to the overbearing effect of civilization on human minds. Through his writings and actions, Thoreau communicated a powerful message about living a simpler life, one that was in harmony with the natural environment and unencumbered by materialistic demands. The present study seeks to fully explore Thoreau's joyful, minimalist way of living at Walden, paying particular attention to his musings on solitude, self-reliance, the enigmatic aspects of nature, social change, Indian culture and asceticism, the impact of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Vedas,* and the role that ecology plays in the life cycle of all living beings.The primary section of the paper examines the current anthropocentric scene and the urgency of addressing environmental concerns.The main body of the paper then discusses Thoreau's life-altering experiences and epiphanies at Walden Pond, and the conclusion deliberates upon the text's relevance in the twenty-first century in terms of inspiring people to adopt a more sustainable and

ecologically responsible way of life, which is also endorsed by key spiritual thinkers and philosophers from different cultures. Evidently, the value of Thoreau's *Walden* in our times is more than merely a code book on "the virtue of simplicity," as suggested by Sherman Paul's essay "Resolution at Walden Pond," because it reflects more acutely on civilizational truths and the dialectics of economy, history, and culture.

Since the earliest times, every civilization had some form of environmental consciousness ingrained in their culture. Primitive communities venerated the manifestations of nature, and the phenomena of nature invoked feelings of awe in the minds of individuals for whom adversities were caused or triggered by nature's fury or in some sense were nature's ways of imposing balance. This dread of nature caused by the ignorance to decode the 'sublime' grandeur or the magnificence of the cosmos resulted in a lack of environmental control, and as a consequence, those people viewed the forces of nature as embodiments of Divine forces that could bring both blessings and curses upon them. It is important to acknowledge, without giving any weight to the popular perception or stereotyping, that the relationship pattern of the deity and the follower was something that affirmed the state of ecological equilibrium. As a result of people's natural fright of the unknown intangible forces of the universe, all aspects of nature were cherished and given the respect they deserved. But since the onset of the industrialization, rapid urbanization, spread of globalization and the dominance of the capitalist world view, the relationship of deity and worshipper subverted to that of master and slave, leading to an unequal dynamics between the two. Ostensibly, man has become the omnipotent master who can use natural resources for his benefit without minding the waste or the apparent loss, and nature has been reduced to a much abused and crushed slave. Over time, a human-centered or "anthropocentric" perspective became the dominant mode of thought, spearheading

the manipulation and destruction of the bio sphere for human gain and comfort. The excessive greed, exploitative psychology backed by self-seeking interests, heavy reliance on machines and technology and denigration of the non human resulted in ecological despair and colossal changes in earth's ecosystem. This situation led to environmental degradation, loss of cultural and biological diversity, and drastic change in climate. Thoreau's ideas in *Walden* persuade us to reconsider our relationship with nature and contribute to a more sustainable future by resorting to practices of restraint and inclusive thinking. In his essay on "Anthropocentrism" in *Oxford Bibliographies*, Jonathan Padwe explains the significance of shifting our focus from human-centeredness to a more holistic view of the environment, which is consistent with Thoreau's message in *Walden*. He writes: "Anthropocentrism refers to a human-centered, or "anthropocentric," point of view. In philosophy, anthropocentrism can refer to the point of view that humans are the only, or primary, holders of moral standing. Anthropocentric value systems thus see nature in terms of its value to humans; while such a view might be seen most clearly in advocacy for the sustainable use of natural resources, even arguments that advocate for the preservation of nature on the grounds that pure nature enhances the human spirit must also be seen as anthropocentric."

Contrary to the utilitarian worldview or the moral-ethical philosophy favouring the benefits or usefulness of everything, the author maintains that those generations who are unable to comprehend the value of serenity, industry, self chosen economy and the pleasures afforded by solitary living are deeply impoverished.Accordingly, he discloses the apparent dichotomy between 'civilizational self' and 'natural' or 'spiritual self' of a person. Evidently, the awareness of the universe and its mechanism and the attainment of inner wholeness or spiritual well-being is not possible by material wealth accumulation. Many of

Thoreau's ideas have affinity with the current turn in cultural thinking and post-colonial and post humanist philosophical thoughts.The text, through techniques of contemplation and deep interrogation comes to terms with our limitations in understanding existence and suggests ways to transform and redefine human sustenance in a complex, ever evolving universe in conformity with ecological, scientific, technological and non human systems. Citing Chinese philosopher Confucius's observation that "To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge"(10) Thoreau makes us aware of our ignorance and exposes the facade of knowledge that we often put on to mask our obvious lack of it. Thoreau's thoughts align with the non humanistic, non anthropocentric view of the world whereby human centrality is questioned and challenged and non hierarchical and more egalitarian relationships among the different phenomena are emphasized. Further, money is seen as deterrent to self-growth as well as spiritual transcendence. Thoreau's opinions are generally well-received since he treats human world separate from nature, without undermining the crucial interconnection between the two. As for him, nature has its own intrinsic value and resources to be cherished beyond serving any utilitarian purpose to humans.This perspective, which is not centred on humans, calls into question dominant Western values and promotes a more profound respect for nature.

As inspired by Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, he believed in the continuity of life and unity of all existence. It's his belief in spiritual ecology or ecospirituality that makes him perceive the symbolic value of the earth and the natural forces, their nurturing quality, the spiritual meanings underlying them and their role in maintaining ecological balance. Leslie E. Sponsel, an eminent Professor of Ecological Anthropology, has also reflected upon the possibility of greater transformation through combining spirituality and environmentalism emphasizing that spirituality

often induces a deeper reverence for nature and the living beings and thus contributes to ecological sustainability in definitive ways.[ii]

While Ecocriticism is widely regarded as an interdisciplinary methodology that examines the interplay between human behaviours, environment and culture, Thoreau's conscious meditations in *Walden* offer a valuable opportunity for introspection regarding our relationship with nature and its impact on our perception of 'self' and our position in the cosmos. The author's observations and insights have the potential to motivate individuals across cultures to reassess their attitudes and conduct with regard to the natural world.

The American society has been chiefly distinguishable by its extreme emphasis on the acquisition of things related to the fulfillment of worldly desires making it an out and out a materialistic society.[iii] John Kofs in his article "Materialism and Consumer Culture" explains that American materialism is a key to comprehend the excitement for the much hyped "the American Dream." From the individual drive to events of success or personal accomplishments to collective vision of richness, wealth and happiness through buying and consuming, American society has relegated everything to the culture of aspiration and personal success through the envisioning of the Great American Dream.According to Elliot Knight and Karen Smith, the cue to understanding a particular nation's cultural system lies in its attitude to materialism. Further, the implications of Materialism can be perceived, in the words of Carneiro as an "idea that technological and economic factors play the primary role in molding a society". (Carneiro 1981:218, qtd. in Elliot Knight and Karen Smith) Thus, Thoreau's environmental thinking can be seen in direct contrast with American society's obsession with temporal and their obvious disregard for anything spiritual.

Retracing the early History of America, one can recall the problematic perception of the initial immigrants towards the 'promised land'.The early settlers in America had perceived land as a commodity, a possession that needed to be transformed for a prosperous future.Lawrence Buell in his influential study records the expansionist's vision of land, while also highlighting the historical context of environmental exploitation in relation to the USA.Explicating the environmental imagination of America, Buell notes, "In U.S. settler culture history, land has always been defined predominantly as commodity.Even more basic to the visionary rhetoric of continental settlement then possession per se, however, is what the scholar of British-American immigrant discourse Stephen Fender calls "the figure of anticipation": the anticipation of a "future culture" destined to spring up from "a present natural setting." The rhetoric of possession, whether it bespoke motives mainly high minded or avaricious, embedded a rudimentary eco globalist calculus: a visionary fusion of cisatlantic landscape (seen as raw material and future habitat) against the background of a distant transcontinental landscape of origin to yield a wishful vision of an ideal landscape of the future of word historical import." (235)The usual attitudes of Americans towards nature were largely driven by self interest and opportunism. However, the New England transcendentalist writers like Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman completely altered the outlook of the American people towards the previously held notions on nature, self, democracy, rationality, global unity and traditional ways of living.

With the credo of "Return to Nature," the Romantic Age or the late 19th century emphasized upon 'mindful living', the sensitivity to acknowledge the unity of all beings, the necessity to view the interconnectedness of all phenomena, and even the interdependence between all aspects of nature, being oblivious to which the entire civilization would disintegrate and come crashing

down. Consequently, sustainable living demanded an awareness of the repercussions of collective action, the cultivation of empathy and thoughtfulness for all living organisms, and a greater awareness of our own role in keeping a balance between human needs and ecological demands. Thoreau made the following observation in regards to his connection with the natural world: "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself"(79). The section "Where I lived, And What I Lived For" concerns both residing in close communion with nature and adopting wholesome habits. For instance, waking up early, aligning oneself with natural rhythms instead of relying on artificial stimulants, and engaging in physical labour as well as intellectual exertion, achievable without mechanical aids, obtaining sufficient and restful sleep and thus to make the most of the morning time and day time in a productive manner. Thoreau gives examples of poets,sages and heroes that being the children of Aurora have given their exemplary output at sunrise: "Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour." (80) He cites the Vedas, "All intelligences awake with the morning." (80) Thoreau, here stresses on life's purpose by drawing attention of the desperate and disillusioned generation of Americans, commonly referred to as the "lost generation," who had become disconnected from the true meaning of life due to their preoccupation with materialism and misguided notions of success. The decision to move to the country was neither an escape nor a sign of resignation; rather, it signified living with full vitality and a heightened sense of responsibility acknowledging the vital connection between life's various forces. Thoreau's voluntary sojourn in the woods offers the advantages of living in a 'retreat' or a hermitage with additional self care benefits realized through meditation and concentration, self employment and entrepreneurial endeavours with the optimal utilization of resources and reduction of expenses and wastage: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the

essential facts of life , and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear" (81) The text contributes significantly to the field of environmental criticism or eco criticism. According to Thoreau, human being or human consciousness is integrally connected with the non human living world or the natural world and the symbiosis between the two is necessary for a tranquil living: "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us even in our soundest sleep" (81).

The text imparts eternal life lessons that remind us of the importance of self-reliance, the value of simplicity, the love of nature, the respect for nature's endowments, and the truth of real progress. Pointing out the futility of our enormous wants and superfluous possessions, which somehow drain us, exhaust us and take us away from our real being, *Walden* exposes the problematical credo of modern life. Thoreau's following observation from the section "Where I lived, And What I lived For" emphasizes the need to de-clutter and control the unnecessary indulgences whenever possible: "Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say let your affairs be as two or three and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail."(82)The desire to trim the external and the superficial is at the centre of his thought process, and immediately connects him with the philosophy of minimalism which focuses at curbing unrestrained consumerism and digressions as a necessary step to self improvement and brings one closer to one's inner self.[iv] Thoreau, when discussing frugality and a life without pomp and pretense, fervently advocates living a life of absolute simplicity

and rejects all ostentation, frivolity, and extravagance. The extent of his desires is limited to food, shelter, clothing, and fuel rendering other things seem superfluous or redundant having no value to his inner growth:

> As I preferred some things to others, and especially valued my freedom, as I could fare hard and yet succeed well, I did not wish to spend my time in earning rich carpets or other fine furniture or delicate cookery, or a house in the Grecian or the Gothic style just yet. ("Economy" 63)

He gradually comes to understand that living isn't a burden but a recreation,as he postulates: "In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime,if we will live simply and wisely…(63). For Thoreau, the idea of self growth was crucially interlinked with the efforts at minimizing, self reliance, moral-ethical responsibility to Nature and a responsiveness to cosmic forces.With conscious and determined efforts he aims to elevate the quality of life by including tasks that assure freedom, joy and hassle free living. In the section titled "Sounds" Thoreau describes housework as "a pleasant pastime" something that is now assumed to be a stressful chore for a lot of people: "It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three legged table from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the Pines and hickories. They seemed glad to get out themselves and as if unwilling to be brought in. I was sometimes tempted to stretch an awning over them and take my seat there. It was worth the while to see the sunshine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects lookout of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life everlasting grows under the table and BlackBerry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be

transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs and bedsteads,- because they once stood in their midst."(103) This passage immediately does away with the binary distinction between living and non-living, human and non human, necessity and excess making a strong appeal in favour of uncomplicated and organic way of living.

Thoreau, a nonconformist, and experimentalist of the highest order, chronicles his personal experiences of living an independent life literally "far from the madding crowd" in woods through his journal entries. Resisting the 'fever and the fret' of modern living, he values serenity and grace and an unhurried slow paced life as is evident from the following lines: "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches to-day to save nine tomorrow. As for work we haven't any of any consequence" (83). Clearly, he makes us see the vanity of all are social endeavours, communication and socializing that leaves us no time to 'keep our heads still'. Thoreau effectively condensed and summarized the essence of his two-year stay within a one-year time frame, addressing a whole lot of issues and concerns. The literary piece radiates in a style of prose that is poetic in nature, as it chronicles the author's deeply felt experiences as an ascetic, portraying his ability to subsist with limited resources and attain self-reliance at all cost. The book presents a set of regulations and principles aimed at achieving a frugal and tranquil way of life, all the while relishing in the genuine joys that arise from residing in close proximity of the natural world. Due to his meticulously planned retreat, he is able to allocate his time between physical pursuits and intellectual endeavors, such as reading, writing, and contemplation. He, systematically divided his time between hoeing, reading, writing, walking about the countryside. Additionally, he has ample opportunities for spiritual enrichment by means of experiencing

and observing a sense of unity with the natural world. The act of building a cabin is described with utmost seriousness at the outset of the text and can be interpreted as a metaphor for the formation of one's character or inner self, or the process of getting integrated with one's soul. Thoreau drew significant inspiration from his contemporaries Emerson and Whitman in his approach to contemplation and profound reflection about man and his position in the universe. These two individuals, in turn, were influenced by the principles of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. Thoreau's worldview may appear unconventional at times, but it is still relevant in contemporary society, especially as the world faces challenges related to excessive consumption, poverty, climate change, avarice, social inequality, rampant capitalism, and egocentrism. As a transcendentalist, Thoreau embraced the broad philosophical movement that placed great importance on the presence of God in nature, and emphasized upon the value of personal intuition, and strong feelings over reason. Thoreau's solitary stay offers the possibility of a spiritual birth and a cultural regeneration, contrary to the increasing materialism in American and other societies.Preferring the necessities over luxuries he discusses basic unostentatious living and higher thinking: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. The ancient philosophers; Chinese, Hindoo, Persian and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward" (13).

Clearly preferring spiritual wealth and cultivation of inner resources, Thoreau detests and denounces the false parameters of civilization which make our lives wretched and miserable. Thoreau develops abhorrence for the cultivated manners and the pretensions of society and speaks of the kind of life that can satisfy inner

yearnings in a spiritual sense. He advocates for a simple and self-sufficient lifestyle, where individuals can connect with nature and find fulfillment in solitude and contemplation. Thoreau believes that such a life can lead to a deeper understanding of oneself and the world around us. He further emphasizes the importance of honesty and authenticity over materialistic possessions or social status: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, gives me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices. I thought that there was no need of ice to freeze them. They talked to me of the age of the wine and the fame of the vintage; but I thought of an older, a newer, and purer wine, of a more glorious vintage, which they had not got, and could not buy" (294). He further suggests that true fulfillment comes from living a genuine and truthful life rather than chasing superficial desires. Descriptions abound where he accords great value to the common man and stresses on their duty towards society and the larger humanity.

An impending global climate crisis as a result of man's gluttony and overindulgence is predicted by the author, who, in turn, advocates embracing a holistic approach to environmentally sustainable living. According to him, the soil is equally owned by a farmer and various wildlife species such as rabbits, squirrels, field mice, and birds.He finds even weeds to be important to the natural ecosystem, the seeds of which fill the granary of the birds. Clearly, he doesn't perceive humans as the 'lord' or the 'glory' of the universe because of their numerous failings and weaknesses and emphasizes upon the 'interconnected' paradigm of creation. His views often align with the Hindu spiritual tradition of 'Advaita' and Jainism's belief in 'Anekaantavad' with their insistence on non dualism of existence and consideration of multiplicity of viewpoints. Thoreau's distrust of any apparent distinction or

conflict between male/female, rich/poor, emotion/intellect, superior/inferior, human/non human, self/other, organic/non organic goes on to prove his sensitivity and inclusiveness and syncretism.With a pronounced emphasis on 'interconnection of evolution' Thoreau stands together with the post modernist philosophers who do away with boundaries of differentiation and othering. As we revisit this classic text we are surprised by the similarity of thought with the modern thinkers as the following comment by De Chardin echoes similar sentiments: Our habit is to divide up our human world into compartments of different sorts of 'realities': natural and artificial, physical and moral, organic and juridical, for instance. / In a space-time, legitimately and perforce extended to include the movements of the mind within us, the frontiers between these pairs of opposites tend to vanish (qtd by F. Ferrando in *Critical Posthumanism And Planetary Futures*,252)

Thus, he emphasizes the reciprocity of the relationships that exist between various aspects of nature and to understand which magnanimity of heart and a corresponding trust is essential. "By avarice and selfishness, and a grovelling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property,or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives.He knows Nature but as a robber"(150). Taking a cue from this age-old but pivotal text with timeless significance, we should prepare ourselves to confront the catastrophic challenges of global warming, loss of biodiversity, and the extinction of species in the coming years. To effectively address these challenges, the text advocates embracing the following core values: self-reliance, simplicity, reverence for nature's endowments, and its connection to spiritual development. The text further recommends: "Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth." Thus, imparting the greatest lesson in mindfulness, the author reminds us

to adapt ourselves to the changing rhythms of the universe and embrace life with utmost humility making a progression from our birth in the spring season to our maturing and decay in winter.Being fully present in every moment and accepting change without complaints is a quality known as 'sthitpragyata' preached by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita.* Further, delving deep into the philosophy of 'Karma Yoga' like a true 'karma yogi'he advises us to free ourselves from the Karmic bondage by keeping our wants limited.

Preferring a DIY (do-it-yourself) approach and hard labour in practical life, he also realizes the necessity of having a higher ethereal life. During his tenure in the forest, the author engaged in manual activities such as the cutting and shaping of timber into studs and rafters. Throughout these endeavours, he was accompanied by various species of birds and animals, including the early thrush, mockingbird, wild goose, nighthawk, evening robin, woodchuck, squirrel, pigeons, tortoise, frogs, and ants, who served as his companions. He sincerely wishes that youngsters, more than anything, need to practice and learn "the art of life." This sentiment is further elaborated as "In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely"(63). The poet sees great possibilities in the forests and meadows that surround villages and towns. The author holds the belief that natural environment possesses the power to stimulate individuals' creativity and facilitate their connection with the environment, thereby offering a sense of tranquility and peace, a respite from the extremities of urbanization and modernization. Additionally, he sees them as a source of inspiration for his creative pursuits, as they offer endless beauty and wonder. Voicing his preference for autonomy and self-reliance, he attempts to persuade others of his cherished domestic management principles that can simplify life and alleviate worries. "As I preferred some

things to others, and especially valued my freedom, as I could fare hard and yet succeed well,I did not wish to spend my time in earning rich carpets or other fine furniture, or delicate cookery, or a house in the Grecian or the Gothic style just yet."(63)His existence in the woods is unaffected by unwanted disturbances or disruptions. Even so, he receives occasional visitors, including peasants, villagers, random passers-by, railway employees, woodcutters, etc.His visits to Concord to meet with acquaintances and conduct small business go awry when he is arrested for refusing to pay a poll tax that supports slavery, which infuriates him about the government of his time, which supports the buying and selling of men, women, and children. He vents his ire in the following words: "I had gone down to the woods for other purposes. But, wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can constrain him to belong to their desperate odd fellow society" (155). Residing in a forested area utilizing rudimentary resources, Thoreau's cabin provided a hospitable refuge to any weary wanderer. He never encountered any visitors who caused him any trouble, and he was never assaulted or robbed, demonstrating that secure doors, locks, and other measures merely served to fuel suspicion and antisocial behaviour. The author posits that the absence of theft and robbery would be a plausible outcome if all individuals were to adopt a lifestyle as modest as their own. Such occurrences are limited to communities where certain individuals possess an excess of resources while others experience a deficiency:"I am convinced, that if all men were to live as simply as I then did, thieving and robbery would be unknown. These take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough (156). His views unmistakably align with socialist ideology here.

He recommends that by refraining from materialistic endeavors, we can learn all the secrets of the vast and

unfathomable land, sky and water. Thoreau believes that nature has the power to inspire and awaken our senses, leading us to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. He encourages us to embrace the beauty and complexity of nature and to seek out its secrets with curiosity and wonder. Further, he sees nature as a source of endless fascination and wonders about something that we should cherish and protect for future generations. "We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigour, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander" (283). These experiences remind us of the grandeur and sublimity of nature and help us put our own lives into perspective. The various descriptions throughout the text offer the prospects of a sense of freedom and life full of possibility for those living in close communion with nature. This, in turn, inspires us to rise above our personal constraints and venture into uncharted territories.Thoreau posits that there exists no inherent ontological divide between humanity and the natural world. The interdependence between the two entities demonstrates a reciprocal complementarity, which can be viewed as a manifestation of a new ecocritical outlook that highlights the interconnectedness of human-arboreal relationships and a more profound understanding of biodiversity, ecology, and the human experience. The complete meaning of man can be understood in relation to the natural world and environment. "We are wont to forget that the sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction. They all reflect and absorb his rays alike, and the former make but a small part of the glorious picture which he beholds in his daily course (150).

As a true Vedantist, Thoreau delights in all seasonal transitions. He believes that the shifting of the seasons is nature's process of reconstructing various aspects of existence. It allows for new growth and rejuvenation and maintains ecologica l balance by allowing various species to blossom at different times of the year. He states, "The change from storm and winter to serene and mild weather, from dark and sluggish hours to bright and elastic ones, is a memorable crisis which all things proclaim. It is seemingly instantaneous at last" (278).

While deforestation has caused disastrous changes in several regions of the world, Thoreau's *Walden* instills a new kind of environmental consciousness in its readers by illuminating the significance of nature in its entirety. He describes the organic splendour of the woods as spring approaches. "The pitch pines and shrub oaks about my house, which had so long drooped, suddenly resumed their several characters, looked brighter, greener, and more erect and alive, as if effectually cleansed and restored by the rain (278). While the coming of the spring is hailed as a momentous occasion as "the creation of cosmos out of chaos and the realization of the Golden age" the winter too is seen not as an obnoxious and eccentric oppressor; "but with the gentleness of a lover he adorns the tresses of summer" (276). He exhibits an enhanced level of sensitivity, which allows him to derive pleasure from all seasons, not just one.

The book cautions that denying climate change will result in severe consequences and even an ecological catastrophe on a global scale. A close reading of this work makes one aware of the need for a careful scrutiny of man made institutions to get to the covert motives behind social, political, industrial, economic and religious conventions. In addition, the text through a meticulous critique of athropocentrism and humanism brings home the contemporary significance of Thoreau's ideas and

experiences,with his radical and bold experiments implying some future direction to the afflicted human race as he rightfully observes in the section titled “Spring”:

> We need the tonic of wildness-to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the blooming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. (283)

By placing greater value on the acquisition and practice of “the art of life” than other conventional courses, Thoreau pays heed to the experiential part of learning that was emphasized by even the 17th Century philosopher Francis Bacon and the 19th century logician and essayist Bertrand Russell in their own times. As a staunch rationalist, he prefers participatory learning to transmitted information and observes, “universe is wider than our views of it” by which he means that a mere change of scenery does not bring about the same metamorphosis as the transformation of the soul and mind. Rather than political economy, he believes that the economy of living should be taught at our colleges.The poet-philosopher is happy to share that he has found residence in the side of a hill where a Woodchuck had earlier dug his burrow, thus respectfully acknowledging the original inhabitants of the region.He is thrilled to inform that he is often greeted by an early Thrust that hands him a note or two as he takes a pleasant ride along the woodland path.

In the wilderness, the poet resides in a place where he can sense the rhythm of nature and discern a profound connection

between himself and nature. He is often amused by beautiful creatures and other forms of life. The serenity of the wilderness and the melodious calling of various birds provide him with the most stimulating environment in which to live and appreciate the splendour of nature. His secluded home provides him with a tranquil retreat where he can escape the chaos of contemporary life and immerse himself in nature. This home evoked the outdoors, thereby connecting him to the flora and fauna. His humble abode in the wilderness provides him with comfort and inspiration. Kathryn VanSpanckeren in her extensive work titled, *Outline of American Literature* talks about the qualities of the work that have helped *Walden* stand the test of time, as she opines: "Both poetry and philosophy this long poetic essay challenges the reader to examine his or her life and live it authentically. The building of the cabin described in the great detail is a concrete metaphor for the careful building of a soul" (30). He shared his enthusiasm for the deep seated knowledge of the Asian cultures with Emerson, and rearticulated his learnings from *the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedas, and the Abhignana Shakuntalam,* Kabir's poetry and the Upanishads, thus making us perceive the viability of contemporary ideas like intersubjective transcendentalism and spiritual thought as imperative to human's complete transformation and movement away from anthropocentric tendencies.

Apart from being a botanist, a nemophilist, Thoreau is also a passionate dendrophile who sees trees as an extension of life force or consciousness that permeates the human as well as the non human living forms. Thoreau is optimistic that the trees will foster rebirth in the materialistic and capitalist society of the West as they embodied hope for a society that had lost contact with its indigenous and spiritual roots.This thought brings him closer to Indian philosophy, which views trees as abodes of the divine forces, repositories of generational wisdom, community living and ethnic and cultural meanings since the beginning of time. The

significance of Banyan, Neem, Peepal, Mango, Coconut, Amla and many others goes beyond their obvious munificence through their fruits and flowers and signifies their symbolic presence in Indian life and Hindu culture.

In a community where interdependence and a sense of community inspire individuals to pursue fulfillment and happiness by living in harmony, trees signify vitality. Contrary to the need-based urban way of life, the author believes in the possibility of resurrection and immortality through natural processes. He redefines spring as a possibility for spiritual transformation:

> Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concrete layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb,- heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board,- may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last! (297)

This passage from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau speaks to the potential for life and beauty to emerge unexpectedly from even the most mundane and lifeless of surroundings. It suggests that there is always hope for renewal and transformation, even in the most unlikely of circumstances.

Thoreau is optimistic that the trees would bring about regeneration in western materialistic capitalistic society. He proposes that the youngsters need to reconnect with nature and learn from the trees' ability to grow and adapt in order to lead a more sustainable and harmonious way of life. Thoreau also sees trees as a source of inspiration for art, literature, and spirituality.

> The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit—not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. (275)

The earth is a complex, interdependent system in which every living thing plays a vital role in maintaining its equilibrium. It is a reminder that we are an integral component of nature and not separate from it.The work will continue to inspire generations to identify their moral spiritual axis, to cut down the din and chaos arising out of hyper consumption and re-valuate the conditions of life. It will also re-kindle the zest and the fervour for living in full consciousness and camaraderie with other beings by re constituting their selves and the surroundings with the help of imagination, intuition, creativity, transcendental consciousness and neolocalization and neo ruralism.

Notes

[i] Sanna Karkulehto and others in their *Introduction* to *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* reflect on the urgency to strive for more ethical cohabitation in order to reconfigure the dynamics among Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman to reduce the impact of anthropocentrism on humanity and the planet as a whole.

[ii] In his article titled, "Spiritual Ecology" Leslie E. Sponsel explains the term : "As a revolution in consciousness, spiritual ecology may be quiet, nonviolent, and decentralized, but it has far-reaching ramifica- tions. If its accelerating momentum and other trends continue, then it has the potential to trans- form the place of humans in nature and thereby restore a far greater degree of ecosanity. This transformation engages the inner being as well as the outer world; hence, it has psychological and spiritual as well as ecological and political dimensions." (4)

[iii] John Kofs in his article "Materialism and Consumer Culture" sums up American's predilection for materialistic culture in the following words: "Everything from personal happiness to religious and secular holidays is measured in terms of materialism as much as is the American Dream. There is even an underlying assumption that there is a direct correlation between wealth and intelligence, wealth and character, wealth and success, wealth and power, wealth and patriotism. Regardless of whether wealth was acquired through creative endeavors and diligence, through inheritance or illegal activities, popular culture and the media project the image that the wealth of an individual is somehow a manifestation of positive innate traits."

[iv] Ylva Uggla analyzes the various attempts at minimalism in the essay "Taking back Control' reflecting upon the growing popularity of the movement: "The minimalist lifestyle is associated with decluttering and the gratification arising from owning fewer objects, but it can also include a broader perspective on how to reduce stress and live a simpler life. As the notion of minimalism has spread it has taken somewhat different directions, such as the nomadic lifestyle (e g , Wright 2013) and the 100 things challenge (e g , Bruno 2011) Some, minimalists tend to have a more aesthetic take on minimalism (e g Sasaki 2017and Kondo 2019), whereas others merge the notions of minimalism with sustainability and environmental issues. (233)

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Negotiating Identity and Ideology: The Concept of the "Third Way" in Salman Rushdie's Literary Vision

Rhitabrata Chatterjee

Philosophically, the imaginative universe of Salman Rushdie links to the pre-Socratic thought of Heraclitus who argued that unity comes through the productive tension of opposites, not through uniformity. It is this idea of harmony through difference that shapes Rushdie's narrative vision. In *Midnight's Children*, the narrator Saleem Sinai envisions a community rooted in plurality. He expresses a desire for a "people-together…children-sticking-together-through-thick-and-thin," sustained by "free will" and "hope" (*MC* 307). This aspiration reflects Rushdie's "third way," an intellectual and artistic framework that values multiplicity over strict ideological beliefs. The "third way" acts as a dialogic principle that aims to reconcile differences without eliminating them. Instead of depicting India as culturally uniform, Rushdie illustrates the subcontinent as historically rich and diverse, shaped by intersecting languages, traditions, and identities. Achieving this vision requires breaking down rigid cultural, ideological, and knowledge boundaries that support exclusionary identity concepts. In Rushdie's works, migration and hybridity are central to this effort. They function not just as narrative elements but as structural and epistemic strategies that confront essentialist views of culture and belonging. Migration in Rushdie's writing means more than just physical movement; it represents a broader state of intellectual freedom. Crossing geographical and symbolic boundaries expands understanding and promotes comparative views. Hybridity likewise undermines myths of cultural purity and questions the belief in fixed origins or stable identities. Through these concepts, Rushdie crafts a flexible understanding of identity, where it emerges as a dynamic formation shaped by historical encounters and cultural exchanges. Imagination plays a key role in allowing

this reconfiguration of community and self. Through imaginative reconstruction, boundaries that seem historically fixed can be renegotiated. Rushdie's fiction thus dismisses the idea of "wholesight," the belief that a single, authoritative view can capture historical reality. Instead, it emphasizes plurality as a fundamental principle of knowledge and narrative. The "third way" in his writing is neither a mere imitation of Western modernity nor a commercial cosmopolitanism aimed at global markets; it reflects a deep commitment to democratic pluralism, cultural diversity, and intellectual freedom.

This vision resonates with Jawaharlal Nehru's reflections, especially in *The Discovery of India*, where he views India as a civilization formed through ongoing cultural dialogue and synthesis. Nehru's concept of unity in diversity echoes Rushdie's narrative imagination, reinforcing the idea of Indian identity as composite rather than uniform. This framework also influences Rushdie's characters, where many challenge traditional gender norms and blur rigid lines between masculinity and femininity. In this sense, hybridity extends beyond national and cultural boundaries into individual identity, making it appear fluid and negotiable rather than fixed. To understand Rushdie's "third way" better, we can consider the idea of holism. Holism emphasizes the interconnectedness of parts within a larger system rather than treating them separately. This idea became prominent in medical discussions through the "holistic approach," which sees the patient as an integrated being whose physical, psychological, and environmental states are connected. Illness is viewed as a disruption in systemic balance, and healing involves restoring harmony among various elements rather than enforcing uniformity. In literary analysis, this concept serves as a helpful analogy for Rushdie's narrative vision. In his work, diversity does not hinder unity; instead, it forms the basis for a dynamic and dialogic whole. Unity arises from the interaction of diverse elements rather than

through eliminating differences. This holistic perspective develops gradually through engagement with historical complexity and varied experiences. Migration plays a crucial role in shaping this broader awareness. By crossing geographical, linguistic, and psychological boundaries, migrants encounter new cultural contexts that widen their intellectual views and promote tolerance and comparative reflection (Manecke 226). However, Rushdie acknowledges that a complete "whole vision" is not achievable. Instead, he suggests what he calls a "stereoscopic vision," a viewpoint grounded in multiplicity and dual perspectives (*IH* 19). This approach accepts the inevitable partiality of human perception and rejects the illusion of total knowledge found in certain realist traditions. Literature thus becomes a contested space where diverse languages, histories, and cultural perspectives engage and challenge each other (*IH* 427).

Central to this framework is the idea of a migrant sensibility. Global migration has created identities that rely less on territorial belonging and more on imaginative and intellectual connections. Perception resembles a fractured mirror—inevitably partial and influenced by various cultures. Rushdie is often seen as a "cloven" writer, addressing both Eastern and Western cultures without fully fitting into either (Goonetilleke 6). Yet this state of being between cultures also brings about creative possibilities. The migrant writer, situated at the crossroads of languages and cultures, contributes to the evolution of language itself. Experiencing the dual estrangement of being both "out-of-country" and "out-of-language," these writers must create new expressive forms capable of conveying complex human experiences (Grant 24). Rushdie's fiction thus depicts life as fundamentally composed of mixtures rather than pure forms. Its richness comes from the blending of cultural, linguistic, and historical elements that enhance human experience. This acceptance of plurality lies at the heart of Rushdie's holistic vision. For the decentered individual, migration

is not just a state of displacement but a fertile ground for exploring hybridity, transformation, and the ongoing reshaping of identity (Hassan 1).

Salman Rushdie's intellectual perspective can be placed within a broad Nehruvian framework that emphasizes secular modernity, cultural diversity, and the intertwined history of civilizations. Jawaharlal Nehru's thoughts in *The Discovery of India* offer significant philosophical context for understanding Rushdie's narrative style and that of other postcolonial Indian English writers, such as Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, and Rohinton Mistry (Chatterjee 42). A key element of this intellectual heritage is the idea of India as a "composite culture," shaped through ongoing interactions among various religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. Nehru's approach to history actively challenged colonial views that portrayed the subcontinent as divided and unable to unite politically. Such colonial stories often justified imperial rule by depicting India as marked by community conflicts and instability. In contrast, Nehru argued that the Indian historical imagination has been driven by a strong urge toward unity (Nehru 35). Importantly, this unity does not rely on cultural sameness; instead, it develops from centuries of dialogue, negotiation, and mutual influence between different traditions. Through this view, Nehru aimed to redefine Indian history as a story of integration rather than separation. In this context, secularism plays a vital role. To Nehru, secularism did not mean eliminating religion from public life; rather, it served as a guiding principle for the coexistence of different beliefs and cultural practices. Thus, Indian identity is the result of a long historical process marked by ongoing cultural growth. Nehru famously likened India to an "ancient palimpsest," a manuscript that has been rewritten many times, yet never entirely erased. Various cultural layers coexist without erasing earlier ones. No single layer defines the nation; instead, Indian identity remains

historically rich, diverse, and complex. Its strength comes from its ability to embrace and incorporate differences.

Rushdie's views on India—especially in the essay "The Riddle of Midnight" from *Imaginary Homelands*—mirror this Nehruvian idea of national identity. He often depicts India as a place of multiple realities. The metaphor of the "crowd," for example, symbolizes the nation, representing diversity and the coexistence of various historical experiences within a common political framework (*IH* 32). This imaginative perspective is fully realized in *Midnight's Children*. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the exact moment of India's independence. His birth ties his personal fate to the nation's historical path. This connection is emphasized by a fictional letter from Nehru, which suggests that Saleem's life will reflect that of the newly independent country. Through this plot device, Rushdie blends personal experiences with national history, turning Saleem's story into a symbolic representation of India's postcolonial journey. Saleem's body and mind represent the nation itself. His prominent nose, similar to the outline of the Deccan peninsula, transforms him into a symbolic map of the subcontinent. With this imagery, Rushdie turns the individual into a national metaphor: fragmented yet continuous, excessive yet unifying. Saleem's narrative voice strengthens this composite identity. His storytelling weaves together elements from various cultural backgrounds, including the dramatic style of Bombay cinema, expressions from Hindi and Urdu, mythological allusions, and differing religious symbols. Language becomes a place where diverse traditions meet. The narrative form itself adopts a mixed style that reflects the complex nature of the nation it aims to portray. Rushdie has noted that modern India needs a shared imaginative story that can compete with the historical forces of religion and economic power that once supported European colonialism. By re-envisioning India as a collective narrative

rooted in shared beliefs, Rushdie suggests the creation of a secular national story. Within this symbolic idea, "India" turns into a unifying tale that can challenge both sacred authority and material influence. National identity thus appears as a dynamic narrative and ethical endeavor driven by continuous reinterpretation and historical understanding. By linking the nation's fate to the uncertain body of Saleem Sinai, Rushdie highlights the fragile nature of this imaginative concept. The story of India persists through constant retelling and rethinking across generations. However, *Midnight's Children* also reveals the conflicts between the Nehruvian vision of a secular, diverse nation and the realities of social violence, inequality, and political turmoil. In this symbolic context, Saleem serves as a fictional guardian of Nehruvian democratic ideals. His story points to what could be seen as a "third way"—a model of shared belonging based on civic diversity, emotional unity, and ethical coexistence (Chatterjee 48). Rushdie's dedication to this vision is evident in details noted by Josna Rege, who mentions that while writing the novel, Rushdie kept a sculpture representing a unified India on his desk. Even while addressing the painful history of Partition, the novel creatively maintains the geopolitical and ethical idea of a unified India as both a historical memory and a geo-political possibility (Rege 199). In this light, Saleem's belief in unity amid diversity reinforces Rushdie's lasting commitment to a mixed and diverse view of the nation.

The viability of Rushdie's "third way" depends upon the capacity of India to sustain its historically composite and dialogic character (Chatterjee 48). As long as the nation preserves its traditions of cultural interaction and plurality, the possibility of such an alternative model of collective belonging remains open. Yet Salman Rushdie also dramatizes the vulnerability of this vision through the ideological conflict between two central figures in *Midnight's Children*: Saleem Sinai and Shiva. Their opposition

symbolizes competing conceptions of the nation. While Saleem imagines India as a community grounded in cooperation, diversity, and affective solidarity, Shiva represents a worldview structured by hierarchy, domination, and coercive power. The conflict between these characters thus allegorizes the enduring struggle between pluralist humanism and authoritarian nationalism. This tension ultimately produces a complex synthesis embodied in Aadam Sinai. Although biologically Shiva's son, Aadam is socially and symbolically claimed by Saleem, who names him after his grandfather. Through this act of symbolic adoption, the novel gestures toward a tentative reconciliation between opposed historical forces. Aadam emerges as a transitional figure through whom the narrative imagines the possibility of a renewed national future—one that mediates between ethical aspiration and historical violence, idealism and political realism. At the same time, Saleem's trajectory reveals the fragility of identities grounded in nostalgic absolutism. His sense of self remains deeply tied to an idealized memory of Bombay, which he attempts to preserve as a stable point of reference. The city of his childhood—populated by cinemas, laundries, comic-book shops, and colonial mansions—gradually transforms into a different urban landscape whose meanings and names no longer correspond to his earlier recollections. Although the physical spaces persist, their symbolic significance shifts irreversibly. This disjunction undermines Saleem's narrative coherence, preventing him from reconciling the changing present with the imaginative framework through which he interprets the past. Saleem's physical disintegration mirrors this psychological rigidity. The cracks that appear across his body function as a metaphor for the fragmentation of his consciousness. Unable to integrate new historical realities into his self-understanding, he retreats into the past and becomes increasingly detached from the evolving social world around him. His illness therefore symbolizes an imaginative failure—the inability to adapt to historical transformation. Although he retains a degree of self-

awareness, he lacks the intellectual resilience required to reconstruct his identity in relation to shifting circumstances. The result is a progressive dissolution that culminates in personal collapse, reflecting the turbulence and instability of the nation whose history he attempts to narrate. Rushdie employs Saleem's fragmentation as a narrative strategy for rethinking the nature of history itself. Rather than presenting a coherent and authoritative historical account, the novel foregrounds uncertainty, multiplicity, and the instability of knowledge. Saleem's storytelling is marked by chronological disruptions, digressions, errors, and repeated acts of revision and recollection. Through this narrative structure, history emerges not as an objective record but as a layered construct shaped by memory, desire, and retrospective interpretation.

Within this framework, the Midnight Children's Conference functions as a symbolic microcosm of the nation's diversity. Saleem's telepathic assembly includes individuals possessing extraordinary abilities alongside those whose characteristics appear disruptive, transgressive, or morally ambiguous. The "voices" that initially appear elevated or prophetic gradually reveal themselves to be heterogeneous, fragmented, and innumerable—"as multitudinous as dust" (*MC* 200). Their impurity is not incidental but constitutive. It is precisely this heterogeneity that forms the basis of collective identity. Recognition of such impurity underpins what may be described as Rushdie's "third principle," a conceptual rejection of rigid binary thinking. This principle directly challenges Shiva's dualistic worldview, which interprets existence through oppositional categories such as strength versus weakness or victor versus victim. In contrast, Saleem advocates a mediating position capable of traversing and destabilizing these oppositions. To move "between the horns of the dilemma," as he suggests, is to inhabit a creative space defined by difference and negotiation rather than

fixed polarity (*MC* 306). Within this space, otherness becomes a generative force through which new forms of identity and community may emerge. The narrative, however, repeatedly emphasizes the precariousness of this position. As the forces of historical violence, political disillusionment, and personal crisis intensify, Saleem's capacity to sustain this third space gradually erodes. Although he aspires to embody hybridity and to mediate between opposing elements, he increasingly finds himself overwhelmed by pressures that reassert rigid divisions. The novel therefore does not portray the third principle as an accomplished achievement but as an unstable and contested possibility. Nevertheless, Rushdie insists that even in failure Saleem's identity remains fundamentally composite. His subjectivity is shaped by multiple genealogies, cultural exchanges, and narrative influences. The "impurity" that defines him is not a defect but an essential condition, reflecting the complex processes through which both individual and national identities are formed. Even when Saleem struggles to inhabit the space of hybridity, his existence itself testifies to the impossibility of singular origins or pure cultural essences. Saleem's eventual disillusionment stems from the difficulty of sustaining meaningful connections between the divided worlds he inhabits. As the hope of unity recedes, his earlier optimism gradually gives way to skepticism. Reflecting on the fate of the Midnight Children, he suggests that if a "third principle" exists, it belongs to childhood—a period of imaginative openness that adulthood ultimately destroys (*MC* 256). The loss of childhood innocence signifies the erosion of the pluralist imagination. What initially appears as a community capable of transcending inherited divisions gradually reproduces the sectarian and social antagonisms of the larger society. The children who once formed a visionary collective begin to replicate the prejudices of their environment. Regional rivalries, religious antagonisms, racial hierarchies, and class divisions infiltrate the conference, dissolving the fragile unity that Saleem had hoped to sustain. Despite their

extraordinary abilities, the Midnight Children cannot escape the ideological structures that shape their social world. Their fragmentations underscore the profound difficulty—perhaps even the impossibility—of preserving a genuinely pluralistic ethos within a society marked by deep historical divisions. Saleem's notion of a "third principle" also resonates with broader political ideas associated with Jawaharlal Nehru, particularly the international vision embodied in the Non-Aligned Movement. Just as the Non-Aligned Movement sought to position newly independent nations beyond the polarized alliances of the Cold War, Saleem's conceptual framework attempts to transcend rigid ideological binaries.

It proposes an ethical space that resists forced alignment and affirms the possibility of independent judgment. The idea also bears a significant conceptual affinity with the theory of the "third space" developed by Homi K. Bhabha (Chatterjee 52). Both frameworks emerge from dissatisfaction with the superficial deployment of multicultural discourse in late twentieth-century Britain. During the 1980s, Rushdie increasingly criticized mainstream political responses to racial inequality, arguing that official multiculturalism often functioned as a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative project. In essays such as "The New Empire within Britain," included in *Imaginary Homelands*, he contends that state-sponsored multicultural policies frequently conceal rather than dismantle the structural legacies of imperialism and racism. Such approaches risk reducing cultural difference either too trivial lifestyle variations or to insurmountable civilizational conflicts. Against this limited framework, Rushdie's "third principle" and Bhabha's "third space" envision a far more radical form of cultural interaction. Rather than stabilizing identities within fixed categories, they imagine a dynamic and contested terrain in which identities are continuously renegotiated, power relations are interrogated, and new possibilities of cultural

affiliation can emerge. In this sense, the "third way" remains less a resolved synthesis than an ongoing process of negotiation—an imaginative space where plurality persists despite the pressures of history and power.

Although Saleem Sinai strongly supports the "third principle," he ultimately fails to fully embody it. In Salman Rushdie's fictional world, the "third way" serves more as a critical way to question rigid ideological and cultural divides than as a solid achievement. For Saleem, this bridging vision connects closely with childhood, which represents innocence, imaginative openness, and the chance for ethical renewal. However, as the story unfolds, these attributes gradually disappear under the weight of fear, disillusionment, and political violence. Given the events of the novel, Saleem's commitment to the "third way" seems weakened and even defeated. Yet this apparent failure holds deeper meaning. As a self-aware and unreliable narrator, Saleem reveals the weakness of pluralist ideals in a society faced with deep divisions. His struggle to maintain the balanced position he claims does not disprove the ethical vision behind it; instead, it highlights the historical challenges of achieving such a vision. Through this narrative conflict, the novel maintains the meaningful essence of the "third way." Saleem's personal flaws showcase the instability of pluralist principles without taking away from their inspirational value. The difference between ideal and reality emphasizes the ongoing importance of the democratic imagination that informs the text. The "third way," even if not fully realized, remains a crucial ethical goal—an imaginative possibility that drives the novel's wider commitment to plurality, dialogue, and civic coexistence. A related thought on this imaginative and ethical aspect appears in *Imaginary Homelands*, where Rushdie comments:

> What I tried to do was to set up a tension in [*Midnight's Children*], a paradoxical opposition between the form and content of the narrative. The story of Saleem does indeed

> lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop regeneration….. the narrative … throws up new stories……'. The form-multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country-is the optimistic counter-weight to Saleem's personal tragedy. (*IH* 16)

The nation, like the novel, can be seen as an unfinished and constantly changing project. It's internal conflicts and contradictions come, in part, from the ongoing gap between the moral and artistic ideals it claims and the realities it manages to deliver (Su, *Epic of Failure,* 554). *Midnight's Children* highlights this sense of incompleteness, revealing both the vulnerability of nationalist dreams and the instability of the storytelling methods used to express them. In this context, the birth of Aadam Sinai signals a tentative balance between conflicting historical forces. In this character, the opposing ideals represented by Saleem Sinai and Shiva—idealism and coercive power, pluralism and control—come together in a delicate mix. The narrative does not try to eliminate these conflicts; instead, it recognizes their interdependence. Saleem and Shiva serve as complementary characters whose rivalry shows that the experience of the nation cannot be simplified into a single ideological story. Regarding the narrative form, Salman Rushdie accomplishes what his protagonist cannot. While Saleem's personal identity crumbles under the weight of historical contradictions, Rushdie's artistic approach effectively redefines the binary structures that shape the novel. By placing opposing forces in productive tension, allowing them to overlap, and revealing their interconnection, the narrative creates a space that neither suppresses differences nor resolves them too soon. Within this imaginative landscape—built through formal experimentation and rich symbolic layering—the idea of hybridity becomes possible. The novel's inventive structure thus achieves what its narrator fails

to see: a dynamic balance between competing forces that maintains the potential for pluralist renewal.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie poses an intriguing question: can art serve as a "third principle" that connects the material and the spiritual realms (*IH* 420)? By creatively bringing both together, can it create a new way of understanding? This question reframes aesthetics as something more than decoration; it becomes a powerful force that can change our perception of reality (Chatterjee 54). In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem promotes love, community, and lasting friendship. He emphasizes "people-together" and "children-sticking-together-through-thick-and-thin," contrasting sharply with Shiva's harsh materialism (*MC* 307). Shiva sees social life strictly through the lens of wealth and poverty, using industrial leaders Birla and Tata as symbols of a nation focused on production and ownership, while many remain without. In his view, people risk becoming mere commodities in this economic system, treated as "things." In contrast, Saleem's focus on emotional and ethical connections presents a different principle rooted in free will and hope.

For Salman Rushdie, literature is an essential medium that sustains cultural and imaginative hope. Through the power of imagination, literature becomes an integral part of the global cultural dialogue that creates "new descriptions of the world" and "new maps for old" that challenge the status quo and change the way we view the world of reality (*IH* 4). Literature becomes an essential medium that provides a space that is uniquely autonomous and resists political appropriation. This view of literature as being pluralistic is consistent with Rushdie's view of the importance of hybridity and heterogeneity. Thus, the power of imagination becomes an essential force that transcends boundaries and becomes capable of mediating between irreconcilable differences. This view of the power of imagination is consistent with the views of Wilson Harris, who also emphasized the

importance of the power of imagination in opening up new possibilities in literature. Rushdie's experience of the fatwa issued against him on the publication of *The Satanic Verses* is an indication of the power of imaginative literature.

In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie uses the metaphor of the suppression of the power of imagination through the tyrannical ruler Khattam-Shud, who wants to poison the well of imagination (39). His dislike of narrative creativity is a reflection of the fears of authoritarian systems that perceive the power of imagination as a danger to their absolute power. There are similarities between different authoritarian ideologies and the fictional character of Shiva from *Midnight's Children* in the way they symbolize authoritarian power that values silence over dialogue. Rushdie's defense of the power of free expression is deeply linked to the Nehruvian ideology of secular pluralism. Although Rushdie celebrates the open intellectual culture of India in the past, he is critical of the present because of the rise of intolerance and political opportunism. However, he remains hopeful that the power of imagination in literature will resist the pressures of authoritarianism and revive democratic values.

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, music and photography are presented as powerful aesthetic practices through which individuals transcend the limitations of their origins, nationalities, and identities. For Ormus Cama, Vina Apsara, and Umeed 'Rai' Merchant, art becomes a means through which they negotiate their hybrid and transnational identities. The ten-year postponement of Ormus and Vina's marriage serves as a kind of artistic discipline through which they are able to channel their emotional intensity into artistic production. Their musical partnership in the band VTO, comprised of Ormus' musical genius and Vina's charismatic voice, propels them to international stardom after they move to the United States. However, their meteoric rise is marred by tragedy when Vina dies in an earthquake during a concert tour. Ormus meets a violent end in New York. Through all these turbulent

events, the trajectory of Rai provides a more reflective and nuanced exploration of the impact of loss and displacement. While he is haunted by his unrequited love for Vina, he eventually enters a meaningful relationship with Mira Celano. While the relationship is initiated by a sense of similarity between the two women, it eventually becomes a more profound ethical commitment that goes beyond the nostalgic. The photographic exhibition "After Vina" by Rai is a manifestation of his desire to create a memorabilia of the past, but in doing so, it is also a form of self-reconstruction rather than self-mourning. His embracing Mira and her daughter Tara, who has no biological link to Rai, also reflects a new form of belonging, which is in keeping with Rushdie's philosophy on hybridity. This is further reinforced by the analysis provided in the text. Gavin Keulks, in his chapter "The Politics of Memory in Salman Rushdie's Fiction" in the book *Rushdie the Novelist*, edited by Meenakshi Bharat, posits that the novel in fact reveals the potential for art, particularly portraiture, to mediate and translate trauma (Keulks 253). Rai's use of photography, therefore, becomes a space for memorialization where deeper meanings are revealed beyond the surface. This is in direct opposition to the spectacle created by the media on the relationship between Ormus and Vina, where Rai's art reflects the potential for memory, creativity, and love to create a space for renewal and hybridity.

So, to summarize, the best way to understand Salman Rushdie's "third way" is via his concept of "mongrelization," or the ideological and the ethical acceptance of mixture. This makes room for a pluralistic philosophy based on the coexistence of different cultures and ideas, hybrids, and the importance of discussion and connection in helping us realize that there is no such thing as one pure culture or ideology; it rejects the notion that a "perfect" society exists. He argues that vitality (an individual's vitality as well as the vitality of a community) cannot exist without the presence of many different cultures, or "mongrels," interacting

with one another and with their environment(s). This idea of vitality reflects the idea of holistic thinking. Just as the human body requires the whole body to function at an optimum level instead of focusing on separate body parts, so society requires multiple communities working together to create a vibrant society as well. Migration and hybridity are two areas that exemplify this idea. Displacement in Rushdie's fiction is not merely a component of the experience, but the condition for encountering people of other cultures who make it possible to break down rigid boundaries associated with geography, language, and ideology. The experience of being displaced opens up a greater awareness of the world due to the encounters with people from other cultures. These encounters challenge us to become more expansive, and to move away from our own exclusive identity. The consciousness of migrants that is shaped by their experiences and relationships with others creates a greater sense of shared community worldwide and reflects the values of the "third way." Imagination also plays a key role in sustaining this pluralistic vision. The issue of fatwa and the discussions that have arisen around *The Satanic Verses* reflect how people perceive political authority through the use of imagination in art and literature. The reaction to the book indicates that fiction is not an unimportant activity but a powerful means of transforming both ethical and political debates. For Rushdie, creative writing offers readers a broader perspective on life and alternative ways to interpret the world around them. While many critics accuse Rushdie of being masterful at creating new forms of literature by combining elements from many different cultures over time, they fail to understand that the idea of bringing together cultural elements from different cultures has deep roots throughout history throughout the Indian subcontinent. Rushdie's incorporation of hybridism into his creative work corresponds well to the Nehruvian ideal of creating a secular democratic nation based on the concept of unity within diversity. In this respect, he speaks out often against censorship; totalitarianism; and other

forms of ideologically imposed limits on dialogue as these prevent the creation of a vibrant democratic culture. The value of art as a means to liberate oneself is a major theme in Rushdie's novels. Through the use of song, visual art, theatre and oral history, the oppressed are able to utilize their creative voices to resist their oppressors by using creativity to push against boundaries imposed on them and establish their own creative freedom. In this sense, while migration may have been viewed simply as a consequence of being exiled from one's homeland, through Rushdie's works, migration has been transformed into a process which allows for the development of tolerance toward others and for standing up to society with intellectual courage, allowing freedom from oppressive cultures. Many of the main characters within Rushdie's novels exist outside of the confines defined by traditional definitions of culture, gender, and ethnicity. The theme of the fluidity between categories is a key aspect of Rushdie's beliefs about the imagination. Therefore, ultimately and on a larger scale, Rushdie believes that people exist imaginatively in their relationship with the universe, to create alternative realities that exist outside of what is determined for them, ultimately creating new life within existing cultures through their imaginative activity.

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Understanding Popular Culture through John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*

Harpreet Kaur and Ramandeep Kaur

John Berger's central argument in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is that the act of seeing is conditioned by history: besides reflecting reality, images also pave the way for perceiving the world around us. He states: "[t]he relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (5). This statement carries the central argument of *Ways of Seeing* that power, cultural and ideological frameworks shape one's visual perception. This also places Berger within a broader realm of cultural criticism of the twentieth century with critics such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Stuart Hall who have made similar arguments. They contend that images not only reflect reality but also add to the meaning-making process. Through his analysis of advertisements, oil paintings, and the representation of women, Berger shows how images reproduce hierarchies in a society and strengthen the capitalist ideology.

Berger considers a photograph to be "the result of the photographer's decision" that an object or event which has been seen is "worth recording" (*Understanding a Photograph* 32). He considers it "a message" about the event it captures (32). For him, a photograph is "effective" when it captures a moment having "truth" in it, but which is never, however, "independent" of its spectator (34). The truth captured expresses something universal, but it tells what is both present and what is absent in a photograph. The spectator's interpretation of the photograph is important in order to understand this. Berger suggests that photographs could serve as "works of art," "evidence," or "news items" as they help in "testing, confirming and constructing" a complete "view of reality." Since they assist a spectator to understand reality, such use of photographs helps in "the ideological struggle" (35).

Berger insists that culture constructs people's vision and does not treat perception as natural but something that is shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts. He explains that "[s]eeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak" (*Ways of Seeing* 5). But he complicates his observation when he writes that "the way" one sees things is "affected" by what one knows or believes (5).

In her essay "Photographic Evangels," Susan Sontag acknowledges that photography, through "close-up and remote sensing" has expanded the domain of the "visible" (608). Although a subject can be known with the help of "unaided vision" yet there is no "agreement" with which more information can be perceived about the subjects of a photograph (608). Sontag asks if a piece of information that a photograph provides about its subjects would actually enhance one's understanding of them or they [subjects] are merely superficial representations of reality. Such representation, as Berger writes, is affected by culture.

Berger's insight resonates with what Roland Barthes writes in his *Mythologies* (1957). Barthes contends that cultural representations serve as symbolic structures that help in naturalizing ideological meanings in society. He rightly explains that "Myth" is "a type of speech" selected by history; it, in his opinion, cannot "possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (*Mythologies* 95). Barthes stresses that myth reconstructs historically loaded meanings and makes them appear natural. To confirm this, he writes that whatever the whole world provides to "myth is an historical reality," "a natural image of this reality" is what myth returns (128). Barthes's analysis brings out how images in a culture hide their ideological roots by uncovering historically constructed meanings as indisputable and self-evident facts. As discussed above, Berger's analysis in *Ways of Seeing* reveals the same.

Stuart Hall makes a similar argument in "The Work of Representation," published in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. His idea of representation emphasizes that images do not simply reflect the meaning; rather, it is produced culturally. For him, representation means "the production of meaning through language" ("The Work of Representation" 16). He also describes representation as something that uses language to convey something "meaningful about" or in order to "represent" the whole world "meaningfully, to other people" (15). His clarification underlines how representation connects language and various concepts to create meaning about the world. He also acknowledges:

> [M]eaning is not straightforward or transparent, and does not survive intact the passage through representation. It is a slippery customer, changing and shifting the context, usage and historical circumstances. It is never finally fixed . . . . It is always being negotiated and inflected, to resonate with new situations. (9-10)

Meaning keeps on changing according to the contexts it is viewed in- along with mirroring reality, cultural images contribute in creating social meanings as well. He, thus, emphasizes that meaning results from the interpretive operations within the world. Sontag also suggests the same: in "Melancholy Objects," she explores how the old photographs have been rehabilitated when they were placed in the "new contexts" (*Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s* 578). Sontag calls photograph a "fragment" (578). This is because it no longer carries its original context and thus becomes a fragment in time. As a photograph becomes a chunk of time, so it is always open to various interpretations. For Sontag, a photograph can also be described as "a quotation," making a book of photographs "a book of quotations" (578). She wants to suggest that one takes a quotation from a book by ignoring the other

information presented in that book. In the same way, a photograph sets apart a moment or an experience from its wider background and evokes the viewers' imagination to reflect on its significance beyond its background. The comparison of photographs with the quotes from various books underlines how new meanings are created. This also enhances the relationship between words and photographs; this relationship enriches one's understanding of the world.

W. J. T. Mitchell in *What do Pictures Want ?: the Lives and Loves of Images* also brings out the power of visual images. They serve as "agents of domination, seduction, persuasion, and deception" (350). With this, he underlines the active role that images play in society. Such theoretical ideas are anticipated by Berger's *Ways of Seeing* as the work demonstrates how historically constructed situations shape one's visual perception. Berger unveils in his analysis of European painting that oil paintings applauded wealth and affluent life-style. He rightly explains:

> Oil painting did to appearances what capital did to social relations. It reduced everything to the equality of objects. Everything became exchangeable because everything became a commodity. All reality was mechanically measured by its materiality. (*Ways of Seeing* 86)

By examining such visual conventions, Berger brings out the role of art in reinforcing the reproduction of hierarchies within European culture.

Berger also highlights how art gets transformed when its works are reproduced mechanically. He observes that the reproduction of a painting by the camera "destroys the uniqueness of its image" (*Ways of Seeing* 17). He argues that technological development has made the circulation of works of art possible all over the world, with the utmost possibility of altering their

meaning. His argument refers to insights from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" where Benjamin argues that it is "the aura" of a work of art that "withers" in "the age of mechanical reproduction" (4). The authenticity of artworks is lost when they are mechanically reproduced, circulated endlessly and consumed at large level within mass culture. Berger observes that with the invention of the camera, it is now the painting that "travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting" (*Ways of Seeing* 17). In such travels, the meaning of the painting is "diversified" (17). He notes that "a detail" of a painting gets "transformed" during the reproduction; any "allegorical figure" from a painting can be "a portrait of a girl" (24).

Susan Sontag's "In Plato's Cave" also helps in understanding how the reproduction of an image happens. She states that to photograph something is to "appropriate" that thing (*Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s* 529). The thing or subject in a photograph is captured in such a way that the photographer's perspective reflects itself. For Sontag, when one photographs, one situates oneself into a "certain relation to the world"; this relation could be the relation of "power" (529). The photographer's possession of any image gives him a power to shape the representation of its [of image's] subject in his own way. Sontag refers to the habit where the world is reduced to mere "printed words" and she considers it a form of "alienation" (529). She compares the images produced during photography with printed words as she considers the printed words less "treacherous" in changing the world to a "mental object" in comparison to the "photographic images" (530). The latter may prove problematic in its potential to manifest reality. Sontag does not deny that a written account of a person and one's painting of that person is an interpretation. But she does not believe "photographed images" to be statements of the world, but its pieces and "miniatures of

reality" that may be created by anyone very easily (530). This idea highlights how these images have the quality of being accessed and reproduced.

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* also critiques modern visual culture by contending that capitalist societies are formed around the circulation of images. He states that life is represented as "an immense accumulation of spectacles" in those societies where "modern conditions of production prevail" (2). In such societies, it is not the unmediated human exchange but the mediated representations that characterize social relations. For him, "the spectacle" is "a social relation between people that is mediated by images," not "a collection of images" (2). Berger's analysis of the reproduced works of art reciprocates this critique as it demonstrates the way images are detached from their original and authentic meanings and assimilated at a mass level into the culture of spectacle and consumption.

Popular culture often uses the classical works of art in fashion photography, advertisements and digital media. They transform these works into symbols in order to enhance their commercial appeal. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* also highlights that the reproduction of works of art paves the way for how culture is commodified. Berger's analysis of the advertising imagery presents advertising as one of the significant visual languages and tools of capitalism. Traditional art invites one to contemplate what it shows whereas advertising imagery is principally designed to stimulate people's or consumer's desires.

Publicity is the tool that advertising industry uses to attract consumers. For Berger, it:

> [I]s a language in itself which is always being used to make the same general proposal. Within publicity, choices are offered between this cream and that cream, that car and this

> car, but publicity as a system only makes a single proposal. It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more. (*Ways of Seeing* 136)

Berger develops his argument further as he emphasizes that advertising does not provide people with actual pleasures related to the commodities it promotes. Rather, publicity functions through its exploitation of the already existing desires by redirecting them towards an imaginary future. For Berger, foods, cars, clothes, etc. are "the real things to be enjoyed in themselves" and publicity becomes "effective precisely" as it "feeds upon the real" (137). Advertising feeds on the genuine human desires for pleasure, comfort or beauty. It cannot fulfill these desires directly but replaces them with symbolic commitments.

Berger argues that this replacement is needed for the proper functioning of advertising. The audience of publicity encompasses the individuals who do not possess the product publicity celebrates. He observes that publicity is all about "the future buyer"; it is "never a celebration of a pleasure-in-itself" (137-38). It builds an imagined and idealized version of the consumer who appears "glamourous" and successful just because of the consumption of the publicized objects. Through his analysis, Berger uncovers how advertising imagery functions within the ideological structure of modern capitalist society.

Berger's insight can be comprehended more by using Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of consumer culture done in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. In this work, he states, "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6). With this, he underlines that people's choice in food, clothing, art, etc. is reflective of the position they hold in a society. Their preferences are used as tools that help in maintaining class distinctions within such society. These preferences not only reveal people's personal tastes but also serve as indicators of their status.

Within such a frame, publicity has a significant role to play in forming and shaping consumer desires by associating commodities to specific lifestyles. When commodities become symbols of sophistication or achievement, publicity gets a fundamental role to play in the procedure where consumption of certain things becomes a label of social and class distinctions.

Berger's *Ways of Seeing* also casts light on the gender representation in visual culture. Berger highlights the tradition of the European oil painting that often depicted women as objects to be viewed and enjoyed by male viewers. He has rightly said that "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (44). His observation demonstrates how the visual representation in the Western art is structured on the basis of gender. In Berger's opinion, women are mostly depicted as passive objects whose principal function is to be looked at and admired. Such representations strengthen patriarchy in society. Laura Mulvey's views in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" complement Berger:

> 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. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (808-09)

Berger's and Mulvey's ideas go beyond the traditional painting and bring out the broader systems of representation within popular culture. In contemporary films, advertising, and digital media, women are often represented through visual images that emphasize sexuality, beauty, desirability, and pleasure. As is evident, such representations aid in normalizing gender hierarchies.

Berger's argument becomes clearer when considered alongside Michel Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, Foucault argues that power operates through various "methods of surveillance" that regulate one's behavior (77). He describes the logic behind disciplinary power and writes: "power is a trap" (200). Many disciplinary institutions, including schools, prisons, hospitals are under the observation of power, encouraging these to regulate their behavior. He emphasizes the effectiveness of power and its institutions and is of the view that one who is "subjected to a field of visibility" and who knows how it functions, "assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" (202). Visibility in institutions makes people monitor their own conduct.

The Foucauldian framework helps in interpreting what Berger has noted about gender representation in society. Berger opines that women's position as objects within visual culture and their continuous exposure to 'the male gaze' leads to the internalization of the act of observation. Berger writes that "the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female" (44). Women, thus, regulate their appearance and conduct according to the expectations of the external gaze.

Analyzed in the light of Foucault's ideas, Berger's insight uncovers how visual culture operates as a tool of social control. As Foucault notes, people internalize surveillance within institutions in the same manner, Berger shows how women internalize the [male] gaze inherent in visual representation. Thus, images not only present gender roles but also participate in the creation of identities [dominated by gender] by encouraging people to conform to the standards of behavior and appearance.

Seeing does not only involve people's 'gaze' at others but also of one's own at oneself. This can be understood via the narcissistic lens. In "The Image World," Sontag notes that

photography has some "narcissistic" functions (645). People are obsessed with clicking themselves. It is also a tool for "depersonalizing" one's relationship with the world (645). The "exotic" has been made near and known whereas the "familiar" has been made "abstract" and "strange" by the camera (645). The double face that a camera holds allows one's "participation and alienation" in one's life (645). In "The Heroism of Vision," Sontag brings out the idea of "the photographic seeing": the new kind of activity people were engaged in (590). Photography has provided society with the position that is both distinct from the conventional 'ways of seeing' [to use the name of Berger's work] and is, simultaneously, complementary to it. By introducing the idea of "heroism of vision," Sontag suggests that photography has uplifted the ordinary way of seeing into something heroic (590). It has allowed people to express their "unique" and "avid sensibility" (590). They have started searching for "striking images" by following the "active, acquisitive, evaluating, gratuitous modality of vision" (590). This undertaking has made the photographers more courageous and photography an audacious enterprise. Significantly, Berger's work seems to have shaped Sontag's ideas.

The dialogue that this paper has carried out between Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and the works of other cultural critics like Benjamin, Barthes, Hall, Bourdieu, Sontag, Mulvey, etc. contributes to a better understanding of contemporary popular culture and the circulation of all kinds of images that reinforce traditional gender norms, create and shape consumers' desires, and organize social identities. The argument serves as a suitable framework to critically examine visual ambience in the modern world and invites readers to reconsider the act of seeing itself. By unveiling how ideology is involved in visual representation of the world, *Ways of seeing* encourages the audience to become more critical of the images around them. Thus, Berger transforms 'seeing' from passive activity to an active one.

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Gender and History in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*

Rafaquat Raja

"History is a nightmare which we can best survive by rewriting it."
E. L. Doctorow

Literary and historical canons have long been shaped by perspectives that privilege dominant, often patriarchal, narratives. Traditionally, historical discourse and canonical literature have presented an authoritative version of events that frequently exclude or marginalize the voices of women, people of color and other underrepresented groups. The canon, therefore, functions not merely as a repository of cultural memory but as an ideological construct that reinforces hierarchies by selectively legitimizing certain experiences while silencing others. Feminist historiography has persistently challenged this exclusionary logic, arguing that history, far from being neutral or objective, is deeply implicated in structures of power that determine whose voices are heard and whose are erased. In this context, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question (Can the Subaltern Speak?) becomes particularly relevant, as it foregrounds the systemic silencing of marginalized subjects within dominant epistemologies. Similarly, Judith Butler's notion of gender as performative draws attention to the ways in which identity is constructed and regulated within normative frameworks, thereby shaping both representation and historical visibility. These theoretical interventions collectively underscore the need to rethink history not as a fixed and unified narrative but as a contested terrain marked by exclusion and reinterpretation.

E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) emerges as a significant literary response to these concerns and offers a narrative that interrogates and reconfigures traditional historical representation. Set in early twentieth-century America, the novel interweaves fictional characters with historical figures. By doing so, the narrative resists clear distinctions between fact and fiction. This

strategy aligns with what Linda Hutcheon terms historiographic metafiction – a mode of writing that simultaneously invokes and subverts historical discourse in order to expose its constructedness. At the same time, the novel reflects the postmodern condition described by Jean-François Lyotard as an "incredulity toward metanarratives," rejecting the authority of universalizing historical explanations in favour of plurality and fragmentation. Through its narrative experimentation, *Ragtime* destabilizes the assumption that history can be transparently represented, instead foregrounding its textuality and ideological mediation.

Doctorow's engagement with history is further articulated in his essay "False Documents" (1993), where he distinguishes between 'regime language' (which claims to convey objective truth) and a 'language of freedom' that embraces imaginative reconstruction and interpretive openness. These terms delineate the tension between language grounded in claims of verifiable truth and a more imaginative, speculative mode that derives its force from its openness and indeterminacy. This distinction is crucial to understanding *Ragtime*'s narrative method, which seeks not to reproduce history but to reimagine it through alternative perspectives. By foregrounding characters from diverse racial, social and gendered backgrounds, the novel challenges the exclusions of canonical historiography and reclaims narrative space for those traditionally relegated to its margins.

Ragtime, therefore, exemplifies a postmodern and feminist rethinking of history, wherein fact and fiction, past and present, authority and marginality are placed in dynamic tension. In doing so, the novel not only critiques the limitations of traditional historiography but also proposes a more inclusive and ethically responsive mode of historical representation – one that acknowledges multiplicity and foregrounds marginalized voices. The novel undertakes a sustained interrogation of universalizing metanarratives and exposes their ideological underpinnings. As

John G. Parks observes, “Doctorow's fiction shows a willingness to take risks, to counter the tendency of a culture to monopolize the compositions of truth” (462). Through this framework, Doctorow not only critiques the authority of historical discourse but also reclaims narrative as a space of possibility. By incorporating characters from diverse racial, social and gendered backgrounds, the novel disrupts the homogeneity of traditional historical narratives and opens up alternative modes of remembering and representation. In this sense, Doctorow’s project aligns with feminist historiographical concerns, particularly the effort to recover marginalized voices and reinsert them into the historical record.

Doctorow’s affinities with postmodernism are further evident in his treatment of the relationship between reality and fiction. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, postmodernity is marked by the collapse of distinctions between the real and the simulated (175). *Ragtime* embodies this collapse by presenting historical “facts” alongside fictional constructs in a manner that renders them indistinguishable. This deliberate conflation not only destabilizes the authority of canonical history but also exposes the inherent “fictiveness” of all representations of reality, as noted by Bevilacqua (94).

Thus, in *Ragtime,* historical fact and imaginative reconstruction exist in a dynamic and productive tension that enables the past to be reinterpreted through multiple and often competing perspectives. This multiplicity resists closure and instead celebrates ambiguity and interpretive openness. As Doctorow asserts in “False Documents”, “there is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative” (163). In this light, *Ragtime* not only revises history but also redefines the very terms through which history is understood and narrated. This makes it a crucial text for examining the intersections of gender, power and historiography.

The novel foregrounds the persistent and multifaceted victimization of women and depicts that their suffering arises not only from socio-economic constraints but also from their gendered existence within a deeply patriarchal social order. Characterization in *Ragtime* thus becomes a crucial narrative strategy through which the text exposes the systemic oppression, and at times, brutal violence, inflicted upon women. This oppression is not singular but intersectional, shaped by the overlapping forces of gender, race and class. For instance, Sarah, an African-American washwoman, is introduced in a moment of acute desperation following the discovery of her near-dead newborn in Mother's garden, a child she seemingly attempted to kill in an act born not of cruelty but of profound helplessness (58). The stark details of the scene, including the baby's uncut umbilical cord and Sarah's solitary labour, underscore her abandonment and social invisibility. Her condition is further aggravated by the absence of the child's father, Coalhouse Walker, whose initial disappearance leaves her to bear the full burden of both motherhood and social stigma. Sarah's plight reveals how her identity as a Black woman renders her doubly marginalized, exposing her to both racial discrimination and gendered vulnerability within an indifferent socio-economic structure. Similarly, the character of Mameh, a Jewish immigrant from Latvia, illustrates how poverty and patriarchy operate in tandem to intensify female oppression. Residing in the most impoverished quarters of New York, Mameh's working-class immigrant status is compounded by her position as a woman subjected to male authority and exploitation. The narrative unflinchingly depicts how her economic precarity coerces her into sexual submission at the hands of her employer, thereby exposing the harsh realities faced by marginalized women:

> He smiled. He touched Mameh's breast. Mameh fled, taking the dollar. The next time the same thing happened …. She became accustomed to the hands of her employer. One day with two weeks' rent due she let the man have his

> way on a cutting table. He kissed her face and tasted the salt of her tears. (15)

It is evident that Mameh supports her family through her sewing wages. Her actions, judged by others as "moral degeneracy" (15), are in reality acts of self-sacrifice, as she endures sexual victimization to ensure her family's survival amid harsh economic conditions, intertwining economic and sexual oppression. When Tateh learns of her compliance with her employer's abuse, he promptly casts her out and condemns her to an even more precarious fate of vagrancy and prostitution (38).

Evelyn Nesbit, a fictionalized character also represents the victimization of women in a patriarchal society, despite her privileged status as a celebrated beauty and artist's model, married to millionaire Harry K. Thaw and former mistress of architect Stanford White. Evelyn's experiences of oppression are strikingly similar to those of Sarah and Mameh. Initially perceived as a *femme fatale* who manipulates men, Evelyn is revealed to be a victim of abuse by two powerful men. She was drugged and raped by White at fifteen and later taken to Europe by the violent Thaw, who paid off her mother and subjected her to further rape and torture. Evelyn decides to end her affair with Mother's Younger Brother because "she loved him but she wanted someone who would treat her badly and whom she could treat badly" (74). Her self-destructiveness is better understood in the context of her enduring abuse since she was young that resulted in leaving indelible scars on her psyche. Evelyn is psychologically unwell, likely due to her history of sexual and physical victimization. When she meets Tateh's Little Girl, she becomes infatuated to the point of insanity: "[s]he was so desperately in love that she could no longer see properly.… She saw everything through a film of salt tears, and her voice became husky because her throat was bathed in the irrepressible and continuous crying which her happiness caused her" (43). Evelyn's behavior towards the Little Girl reflects her

own traumatic past. Therefore, the representation of Nesbit's psychological condition arguably allows the novel to warn about the disastrous psychological consequences of patriarchal oppression and violence. Through Nesbit, the text also addresses the objectification of the female body. Evelyn is defined as "the first sex goddess in American history" (70) and the inspiration for the movie star system (71), as her face on a newspaper sold out editions (71). Nesbit is presented as an instrument for selling products, denouncing the business of sexualized publicity that commodifies the female body. Evelyn complies with this objectification in the name of beauty. When she removes her underclothes, "marks of the stays ran vertically like welts around Nesbit's waist. The evidence of garters could be seen in the red lines running around the tops of her thighs" (53). These marks are described similarly to the wounds Thaw inflicts on her at the German castle. This depiction reflects a connection between male physical abuse and female subjugation to patriarchal beauty standards. It highlights the negative effects of internalized sexism and self-objectification as Goldman aptly claims: "women kill themselves" (54).

The examples provided by these three female characters in *Ragtime* underscore the novel's articulation of gender oppression and sexual violence as pervasive issues affecting women irrespective of race or social class. Despite their differences, the victimization and oppression they endure transcend these boundaries and get manifested in their shared helplessness within a patriarchal society. This concept resonates with the perspectives of second-wave feminists contemporary to Doctorow's emergence as a novelist, though it has since faced rejection from black and postcolonial feminist critics.

In its effort to denounce gender discrimination, *Ragtime* also engages with perhaps less harmful but much more widespread ideological forms of oppression through the representation of a

well-off WASP family. The characterization of Mother and Father serves as a central tool to explore and contest the polarization of masculine and feminine conduct in early 20th-century US society. At first glance, Mother appears to embody domestic self-fulfilment, married to a wealthy entrepreneur and enjoying a comfortable upper-middle-class life without enduring hardships or abuse. However, her characterization reveals her subjection to cultural and social conventions. This is evident in her modesty and reluctance to engage in sexual intercourse, an attitude admired by Father. Through her perspective, sex is depicted as distasteful and grotesque, yet part of her wifely duties:

> Father was a burly man with strong appetites, but he appreciated his wife's reluctance to assume the indelicate attitudes that answered to his needs. … He was solemn and attentive as befitted the occasion. Mother shut her eyes and held her hands over her ears. Sweat from Father's chin fell on her breasts. She started. (10-11)

As this quote illustrates, the WASP household's sexual politics are a source of humour and irony for the narrator, who at every chance satirizes the family's submission to patriarchal rules of female behaviour. Father's extremely narrow view of the way women ought to behave earns him an even bigger shock when he returns from the Pole: He finds his wife holding a black baby and deeply changed by his absence. Her evolution began when she made her first independent decision: keeping Sarah's baby and taking responsibility for them against the advice of the doctor and the policeman, key representatives of white male authority in western patriarchal society (59). Overcoming her despair at being "deserted by the race of males" (57), she remains faithful to her principles and acts independently of male control as she gains a new sense of empowerment. Mother becomes more autonomous and assumes executive responsibilities in the family business: "Mother could now speak crisply of such matters as unit cost, inventory and

advertising.… She had made changes in certain billing procedures and contracted with four new sales agents in California and Oregon ….” (93). Additionally, Mother starts to “claim her gender” (93) in bed, shocking Father with her newfound assertiveness, which he humorously considers God’s punishment for his absence. He finds on her bedside table a volume entitled *The Ladies’ Battle* and a pamphlet on family limitation by Emma Goldman. Mother’s evolution is also evident in her attitude towards Sarah and her baby. Overcoming societal racism, she treats them with empathy and genuine affection, ultimately legally adopting the child after Sarah’s death. Mother’s newly acquired measure of independence and Father’s failure to come to terms with it dramatically deteriorate the relationship between them. It causes Mother to awake to the reality of her husband’s parochial shortcomings. Mother’s estrangement from Father, aggravated by her sorrow at Sarah’s loss, makes Father feel “altogether invisible” (182) and culminates in a power struggle between them. Father reproaches his wife for taking Sarah in. He accuses her of victimizing the family with her “foolish female sentimentality” (175). His displeasure at his wife’s newfound autonomy is evident after his return as he feels his masculinity and authority demeaned and threatened by her empowerment. By deprecating her sentimentality as a feminine trait, he seeks to recover his sense of control and reinforce his manliness. Father attempts to exert power through sexual subjection, with Mother feeling compelled to comply out of a long-learned sense of wifely duty. Mother’s silent submissiveness undermines Father’s success in submitting her to his desires. Father’s sense of power is illusory; Mother moves from disregard to open animosity, and her bitterness drives her into another man’s arms, leading to their marriage’s dissolution. Despite his efforts to restore old sexual politics, Father is clearly defeated and cannot even count on the reader’s sympathy. As a result, it may be claimed that Mother’s evolution and the power struggle that has resulted from it underscores the novel’s

preoccupation with hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity as well as gender relations. The reader is led to empathize with a female character who, to a certain extent, has managed to awaken to the reality of her own submission and has striven to stand up to the patriarchal ideological stagnation that Father represents in the novel. Father, on the contrary, stands for a model of masculinity that *Ragtime* openly ridicules and undermines. His abusive behaviour is constantly satirized, which effectively shatters the possibility of reader identification with his dissatisfaction and confusion.

The fictionalized representation of Emma Goldman arguably embodies the novel's feminist ideology. For instance, during a socialist meeting she organizes in the slums, Goldman asserts that marriage as an imposition must be repudiated and calls it a shallow and empty mockery. This perspective is reflected in the story itself, particularly in the marriage between Mother and Father. Goldman challenges the socialists: "can you socialists ignore the double bondage of one half of the human race? Do you think the society that plunders your labour has no interest in the way you are asked to live with women? Not through freedom but through bondage?" (46). The male socialists, however, are largely indifferent, with many expressing outrage that highlights the hypocrisy and sexism traditionally associated with the Socialist Labour Movement. It is certainly true that some of the ideas ascribed to Goldman in the novel would seem more in keeping with second-wave feminist ideology: "Is our genius only in our wombs? Can we not write books and create learned scholarship and perform music and provide philosophical models for the betterment of mankind? Must our fate always be physical?" (46).
Doctorow's purpose in introducing a character like Emma Goldman, outspoken in her condemnation of patriarchal oppression, seems self-explanatory. Goldman's ideology complements and reinforces the novel's underlying support of feminist concerns. Furthermore, as Phyllis Jones aptly notes, the

novel encourages reader identification with Emma, as she emerges as the only female character who successfully balances "individual needs with political demands, personal success with societal compassion" (27).

Thus, *Ragtime* challenges the literary and historical canon by reconfiguring gender roles and presenting an alternative historiography that embraces subjectivity and inclusivity. Through a feminist lens, it critiques historical exclusion and questions the authority of metanarratives. It presents a revisionist view that destabilizes traditional narrative hierarchies. Doctorow encourages the readers to rethink the limitations of the canon and recognize the need for histories that reflect a diversity of voices and experiences, ultimately expanding the boundaries of both literature and historical discourse. Within this framework, *Ragtime* brings marginalized voices, especially women's voices, to the forefront. In doing so, it does more than supplement historical discourse; it reconfigures it. Further, its ethical and epistemological scope is expanded to accommodate a more inclusive and critically self-aware understanding of the intersections of history and gender.

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Shifting Paradigms in Human Interactions in *The Smell of Bamboo Blossoms*

Asif Gulzar Bhat and Mujeeb Ul Haq

Introduction

Linguistic diversity has been problematic for nation-building since India's independence. Misra in her article *Crossing Linguistic Boundaries* argues that in Arunachal Pradesh, which possesses a rich cultural legacy and is inhabited by numerous indigenous tribes, "the nationalist politics… have set a new trend by rejecting language as an important marker of the cultural identity of a people, and people now prefer to remember their past in an acquired language which can bind communities together" (Misra 3653). The writers of Arunachal Pradesh have transcended language conflicts and created "a literature of their own" (Misra 2007) and their writings express the profound impact of native (multilingual) writings and the English language. She remarks that in the region, authors attempt to write in English but introduce native styles and techniques into the acquired language to preserve collective tradition and memory. She further writes, "The poets who composed (these) texts were writing for a polyglot literary community whose works belonged to a wider canvas than the narrower limits set by modern nationalism" (Misra 47). However, the English language has created a gap between the elite and poor tribal communities. This has influenced creative writers in the region. Lummer Dai's remarks to Thongchi highlight this tension, "Writers like you and me have no place in Arunachal Pradesh. In fact, people ridicule us because we write in Asamiya. When I sit down to write, these thoughts trouble me, and I say to myself, for whom should I write and what? Is there any use in writing? And then my pen stands still, my words dry up" (quoted in Misra 3656). This statement expresses the pain and positions of authors who have been alienated from the readers because they write in their

native language. According to Amit R. Baishya, “Janajatiya writers focus on the seepage of modernising discourses and practices into 'traditional' societies” (Baishya 111).

Yesh Dorje Thongchi’s *Baanh Phular Gondha (2005),* translated as *The Smell of Bamboo Blossoms (2016)* by Aruni Kashyap, is a significant short story set in the culturally rich and diverse area of Arunachal Pradesh in Northeastern India. The text intricately intertwines the natural terrain with the societal issues of the region, creating a profound environment that serves as an important character in the story, alongside other human characters. A usual cultural experience, the flowering of bamboo, works as a backdrop to the story, which indicates an environmental disaster. The translator of the short story collection, Aruni Kashyap, writes on his webpage, “In most cultures, the phenomenon is perceived as an indicator of an impending famine.” This compelling narrative unfolds in the wake of a catastrophic tragedy as the whole region confronts the dual challenges of a famine and an explosion of rodent populations that devastate the crops. The story charts the various interactions between human beings and the non-human world. It not only embodies the community’s care for its people’s relationships, but also displays an inclusive approach of individuals with their surrounding environment.

In the story, Matung, an old man, serves as a focal point through which the author examines themes of change, resilience, and interconnectedness. Matung catches a communicable disease from rats and subsequently immolates himself to prevent the infection from spreading to his granddaughter, her spouse, and the entire population. Voluntary euthanasia has been an ancestral practice (Baruah 1960) in societies to save other members of the community from infection or disease. Bikash K. Bhattacharya, in his web article in *Yes Magazine*, traces the historical scholarship regarding voluntary euthanasia. He writes that this practice has

been historicised by anthropological scholarship, such as Tapan Kumar M. Baruah's *TheIdu Mishmis* (1960) which narrates an incident tha took place in 1948, where a man named Mepo, suffering from ailments, burns himself voluntarily. His action stems from personal growth and transformation, exhibiting the dynamic shifts in the natural environment. His life embodies the bamboo cycle that not only expresses his personal growth but also shapes his identity and emotional resilience. Thongchi writes, "Fear, anxiety and hatred oozed from his face" (130) since he had heard about the bamboo flowering. As Matung burns himself, Thongchi writes, "It was the fire that would overpower the smell of bamboo blossoms to welcome orchids. It was the fire of creation" (133). His self-sacrifice for the sake of his family and community highlights the importance, interconnectedness and responsibility of a person towards his society.

Thongchi has said that he used this situation as the backdrop in the story collection. Belonging to the Sherdukpen tribal community, he says about the community, "Voluntary and assisted euthanasia was an accepted social practice in many a remote community here – especially when the survival of the entire community was at stake." He further adds , "My story tried to capture how the isolated communities in Northeast India tried to cope with extraordinary situations such as an epidemic in the absence of modern healthcare and state" (2023). KB Veio Pou in *Literary Cultures of India's Northeast* mentions that the British were not interested in the hilly and remote areas of North-East India, and writes, "Taking that as a point of reference, the recent history of the region saw an upsurge of several political conflicts with the post-independent India, many of which based their 'historical' disconnect with the larger idea of an inclusive India" (Pou 03). Matung also narrates a story where he says he burnt his parents and family members years ago to save the community from a plague they caught from bamboo masting because the cremation

of diseased individuals and their possessions was thought to halt the transmission of the plague. This responsibility is taken as a norm when modern healthcare and state care are absent.

Thongchi employs bamboo iconography to explore themes of continuity and change, resilience and vulnerability, as well as the intricate interrelations between humanity and nature. The infrequent flowering of bamboo, which transpires around every fifty years, holds significant cultural and symbolic importance. Though it indicates misfortune and hard times, it also shows the development of communal connections. The proliferation of rats, brought on by the flowering of bamboo, brings misfortune and hardship to the region. Thongchi writes, "The rats are not only destroying crops and marching around inside houses, chewing everything they encounter, but they are also swimming across the Kameng River despite its strong currents" (126). Matung also tells Tarak, "The bamboo are flowering again! These seeds are a bad omen! Now rats will rule over people. They will devour the paddy, the maize, the wheat, everything! People will die without food" (130). However, people try to adapt to the situations by finding alternate solutions. Kikon states, "food played a central role in mitigating conflicts and maintaining social boundaries in the region" (Kikon 377). Rats become a source of livelihood during harsh times. In the story, we see that the eloped couple, Tarak and Medak, try to earn their livelihood through the business of capturing and selling rats. With the help of this business, Tarak is able to pay double the bride price and also the rent to live in Matung's house. Thongchi writes, "Tarak Dadao went to the riverbank every day to kill rats. Saddled with the debt he had incurred for his wedding, he knew this was a golden opportunity to earn some money" (126).

"The Northeast is a grand confluence," argues Nigamananda Das,"of cultures as well as biodiversities. Its natural potentialities are beyond easy comprehension due to their physical

diversities, complexities and haziness, and hence 'nature' here is an excellent metaphysical entity" (Das 07). Nature also remains central in Thongchi's work, with the verdant landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh providing an immersive backdrop. The title of the work, *The Smell of Bamboo Blossoms*, underscores the significance of the natural environment. Bamboo, which blooms rarely, represents both continuity and disturbance. As Anna Tsing remarks, Matsu "guide(s) us to possibilities of coexistence within environmental disturbance" (Tsing, 2015, 04).Thongchi's vivid depictions of the natural environment engender a sensory experience that immerses readers in the characters' lives. The flourishing bamboo symbolises life cycles, growth, and destruction, mirroring the characters' emotional and relational experiences. The mutual relationship between the two is important in the story. Dolly Kikon states that "the knowledge and fermentation practices of bamboo shoot among eastern Himalayan societies are layered and complex. In addition, communities are also named after fermented food" (Kikon 376).The story explores the importance of bamboo in indigenous tribal civilisations, serving not only as a resource but also as a symbol of tenacity and adaptability. Kikon further adds that bamboo fermentation and eating "reveal deeper meanings and significance about taste, ethnicity, gender, and social relations" (376). Bamboo transcends its status as a mere plant, serving as a symbol of persistence and interconnectivity. In the story, Tarak has been described as someone who has a close relationship with bamboo. Thongchis own experience is similar ; he writes , "Bamboo had been an intimate part of his life," and Madak, his wife too "… loved eating bamboo shoots" (128).

The interaction between non-human and humans has remained a central aspect of literature from this region. According to Ritwika Maity, "Hunting, fishing and gathering ingredients is the traditional way to survival and identity. The description of

traditional meals, such as millet beer, smoked fish, and rice cakes, symbolises a way of life closely tied to the land and its seasons. The characters' intimate relationship with their environment is reflected by the ingredients' preparation method and culinary traditions" (Maity 23). Thongchi offers a close relationship between nature and culture/society in the story. Food remains an important element in the lives of people in the Northeast region. Apart from bamboo, there are two other foods, rice and rat meat ,that are ubiquitous in the story. In the northeast, these two foods have cultural significance. Temsula Ao talks about the relationship between rats and rice with humans and reveals that in Northeast states, people worship rats before the harvesting of rice starts (Ao 2015). Meyer-Rochow et al. also state that in Hindu religion, rats have been given a significant place and there are temples constructed in the name of rats as they are perceived as the vehicle of Ganesha. "Hindus believe that a rat had helped to carry Lord Ganesh around the world" (Meyer-Rochoiw et al. 02). They add that in the Adi community, "The practice of 'gift-exchange' is also widely practised. . . . Each family gives a pair of rats to their real or closely related, both maternal and paternal uncles" (ibid. 06). They further argue that in Arunachal Pradesh's tribal communities, "rats are appreciated for yet another reason: their taste" (ibid. 02). In the story rats are consumed as food and seen as a means to become rich. The rats are no longer perceived as plague transmitters and inauspicious; instead, they are viewed as a commercial source. Tarak made money by selling the rat meat and was able to cure his wife, construct his own house , and pay the double bride price He also instructs Madak to consume smoked rats for recovery , affirming also their taste. He asks Madak, "Why don't you eat a little, it's so tasty!" (130). The cultural aspect of preparing rat meat also highlights the distinctiveness of Northeastern cultures. Morning keey Phangcho notes that in Northeast cultures, meat is not fried or cooked; instead, it is only smoked, which helps it become tastier and retain its original

flavours (Phangcho 2015).Thongchi writes,"At dusk, Tarak would go with Chomar to the riverbank to kill rats, and they would return at dawn with a large bunch. Medak and Yaro would sit down together, hollow the rats by pulling out their intestines and smoke them after piercing four cleaned rats with a slim bamboo stick" (130).

Meat has been shown to be a significant identity marker in the story. Kiko also believes that "Identities and cultures are constantly mediated through food (Kiko 377). In the societies of the northeast, the groom must provide some meat to the elders of the bride's family as a token of bride price. KB Veio Poustates that "among all Naga tribes, marriage is treated with high dignity and the rituals had to be followed [so] that they do not annoy the spirits and that the new household prosper" (Pou 79). Matung, while offering his life narrative in the dance performance, mentions that, being the grandfather of Madak, Tarak should have offered him meat as bride price. He says, "Tarak didn't even give me one piece of meat as her bride price" (132) However, Thongchi represents both the positive and negative aspects of the practice of bride price. On one hand, Matung narrates that his wife Yani, was seized by Old Tali by paying a large number of Mithuns as bride price while she was pregnant. On the other hand, when Madak runs away from her husband on her wedding day to be with Tarak, the matter is resolved between the communities by asking him to pay double bride price.

According to Misra, "Lummer Dai and Yeshe Thongchi deal with the problem of defining the private space in a pre-modern community where individuals do not exist as separate units but as part of a closely knit family" (Misra 3657). Matung Burha, introduced as an old person living a secluded life, is described as a strong person. His life is intricately tied to the land and culture of Arunachal Pradesh, providing an important backdrop for unfolding the narrative.The character's initial interactions with the couple

and villagers reflect a deep connection to traditional values and customs. He warns Tarak not to kill rats and keeps the folk belief that "the blooming of bamboo is a very inauspicious omen, and there will be calamity and epidemic" (Das 290). He depends on the other people, yet offers help to the eloped couple and allows them to live in his bamboo house. He is a reservoir of the land's history as he remembers its customs and rituals. He becomes a bridge between the past and the present, and a person who has witnessed the community's transition towards modernity in postcolonial times.

The postcolonial era prompted significant transformations in the northeastern region, changing conventional lifestyles and creating novel socio-economic dynamics. Thongchi has illustrated the challenges and opportunities that created the transformation by emphasising the tension between cultural preservation and adaptation. The story foregrounds the tension between tradition and modernity. There is tension between the couple and old Matung regarding the bamboo masting and its effects. Matung says, "These seeds are a bad omen! Now rats will rule over people. They will devour the paddy, the maize, the wheat, everything! People will die without food. Village after village will be destroyed. Oh, Doni Polo, did you keep me alive this long just to show me this? Just kill me, please kill me" (130), whereas Tarak and Madak tell him that things have changed: doctors are curing patients, and rats have become their source of income. Amit R. Baishya argues that patriarchy, bride price, allusions and interactions between the tribal and urban communities are signs of modernity that align *Baah Phulor Gundho* with extant interpretive frames. He further says that these frames also include the state's intervention, creating room for biopolitical nuance in the story (Baishya 114). These socio-eco-political changes profoundly impact the interactions between characters, thus enhancing the complexity of the story. During Matung's time, the state had been

absent and plague management was a community affair with rat infestations leading to famine. The hills then "only had *Bangni* people. By contrast, when the flowering happens in the diegetic present, the government is quick to distribute food to mitigate the effects of crop damage" (Baishya 114). He further adds that state intervention in controlling the livelihood of the people which is a direct expression of biopower. The government halted the sale of rat meat when the plague broke out, which directly impacted the income of the tribal community.

The story also expresses the ideological tussle between generations.. The impact of growing urbanisation colour Thongchi's literary canvas. The clash between traditional customs and heritages, symbolically represented by the older generation, and the 'mixed' or hybrid acculturation of the younger generation, remains evident in his stories. The present generation, who call themselves modern, does not believe in such superstitions that bamboo flowers cause famines and diseases. Madak says, while negating Mutang's perception based on traditional ideology, "This is the age of the *harangs*. The age of *bangni* simpletons from the hills are over. That's why, when the bamboos bloom, famines and epidemics don't take place. On the contrary, this is the age to become rich!" (131). Her claim is based on practical reasons because she can cure her illness with medicines, and they can make their income better by selling smoked rats. About northeast writings KB Veio Pou maintains that "along with the historical, political and social problems that the people of the region face, there are also stories that celebrate the people's tradition and culture and the belief system deep rooted in history yet closely knitted in present realities" (Pou 11). Thongchi adeptly encapsulates the spirit of his native cultures through his realistic depictions of local customs, rituals, and quotidian life. "The novels of Dai and Thongchi," according to Misra," are sensitive representations of the lives of the people in the Arunachal hills"

(Misra 3657). Cultural resilience and traditional rituals are also highlighted in this story. There is a meticulous depiction of local rituals. For instance, a poignant scene depicts the village gathering to perform dance rituals inherited through generations and commemorate the song by Matung Burha,. As he held his "machete up in the air and started to sing and perform the traditional Boyo dance, villagers joined him in the song as a chorus, and others like Chama, Yaro and others joined him in the dance. They made a circle" (132). This event epitomises the community's endeavour to preserve its cultural identity amidst external pressures and new developments.

Romantic relationships in the story further add intricacy to its character development. These relationships contribute to the development of the characters' personalities, as they navigate the challenges and joys of love within the context of cultural expectations and personal desires. Madak proves to be a strong woman who takes the risk of marrying against her family's wishes. She runs away from the wedding ready to face later challenges . She leaves her would-be comfortable life with her husband, Tero Chingi, and accepts poverty for the sake of love and her own happiness. She escapes to the forest, subsisting on wild fruits, where she meets Tarak, her beloved. Tarak, Thongchi writes, "He had been in love with her for a long time. So, he was heartbroken when she married someone else" (129). After the reunion, economic and financial hardships push them into poverty. However, they find ways to be happy and tackle these situations. Tarak pays double the bride price, and without being aware of the bamboo seeds, he collects them for his wife out of love because she enjoys having bamboo in her food. Madak and Tarak become each other's pillars of support. When Madak is diagnosed with tuberculosis, Tarak cares for her and provides the necessary support. Their deep bond and love are poignantly expressed in a scene where Matung insists that she should be burned to prevent

the illness from spreading. In the face of this challenging situation, both Madak and Tarak pledge to remain together.

In conclusion, *The Smell of Bamboo Blossoms* is a complex narrative that intricately weaves together the historical, environmental, and cultural aspects of Arunachal Pradesh. The evocative descriptions in the story build a narrative that is profoundly embodied in its milieu.

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Ecocentrism in Select Indian Graphic Novels

Zahra Ahmad

The graphic novel (a term coined by Richard Kyle) is, as Nayar asserts in *The Indian Graphic Novel*, "the brave new medium and genre" (3). Christensen adds that "in contrast to superhero comic books, graphic novels are more serious, often non-fiction, full-length, sequential art novels that explore the issues of race, social justice, global conflict, and war with intelligence and humor" (227). Graphic novel employs multimodal semiotic approach, fusing words and images, representing social issues of marginalization, exploitation and environmental issues. Environmental graphic narratives play a vital role in fostering ecological consciousness by combining visual aesthetics with ecological critique. Graphic novels, with their rich multimodal format, make abstract environmental concerns visceral and immediate, portraying the extent of ecological destruction wrought by human negligence. They do not merely represent environmental crises but demand a response, urging readers to reflect, act, and transform.

Uruguayan Santullo and Bergara's (2015) *Dengue* depicts how the deteriorating climatic condition at Montevideo, Uruguay caused mosquitoes attack and initiated a deadly dengue outbreak, leading to fear of an apocalypse. Brazilian writer, Marcelo d'Salete's (2014) *Cumbe* "represents one of the first literary and artistic attempts to come to terms with the country's dark past through the eyes of its victims" (Mallonee 2) depicting environmental destruction due to sugar plantations. Domingos' (2005) *Jaguara* combines ecosystem, imagination and fiction with Brazilian folk tales, depicting a warrior from the Krenakores tribe of the Amazon. Australian eco-graphic novels like George Miller's (2015) *Mad Max Fury Road* represent environmental destruction at its peak caused by human greed to control nature. Boyle and

Mason's *Storm Warning* (2021) connects colonialism with modern ecological issues. *Luz Sees the Light* by Chilean writer, Davila (2011) demonstrates problems concerning fossil fuels emphasising the importance of sustainable development.

Contemporary Indian graphic novels provide authors significant space to portray tales of catastrophic events. Ghosh's, *The Great Derangement*, a collection of essays on climate change, proposes graphics as better alternative to represent crisis in literature, "to think about the Anthropocene will be to think in images, [and] will require a departure from our accustomed logocentricism" (83). Historically, storytelling in India has always embraced a synergy of the verbal and the visual, be it in cave paintings, temple sculptures, puppetry, or illustrated manuscripts. This tradition was somewhat disrupted by the dominance of print culture and logocentrism following the invention of the printing press, which relegated the image to a secondary, even suspect, status. As Ghosh notes, "images too began to seep back into the textual world of the novel; then came the rise of the graphic novel', signifying a return to integrated modes of storytelling (84). In today's context of climate emergency, this return is not merely aesthetic but urgent. Words alone often falter in the face of complex planetary crises; hence, the graphic form, situated at the intersection of text, image, and affect, emerges as a compelling medium for ecological expression. Some Indian graphic novels are discussed below :

River of Stories (1994)

Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994), widely regarded as India's first graphic novel, talks about ecological destruction and socio-political injustice associated with the Narmada Valley development project. It is an inspirational narrative of ecological activism. Orijit Sen is an Indian graphic artist, muralist, and designer. The novel is set against the backdrop of the controversial

Sardar Sarovar Dam, which sparked one of the most sustained environmental and human rights movements in India's postcolonial history- the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*. His personal experiences gave him insight to write the story of the fictional movement "*Rewa Andolan*" based on it, through which Sen gives voice to Adivasi communities, farmers, and environmental activists confronting the violent consequences of state-led developmentalism. The movement protested against construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam as it would dislocate tribal adivasi communities, farmers from the Narmada Valley and cause environmental issues in the name of development. He has weaved together the history of the protest with local tales and tribal folklore, to render a powerful ecocritical commentary.

The story is divided into three symbolic parts- The Spring, The River, and The Sea. Thus, the novel mimics the natural flow of the Narmada River, while simultaneously tracing the stages of ecological loss and resistance. Thus, it explains the whole story geographically also. The visual structure of the book with interspersed with fold-out maps, landscape panels, and dialogue fragments produces, what can be termed an ecographic archive. The author gives a fold-out map of the Rewa Valley, which allows to "follow the course of Rewa" (Sen), tracing the direction of Narmada River, underscoring the spatiality of resistance and framing ecological loss as geographically rooted and politically motivated.

The development projects by states cause irreparable losses. The narrative critiques the neoliberal logic of compensation that often accompanies large-scale development projects. The state cannot substitute what it takes away. The story represents the anguish at loss of biodiversity. Displacement is framed not merely as physical dislocation, but destruction of entire cosmologies, as a deeper rupture- cultural, ecological, and spiritual. Sen captures this dissonance through a poignant exchange,"Nowadays the sarkar is

making big promises to the people who will be displaced, promising good lands, jobs for their children, and what not.… but I can't bear to leave Mother Rewa. She is the holy one, the provider and protector of life.…Can the sarkar give us another like her ?"(Sen 36). This passage reflects a worldview grounded in ecocentrism, where nature is not a resource to be exploited but a sacred and irreplaceable presence embedded in everyday life.

Sen's visual storytelling amplifies the stakes of ecological destruction by depicting not only human suffering but also the erasure of plant species, forest ecosystems, and indigenous medicinal knowledge. "Around 375 square kilometres of forest and farmland will go under water ..."(Sen 34). This accuses the system that reduces forests to statistics and rivers to reservoirs. The novel shows ecocentrism and also portrays resistance as a collective struggle, "A hundred thousand people will lose their lands and homes due to submergence"(Sen 34).

The environmental degradation is shown to intersect with class hierarchies, caste violence, and state indifference. The novel also interrogates state power and elite apathy. It highlights the brutality inflicted on non-violent protestors. The media's involvement is also criticized, "media people are always adding fuel to the fire …blowing things out of proportion"(Sen 33).Sen's graphic realism powerfully captures the intersection of environmental violence with socio-political oppression.

River of Stories also shows temporality when it talks about natural disasters and state-sanctioned development projects. The author mentions that one of the victims while talking about natural disasters calls them temporary and reversible. Here, natural disasters are represented as cyclical and recoverable. In contrast these development projects cause permanent irreversible loss of everything- land, livelihood, memory, mythology, and meaning. "This dam represents what our entire human society has become-

oppressive- foisted on us without our consent"(Sen 50).Thus, the novel mobilizes Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" to describe the gradual, often invisible forms of environmental harm which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations(2).

Through its combination of art, oral history, documentary realism, and political critique, *River of Stories* enacts what can be seen as an *aesthetics of resistance*. The graphic form allows Sen to layer narrative voices, landscapes, and timelines, creating a visually polyphonic critique of ecological injustice. The novel becomes not only a protest document but also a counter-narrative to dominant historiographies of development in postcolonial India.

Hotel at the End of the World (2009)

Parismita Singh's (2009) *Hotel at the End of the World* is a richly illustrated graphic novel that draws on the folklore, landscapes, and mythic consciousness of Northeast India. The narrative is set in a hut like hotel on a hillock amongst nature, stretches of mountains, conical trees, clouds, away from modern human civilization. While providing shelter from the rains, it weaves several magical stories from the visitors, stories imbued with wonder, memory, magic, and sorrow. It talks about the tragedy of Pema, misfortunes of Kona and Kuja, a young girl's mysterious encounter in the forest, and blind prophet's wisdom- all of which unfold against and within nature. The storytelling space itself is embedded in the ecological rhythms of rain, wind, and mountain silence, foregrounding the deep connection between nature and human life.

Singh's work is best understood as an eco-narrative that moves beyond anthropocentric paradigms, offering a subtle critique of the Enlightenment's rationalist tradition as well as Romantic idealization of nature. Through fragmented storytelling and visual pauses, the novel decentralizes human agency and grants autonomy to nonhuman forces. The prophet's story talks

about “an island on a lake that floats with many treasures” (Singh 26), which attracts capitalists. The island is eyed by outsiders because of its “medicinal plants worth a lot of money for medicinal companies” or as material for “a TV programme” or as a rewarding business as “new tourist destination” (Singh 109). Here, Singh critiques the commodification of nature by external powers, exposing how ecological knowledge and sacred spaces are converted into consumable assets by modern capitalist desires.

What sets Singh’s visual storytelling apart is her use of full-page illustrations that feature no human figures or speech bubbles, focusing instead on atmospheric depictions of forests, skies, rivers, and stormy weather. Singh gives autonomy to nature while framing it as climate and representing as independent of human. These silent panels elevate the importance of nature, representing it as a force with affective and narrative power. Singh refrains from framing nature as a mere setting or metaphor; instead, nature becomes an actor in its own right. The visuals and verbal represented in other panels gives importance to nature, climate, affecting humans in significant way. According to Chakrabarty, climate change introduces “a new kind of historical agent’- the planet or climate system itself - which Singh captures by giving nature an “agentive presence” (205).

One of the most evocative moments in the novel is the representation of Prema’s father. Rather than appearing in conventional human form, he is portrayed as a cloud or bolt of lightning- an ambiguous being possibly indicative of erratic climate conditions or mythological transformation. The narrator notes, “Sometimes, when the clouds rolled in and the lightning danced along the hill, she would say, “That’s father arriving’’(Singh 48). This subtle blending of supernatural and climatic elements illustrates how nature transcends human comprehension and control. By embedding emotion, memory, and identity into environmental phenomena, Singh erases the binary

between human and nonhuman, allowing the narrative to blur categories and embrace ecocentrism.

The novel thereby subverts traditional Western and Romantic modes of environmental representation that frame nature as either a sublime other or a tranquil refuge. Instead, Singh offers a situated ecocritical vision rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, mythic consciousness, and regional specificity. Like Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), which maps psychic and ecological toxicity through the metaphor of a polluted urban landscape, *The Hotel at the End of the World* articulates an alternative climatic imaginary- one where rain, trees, lakes, and silence carry narrative weight. Both call for a more nuanced understanding of climate as not merely crisis or backdrop, but as a condition of being.

Bhimayana (2011)

Bhimayana, the Indian graphic novel employs traditional art of Pardhan Gond tribal artists, Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam to narrate casteism faced by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. It shows effective mingling of ecocentrism, anthropocentrism, sustainability with issues of caste system, though some have criticized the use of Vyams's art to depict serious issue like caste violence. According to Chandra, in *The Fear of Iconoclasm* (2018), use of art in *Bhimayana* "subdues the effectiveness of the narrative to depict untouchability in Dalit discourse" (20).

Pardhan Gond tribal art has been used here for illustrations. Jangarh Singh Shyam was the first tribal painter to practice this art professionally on canvas and paper. This tribal art used nature in ample, thus widening the lens and bringing environmental fantasy that blurs all divides and hierarchies. It included the non-living with the living, imitating the planetary ecosystem. *Bhimayana*'s picturing of myth-epic in ecocentric space foretells, "the post anthropocentric shift away from the hierarchical relations that had

privileged "Man'"(Braidotti 88). John Berger points the same in his foreword in *Bhimayana*:

> A global economic system which reduces the whole of History and every horizon of life to the pursuit of profit… No more rectangular framing or unilinear time. No more profiled individuals. Instead, a conference of corporeal experience across generations, full of pain and empathy, and nurtured by a complicity and endurance that can outlive the Market. (Natarajan et al. 9)

The tribal life is pure, pristine, free from technology where nature and humans co-exist symbiotically. The art depicts the ideal rural life in contrast to the city life. Pardhan Gond tribe are populated in Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Bihar, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. The word Gond derived from "Kond" means mountains covered with greenery. Pardhan Gond community are described as "traditional keepers of their people's cultural heritage and lineages …" (Natarajan et al. 100). They adorn the walls of their homes with decorative paintings of everyday life, using natural things like charcoal, limestone, seasonal clay, and plant-based dyes, with motifs of birds, animals, and seeds. The pattern of their art also personifies nature and mythologies connected with jungles. Saxena says, "horses, elephants, tigers, birds, Gods, men and objects of daily life are painted in bright hues full of life" (61131). Environmental spirit is seen here in structures and colours too. Ecology predominates in these paintings showing ecocentrism. Employing of Gond art to narrate *Bhimayana* show the usage of local art for local problem as well as to emphasize the interdependence of indigenous art and the ecosphere. Thus, Homo sapiens and nature are inseparably entangled.

Natarajan and Anand co-authored *Bhimayana* taking clues from Ambedkar's autobiographical notes, *Waiting for a Visa*. Anand mentions that the artists after seeing different existing

graphic traditions decided to use "their own philosophy of art to the visual imagery" (100). The Vyams said, "we shall not force character into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is *khulla* (open), where there's a space for all to breathe" just like humans can breathe in nature(100). It suggests not only a stylistic choice but also an ecological philosophy akin to open, breathable ecosystems. Artist Durga Vyam in "The Art of Bhimayana', talks about the use of bright colours through natural soils, grains, mustard, moa grass charcoal, plants, leaves, cow dung etc. in the painting. She remarks:

> In villages, we would collect various kinds of coloured *matti*, available seasonally, to make *dignas*. The white *chuhi muatti* is available only in January and February in the Barenda Jungle. Ramraj, yellow, is found on the Amarkantak hill- where the Narmada originates- just before the annual Goddess Narmada festival. After which it turns red. In *Phagun* (February & March), we collect the black *kaali matti* in *Ghar ka Matta.* Only *lal matti* (red) is available perennially in Dhooti jungle…. To fill spaces, we use patterns like *dhan* (grain, page 60) *kodo* (mustard, Ambedkar's face on the cover), *moa* grass (34) etc. The borders that frame an image are inspired by fences in a field. (Natarajan et al. 97)

The natural world and gods are painted to represent legends and traditions of the Gond people. The tribals show ecocentrism in their artworks as they worship nature and believe in its connection with man. Charcoal, coloured soils, are utilized by them to paint in bright colours like red, yellow, blue, green, etc. Caste based atrocities of discrimination are here depicted using colours. Division has been subverted by using black and white section while bright colours show unification. The Gond artist uses the "*digna*" pattern, "traditional auspicious design patterns applied to walls and floors in Gond homes - as a way of dividing up a page"

(Natarajan et al. 102). Dots, fine lines, curved lines, dashes, fish scales, seed shapes, geometrical shapes, drops of water, birds and animal shapes etc. are the patterns frequently used. Their art is rich in animal and nature imagery and animals like fish, birds, doves, scorpions, peacocks, snakes, lions etc. are seen here. "The ecology of Pardhan Gond art is such that even when dealing with urban subjects we see freefalling animals, birds and trees in landscapes without a horizon" (Natarajan et al. 102). Thus, Ambedkar as a thirsty child at school is portrayed with fish inside him and the handpump as snake. Most of the water bodies are depicted as fish. Motif of fish has been extensively used showing the artists" love for aquatic life forms(Natarajan et al. 102). Train often appears as animals with wheels as coiled snails (Natarajan et al. 27). Bus appears as Ambedkar (Natarajan et al. 75). Happiness of the people of Chalisgaon on meeting Ambedkar is shown as dancing peacocks. Earthmover is shown as an animal shedding tears with shocked cows as observer, when a dalit, Madhukar Ghatge was killed for digging a well on his own property (Natarajan et al. 46). The speech balloons are represented as birds" beak for the lower caste, scorpion's tail for the upper caste, thought bubble with eyes for unspoken words. Hand-pumps are drawn with elephant trunks(Natarajan et al. 20). Zoomorphism is thus commonly seen in the novel as inanimate objects represented as animals. Ambedkar's speech during Mahad Satyagraha, the struggle against usage of water from Chavadar Tank appear as sprinklers of water signifying energy (Natarajan et al. 48). There are clocks that look like peacocks (Natarajan et al. 34, 36).

Nature, wildlife and natural ecosphere have a significant place here. The art used, illustrations, theme, pattern, colour combinations, material used, everything shows ecocentrism. Through these visual metaphors, nature is not passive but expressive- infused with life and voice. This establishes *Bhimayana* as a work of ecological consciousness, where art,

pattern, material, colour, and form all reflect ecocentric values and resist anthropocentric hierarchies. The tribal aesthetic becomes a political and ecological tool, reinforcing the inseparability of human rights and environmental sustainability.

Odayan (2013)

Suhas Sundar's *Odayan* set in a mythologised version of feudal Kerala, explores not only the rise of a vigilante figure but also subtly engages with ecological motifs through its portrayal of land, power, and elemental forces. The narrative, while primarily action-driven, positions nature not merely as a backdrop but as a symbolic entity that reflects the sociopolitical and spiritual landscape of the time. The lush terrain of Kerala, its rivers, forests, and monsoonal moods are rendered in brooding, high-contrast visuals by artist Deepak Sharma, establishing an atmospheric tension between civilization and the wilderness. In many panels, nature seems to assert its dominance and mystery, resisting human efforts to conquer or control it. The protagonist, Odayan, frequently emerges from the shadows of banyan trees, caves, and water bodies, signalling a deep connection with the primal forces of the land. One striking moment captures this merging of man and environment, "He moves like a storm cloud rolling in from the Ghats—silent, unseen, but filled with fury" (Sundar 18). This simile fuses the vigilante's presence with a natural phenomenon, framing him as an extension of the monsoon's chaotic justice.

Further reinforcing this ecocentric vision is a scene where the narrator observes, "This land remembers blood. The soil drinks every drop. The trees grow tall on the stories buried beneath them" (Sundar 22). Here, nature is depicted not only as sentient but also as historically and morally aware—an archive of human actions, retribution, and sacrifice. Such imagery invites an interpretation in which the environment functions as more than passive terrain; it becomes a repository of memory and agency, entangled with the

region's political and cultural legacy. In contrast to colonial or modernist visions that seek to tame the land, *Odayan* frames nature as both sacred and sovereign, echoing traditional cosmologies in which the environment is imbued with spiritual power and autonomy. The graphic novel thus contributes to a growing corpus of Indian visual narratives that challenge anthropocentric paradigms by affirming the agency, resilience, and narrative centrality of the natural world.

Kari (2016)

Amruta Patil's *Kari* portrays a queer protagonist struggling against heterosexual normative society and emotionally desensitized urban environment, to establish her identity. The text begins by highlighting the ecology and environment issues. The narrative not only focuses on Kari's internal battle with loneliness, alienation, and heartbreak but also overlays this with an acute ecological consciousness. From the outset, *Kari* confronts the reader with the decay of the urban landscape. The protagonist Kari's suicide attempt fails due to fall in the sewer but she talks about the terrible drainage system, which reveals bitter awareness of the city's physical and moral rot. She says, "I was saved by a sewer, by the stinking river of effluents that snakes past our neighbourhood, the one our buildings avert their faces from" (Patil 8). The sewer becomes a symbol not only of physical pollution but also of social neglect and denial, themes that are reinforced through grim illustrations of urban squalor- dirt, filth and overflowing sewer in the city, especially on pages 32-33.

The cityscape Kari inhabits is depicted as a space teetering on collapse. Through visceral metaphors, the text conveys the toxicity of urban life. Kari also talks about the stench caused by sewer which further pollutes the atmosphere, "It's hard to fathom the exact composition of the smell. It must have something to do with the city's digestive system. When a digestive system is

unwell, it poisons the body with toxins of its own making" (Patil 41). The digestive metaphor indicates a self-consuming city, one that is unable to process or regenerate, instead regurgitating waste back into the atmosphere and its inhabitants. The text talks about the "smog city" in which it is difficult to breathe due to polluted air. The reference to "smog city" underscores the deterioration of air quality and the inability to find clarity-both literally and figuratively. Environmental degradation becomes a metaphor for Kari's emotional claustrophobia.

The heavy rain raises additional issues like water logging, traffic jams, and the merging of sewage with roads, as mentioned in the text. "First rains! … Road and sewer are one." (Patil 52). The collapse of boundaries in urban infrastructure mirrors Kari's fragmented psyche and mental turmoil as well as her experience of blurred binaries- between male and female, belonging and alienation, nature and culture. The motif of neglect continues in small but telling details such as "three potted plants that double up as ashtrays" (Patil 17), symbolizing how human interaction with nature is often careless and instrumental.

Even animals bear the marks of urban neglect. Kari reflects on the cats in the neighborhood, lamenting, "They are all very dusty, the whites turned sooty, the gingers turned grey" (Patil 45). Environmental problems and its disregard are talked of throughout. Urban grime becomes a visual symbol of how natural vibrancy is dulled, dirtied, and effaced by the city's omnipresent pollution. However, amidst the industrial debris, junk and processed food, Ruth who is Kari's ethereal love interest, offers a retreat into the sensorial and sacred rhythms of the natural world. Kari recalls Ruth's knowledge of plants and spices, saying she taught her, "secret lives of ginger, cardamon, basil and anise … Star anise … here, flower, wear it around your neck" (Patil 25).This moment hints at an alternate form of intimacy and

ecological connection, one grounded in sensory awareness and non-industrial knowledge.

Moreover, further giving importance to natural things she talks of Ruth's living space as "lotus pad" (Patil 25)a symbolic sanctuary that stands in contrast to the urban chaos—a space of stillness, resilience, and rootedness. Kari also reflects at one point: "Smog and static cling to our skins. Our heads ache with decibel and detail. But here, in Ruth's room, time is a silent animal" (Patil 26). This observation not only emphasizes the healing potential of natural and emotionally attuned environments but also captures the ecocentric rhythm that permeates the narrative. These shed light on the ecological interactions in different environments, showing ecocentrism. Patil's visual and narrative strategies construct a world where ecological decay and emotional distress are intertwined, and where moments of ecological attunement offer the possibility of renewal and resistance.

Sita's Ramayana (2018)

Sita's Ramayana by Samhita Arni is a revisionist graphic retelling of the ancient epic *Ramayana* from eco-feminist perspective. It is illustrated by Patua artist Moyna Chitrakar. The narrative reimagines the story from the marginalised viewpoint of Sita, giving her voice, agency, and ecological awareness. Sita gets a voice as she finds solace, strength and confidence in the forest during her exile. She is depicted as an embodiment of nature itself-born from the Earth and ultimately returning to it. The end of the epic forms the start of text. After being exiled the pregnant Sita is portrayed wandering alone in the Dandaka Forest, connecting herself to nature in a deeply spiritual manner. The natural world becomes her sanctuary, "at her touch the flowers, creepers and trees of the Dandaka awoke from their long sleep" (Arni and Chitrakar 8). This powerful image evokes her symbolic kinship with the forest and underscores her ecological identity. Sita

requested the forest which pledges to help her, representing her close connection with nature. Nature is not passive in the text; it responds empathetically to her presence and pain. As Arni poignantly describes,

> The forest heard Sita's story. Her tale was passed from tree to tree, leaf to leaf. The birds flew high into the sky, promising to spread her tale across the forest. The snakes, hearing of her loss, vowed to stay free of her feet, and the lions and tigers swore to leave her in peace.(Arni and Chitrakar 128)

These lines reveal nature as a sympathetic entity that actively participates in her healing and survival. Sita's bond with nature is highlighted throughout the text. Sita's choice to accompany Rama to the forest, her attraction towards the golden deer, choosing to live at Ashok Vatika (one of the gardens at Lanka), and her final refuge in the forest during her second exile. In all these instances; nature through the trees, chirping birds, roaring animals, clouds, blue skies, and rain; offers her comfort, strength, and continuity during hardships. Nature not only shelters her physically but also supports her emotionally and spiritually, establishing a worldview where ecological consciousness is central to human experience.

Further, Sita passes on this ecological wisdom to her sons, Luv and Kush, instructing them to value nature while grooming them for royal life and responsibilities. This blending of environmental and ethical education reflects the text's underlying principles of ecocentrism, presenting nature not merely as background but as an active force. The forest in *Sita's Ramayana* is not a site of danger or savagery, but of rebirth, teaching, and feminine resilience. Through this depiction, the graphic novel challenges both androcentric and anthropocentric interpretations of the epic, foregrounding a voice long silenced and a world often ignored.

This ecofeminist sensibility also finds resonance in Volga's (2018), *The Liberation of Sita*, where Sita asserts, "I am the daughter of Earth" (Volga 41) reinforcing her intrinsic link with the natural world. Some alternative retellings even depict her affinity with nature as beginning in childhood, suggesting that her ecological identity precedes and transcends her royal one. Together, these narratives reframe Sita's story, situating nature not as a backdrop to human action but as an active, nurturing presence that empowers the feminine.

In this moment of ecological urgency, the need for multimodal storytelling becomes paramount. As Perry notes, "the aesthetics of temporality, or visual time, in graphic novels encourages readings that take notice of the nonhuman presence in plots and narrative events" (1).The graphic form slows down time, allows for pauses on landscapes, offers nonhuman perspectives, and challenges anthropocentric narrative structures. It not only enhances environmental storytelling but makes visible the very forces and agents- climate, animals, rivers, seasons, that are often marginalised or invisible in mainstream literature. Indian environmental graphic novels serve as powerful tools of eco-critical activism, environmental justice, and aesthetic innovation. They bridge the gap between ancient ecological sensibilities and modern environmental crises. Through their blend of narrative and image, these texts articulate a clarion call to protect, preserve, and reimagine our relationship with nature. In doing so, they not only reflect but also shape the discourse of ecocentrism in the Anthropocene.

The environmental graphic novels discussed in this paper function as eco-narratives that reject human supremacy and instead advocate for ecocentric worldviews. They offer counter-narratives to capitalist progress, scientific arrogance, and exploitative modernity. Through image and text, they illustrate nature not as background, but as agent, memory, witness, and judge. These

works call for the revaluation of indigenous knowledge systems, local ecologies, and mythic traditions, while simultaneously speaking to contemporary global crises. They urge a rethinking of our relationship with the natural world, not as dominators, but as cohabitants in a fragile, interconnected biosphere. Moreover, these texts democratise ecological discourse by making it accessible beyond the confines of scientific or policy-oriented frameworks. They function as cultural interventions, bringing environmental advocacy into classrooms, bookstores, and public discussions. They appeal not just to reason but to the senses, the emotions, and the imagination. By engaging readers visually and affectively, they cultivate ecological empathy, a key ingredient in environmental activism.

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Translations

Karwa Chauth

Rattan Talashi

"Hey, listen. My talk is going to be aired the day after. Do tune in. It is on *Karwa Chauth*[i]." For many days now Ashok had been pestering me thus. I gave him my word, "Yes, I will definitely listen to it."

This was an old routine. Whenever his programme was to be aired he would insist that I listen to it. I would promise that I would. He would ask the same of other colleagues. A few would tune in, while others, like me, would turn a deaf ear. The former would be all praise for it the next day. However, He knew that they did not know much about these things and were merely being courteous. He believed that I was more discerning and my review of his programme would be objective. That is why he repeatedly insisted, "You must definitely tune in and let me know the next morning what you thought." But my excuse the next morning was always the same: " I forgot, I am such a rascal! Actually I fell asleep early."

It was *Karva Chauth* and Ashok reminded me a number of times, "Don't miss it this time. It is a good talk. I have touched upon everything, the importance of this ritual, its purpose, its sanctity." He thus provided a commentary on his own talk. In the age of television who listens to the radio! But this time I had made up my mind that I would tune in to his talk and please my clever friend.

It was around 9.30 in the night. I had reached my room a few hours back. There was no electricity. Stretched out on the bed I was trying to keep sleep at bay. The radio was on, Hindi film songs were being played. The volume was low, no chance of the sound reaching outside my room. As it is, I prefer to keep the

volume of the radio or television low. Then if one lives in someone else's home, it is not a good thing to create a ruckus.

For some reason I felt a complete stranger in this *mohalla*. I was new to the household, didn't know much about its history and geography. Actually I was not interested! As it is, I spent the days in the office and the evenings roaming the streets. I would often reach my lodgings late, having eaten out and sit mostly in my room with the door shut . When bored, I would come out of my room and walk a bit on the verandah.

My room was on the second floor of this house, the only room. On both sides was a huge verandah. On one corner was a big *Sintex* water tank. The owners lived downstairs. It was a quiet place, one, because the house was situated at the end of the lane and second there were not many inhabitants. Just a couple and an old woman. The sole male of the house was around forty years old. He was short but of a sturdy built. He had a cosmetic shop in the market place and an STD booth. He would hardly spend six or seven hours at home. His wife, Saroj was thirty five or thirty six, but looked young for her age. On the face of it, their married life was going on smoothly, though I hardly ever saw them talking to each other openly. They seemed to have no time for this. Coming home around eleven or twelve was a norm with Ravi and Saroj was duty bound to wait for him. Sometimes when her eyes would droop waiting, she would go to her room and take a nap. When Ravi got home she would eat her dinner with him on a *charpoy* outside. Next to it was placed another *charpoy*. This was Ravi's old mother's permanent seat. I would often see her nodding off to sleep here or keeping an eye on the entrance.

While eating dinner Ravi would tell his wife and mother about his day. He would often speak boastfully: "Had a great day today, even the duplicate goods had a brisk sale". Sometimes he would recount a special occurrence: "Today a fashionable young

girl dropped in. Was looking for a brassiere. I showed her the ordinary stuff and said this is French. She did not see through me and gave me a good price." God knows whether his mother understood what he was saying but she would interrupt him with, "May you live long and prosper!"

During all this Saroj would remain quiet. As it is, she was of a quiet disposition but at such times her sleepy eyes clearly reflected her lack of interest. She would often look at the wall clock , as if thinking ," If only they would get up and go off to sleep." But Ravi would go on and on. If he finished with the gossip about the shop, he would switch to films.

Seated near the window in my room, I would often overhear these conversations. Sometimes I felt like watching this insipid *darbar* in person and would come out to the verandah. It overlooked the courtyard where they were seated as well as the courtyard of the adjacent house. Four or five people lived there but I did not know much about them. However, I was familiar with one of their sons. Probably his name was Tarun, for that was how his mother would call out to him from inside the house. He was tall, lean and dark around thirty five years old. Sometimes when he caught my gaze he would offer a *Namaste* and try to start a conversation. Until now, I had managed to ward off any such attempts. I don't know why but I did not like him. Whenever I would come out on the verandah I would see him on his verandah or in the courtyard. Many times I had felt that as soon as he heard Saroj's voice he would come out and steal glances this side. Saroj too, I had noticed, would saunter out when she heard Tarun's voice and gaze smilingly towards that side. Once or twice I had caught them whispering to each other from their rooms but I had paid no heed. Why should I have?

When I opened the door this evening, I saw Saroj dressed like a bride. Her back was towards me and she was gazing at the

verandah. Tarun was standing on his own verandah. He was looking at Saroj and was telling her something with his eyes, his lips silently whispering, "You are like the full moon." I entered the courtyard and saw their locked gaze. Tarun nodded a greeting towards me. Saroj turned towards the door and saw me. She gave me a smile, her gaze lingering over me.

She would usually smile like this whenever she saw me and I rather liked it. The smile would begin from her lips and reach her *mynah* eyes. She turned towards me and I saw she was carrying a *thali*. I did not know what it contained but before I could find out, her magnetic smile distracted me. She left the house. I thought to myself, "She must have gone to a neighbour's house to listen to the *Karwa Chauth Katha*." I went up the stairs and entered my room.

It must have been a little over ten . There was still no sign of electricity. I was lying on my bed placed near the window directly overlooking the house on the right. Close by was Tarun's house. A dull light suffused the air. Scattered in the sky were thick clouds. The rising moon and the clouds were playing hide and seek. Film songs were still playing on the radio. There were just a few minutes to Ashok's talk. My eyes were watching the tussle between the moon and the clouds.

Suddenly it seemed a whiff of air entered from the window and made my room fragrant. The fragrance spread to every nook of the room and refreshed my very being. I looked out to the verandah and saw a lamp burning. I stared harder and saw it was Saroj, a lamp lit in her *thali*. The sound of her glass bangles pierced the silence of the room. She moved to the corner, "Must have come up to see the moon," I thought. She reached the *Sintex* water tank and cast a look at my room first and then at Tarun's house. I saw a shadowy figure lurking on their verandah which moved to our side and leapt over. The light from Saroj's lamp fell on it. I recognized the tall figure, it was Tarun.

Tarun went close to Saroj, both began whispering. I could not make out what they were saying. Then they began to survey my window. I ducked my head and lowered the volume of the radio even more. Warily I glanced out again; they were still looking at my room. Probably Tarun was saying, "The poor man is fast asleep." I now took position near the window ledge and keenly began watching the intruder's actions. Tarun put one hand in the front pocket of his trouser and the other over Saroj's shoulder. He said something to her and she lowered her head. I think she blushed. Slowly Tarun brought his face close to hers and with his warm lips put a seal on her left cheek. In the light Saroj's face was clearly visible to me. Tarun's kiss had made her flush. Her face dropped on Tarun's chest like a ripe pear that the breeze snatches from a branch into the waiting lap of someone waiting under . Tarun snatched the *thali* from her hands and put it aside. He came closer and took Saroj in his arms. She too embraced him . He pushed her down; it was as if an insolent fool had cut a rose bush in full bloom and dropped it on a heap of sand. In the sky the moon had risen but was caught in the folds of a dark cloud. The film songs came to an end on the radio and the announcer was saying something. Maybe it was time for Ashok's programme but I had lost interest in it now. All my attention was on the verandah. Tarun's mouth was on hers, he was playing with her fleshy lobes. The flame of the lamp was dancing like a snake in the slight breeze. The moon rose out of the clouds but quickly hid again. I felt as if a village damsel had made a hasty retreat from the river bank on seeing a man taking a bath in the river. In the dark their quickened breath hit my window like a hot wave. The flame of the lamp was slowly flickering; I sensed that its soot was spreading on the *thali*.

At once the tempo of their breathing increased, faster and then even faster. The wick ran out of oil and the flame died. Suddenly there was a silence. I remembered, "The electricity will

be back soon. The switch is on." I rose carefully and stretched my hand to put the switch off. Quickly I was back in position. Once I sat down I saw Tarun walking back to his verandah like a stray dog, disappearing quickly into the shadows. Saroj too was now facing my window. Suddenly the electricity was back and she jumped. But the darkness of my room calmed her. With her hands she gathered her disheveled hair and tied it up.

In the light from the street her face was clearly visible. She picked the sieve next to the *thali* and began looking at the moon through it. I felt as if she was acknowledging her transgression and beseeching it, "Don't tell anyone."

I too looked at the moon. It seemed to be saying in reply," Don't be foolish. Am I not your mother moon!"

Suddenly Ravi's voice could be heard from downstairs. Saroj hurried down. Ashok's radio talk must have been over by now but I had no regrets about not tuning in. Getting up, I went outside to the verandah and cast a look below. Saroj was standing in front of Ravi holding out a glass of water. From the *charpoy* her mother-in-law was offering her blessings: "May you always enjoy marital bliss, may you live to see hundred such *Karwa Chauths*!"

Translated from the Kashmiri by Nusrat Jan

Notes

Karwa Chauth is a Hindu festival observed by married women who traditionally fast from sunrise to moonrise for the well being and long life of their husbands. They view the moon through the sieve before breaking their fast.

Poems

Saqi Faruqi

In trust

At a school in a town
a boy had caught
an exhausted butterfly
and in her struggle to escape
the bright blue-purple tint of her wings
had faded into the air.
The boy
pinned her on the table
under a paper weight,
singed her wings with a match
and cleaved her torso into two
with a sharp pen knife.

The boy has long gone
but since thirty years
his stained knife lies with me
and the smudge of pale blood on the knife
bothers me no end
an acrid taste lingers on my tongue
I am so exhausted,
maddened by my lack of sleep.

A wounded Tomcat in an empty sack

Jan Mohamad khan

The journey is certainly not easy
My breath is emptied
In the frayed knots of this empty paddy sack
These strong bars of jute are chiselled in my heart
The coins of soiled moon crowd- clink, clink
in the pallid bowls of my eyes
The tentacles of night run riot in my body.
Who will stoke the fire today
On your naked back?
Who will parade the embers?
And who will water the bleeding flowers
Of struggle in cruel bloom?
The life in my fiery claws has ebbed out
The journey is quite tiring today
In a few minutes
This straitjacketed lane will snap
and drown in a dirty pond
I will cuddle with the solitude of my coffin
And doze
I will be water, mere water
You have to sleepwalk in a deep sleep
And you who can't see this sack
Who doesn't recognise his sack

Jan Mohamad khan

The journey is not easy

Fragrance of Death

Separation

is the brook that feeds

the blood greased river of love

fidelity

has clung

to the coral branch of memory

heart, comfort and lovers

all crouch within the orbit of fear

The air reeks of stale kisses

Broken mirrors of dreams bleed in eyes

Sapphires of tears

Hide in the isles of hearts

A drizzle of sorrow spurts through the veins

But the seeds of sorrow will continue to fall

But people will continue to be separated

These are old sorrows

These seasons of union and separation

are old seasons

new-fangled sorrows have set out

to haggle with old sorrows

bloated lips sport a new blue

new seeds have begun
to be sown in heart
enemy skies crackle
with whispers of enemy planes
slums of stars lie torched
and only dark shadows
appear on the radar of empty eyes
We are mad from the fragrance of death
We drift in the black sea of destruction
Crouched inside the red submarines of hope.
From one shore to other
Hangs a pall of thick, bitter smoke
Earth, where is the magic of your fragrance?

Translated from the Urdu by Huzaifa Pandit

Platinum City

Hongri Yuan

Ah! Of iridescent gems of time
The heavenly road you paved light !
In a kingdom of stars,
I found my home.
In the golden cities,
I opened the gates of the city to the sun,
To behold the godly giants.
At the royal palace of the jewel
I read of prehistoric wonderful poems
The enormous, gorgeous ancient books.
Carved with the golden words
The wondrous strange mystery tales,
Made my eyes drunken.
I walked into the full new universes,
And saw the holy kingdoms:
Even before the earth was born
The erstwhile home of human history.

Across Time and Space in crystalline glitter
Stands this moment a platinum city –
The spaceships drifting leisurely,
Like the birds, resplendent in variegated hues.

In the crystal garden I saw
A crowd of youthful giants,
Their eyes were bright and glittering
In the aura of the body sparkle..

They sang happy songs
They danced a wonderful dance
Lanky boys and girls in pairs
As if to celebrate the splendid carnival.

I saw a circular edifice
High above the city.
Giving out white-bright lightnings.
Raised ground to fly into the quiet space.

A frame of platinum edifice
Creating a beautiful pattern.
The whole city is a circle
Arranged into a fine structure.

Into a bright hall I went.
A strange instrument there I saw.
A huge screen hanging on the wall,
Displaying a golden space.

Like bits of colourful crystal gemstones!
Resplendent with variegated colours of the city!
Those strange and beautiful high-rise buildings
A sight better than the myth of the world.

I saw lines of strange letters.
On one side of the screen flashed swiftly
Numerous young and strong giants
An effort to concentrate on the changing images.

Their look is quiet and peaceful.
The learned flame flashes in their eyes.
In a flash of clothes
The next is a whole.

Their stature, unusually tall.
Each one is well-nigh seven meters high.
Both men and women look dignified
Almost no age difference apparent.

Their skin is white as snow
With a faint flashy shine
Bright eyes are as naive as an infant's
Also kindled with a strange flame.

They manipulate the magic of the instrument.
The pictures of the changing space.
Their language is artless and plane.
As the bell is generally pleasant.

As I survey the length and breadth of the bright hall
I feel a powerful energy
Body and mind suffused with bliss and delight.
As if I too am a giant.

I seem to understand their language.
They are exploring the mysteries of the universe.
The cities on a lot of planets
Peopled with their countless partners.

Their mind they use to manipulate the instrument
Also can to transfer data be used
Even thousands of miles apart
Also to talk free to the heart.

Many lines of text on the screen
Is but a message from afar.
The whole universe is their home.
They build cities in space.

They use the spaceships
To transport you to far-distant other spaces.
Into a lightning, a moment, and you
Vanish into thin air, without a trace.

I feel a new civilization.
They have magical eyes.
They seem to be able to see the future
And can enter diverse time-spaces.

Men and women are holy and loving
Superior to our world's so-called love
They don't seem to understand ageing
Neither do they know about war.

Time seems not to exist
Science is jut a wonderful art
Their happiness comes from the creation of
A universe full of divine love.

I saw a young giant
Opening the door of a platinum
A round, magnificent hall
Packed with rows of giant s of men and women.

I saw a crystal stage.
Gyrating at the center of the hall.
Where a dignified and beautiful girl
Was playing a huge musical instrument.

A bunch of golden rays,
Shifting with all kinds of brilliant graphics
A mysterious and beautiful music
Like the Dragon leisurely crowing.

Thence I saw an enormous giant
Jump out of the remarkable dance onto the stage.
His hands held a huge ball
Which flashed with many colourful drawing .

I saw a group of young girls
Wearing a kind of white dresses
They seemed to fly lightly
Like the giant cranes.

The huge circular hall was resplendent
With clear, transparent decoration.
Like a bizarre gem of a full set,
Scintillating brilliantly in the light.

I saw a young singer
About the golden flame
The sound was strange and striking
Like singing , like chanting too.

Their music is at once mysterious and blissful
That shift randomly like the lightning
As if many planets of the universe
Shining bright and light in space.

The crystal city, aloft in space
Looks resplendent, magnificent
Countless wonderful golden flowers
Bloom and blush in that flawless space.

I saw an image of a transparent smiling face,
As if it were a colourful garden
The sky shed the golden light
And turned it into a city of gold.

I strode out of the circular hall
Came to a wide street with a smooth
Pavement covered with precious stones
And in line with the platinum edifice.

There are no terrestrial trees here,
But they are in full bloom with a lot of exotic flowers.
Sparkling with rich incense,
Shaping a garden at the center of the street.

Some strange flowers were there.
The branches as transparent crystal
Flashing all kinds of brilliant colours;
And bunches of round golden fruit.

I saw a huge statue.
It was like a spaceship.
Clustered around by shining stars,
High above the centre of the street.

I saw the column of a dazzling fountain
In a huge circle in the square;
The elegantly modelled statues
Portraying the holy giants.

The soaring magnificent edifices
Ran round the circle square.
There were some garden villas
There was a platinum steeple.

I saw a wide river
Girdling this huge city
The bottom flashed with transparent gold dust,
Amidst which were scattered brilliant gems.

The planning of tall trees on shore
And a long crystal corridor
A big multi-coloured bird
Three five one group floated on the surface of the water.

I saw a vast forest
The swaying tree, a tree of gold
The trees with towering spires
And as some platinum Pavilion.

I saw some giants along the walk,
Some male and female bodybuilders.
At the water's brink or in the forest
Like birds carefree and relaxed.

The wonderful space was as bright as crystal
Embraced this platinum city;
A giant, white and bright ball
Flashing boundless light into the air.

It resembled the huge suns
And like the man-made planets
The whole city was shining too,
Weaving a rare breed of magic.

A strange speeding train circled
About the city back and forth;
There seemed to be a kind of track in the sky
Like a shiny silver curve.

They seated body white buildings
As if it was a dreamlike maze
This huge city was unusually quiet,
Could not even hear the sound of the wind.

I bade goodbye to the platinum city.
Near a golden space
Stands another city here
A huge city of gold.

The building here is also huge.
But it's another beautiful shape.
The whole city is glittering
Golden edifice as beautiful as sculpture.

Here there live some other giants.

As if from another nation

They have boundless wisdom.

Like a golden, holy civilization.

Translated from the Chinese by Manu Mangattu

Creative Pieces

The Odyssey

Badrunissa Bhat

After a week of incessant rain, thunder, and the looming threat of floods, the day arrives, a day of relief, of sunshine, of relentless heat that kisses and scorches simultaneously. Such weather is a delight when you swing gently in a hammock under the shade of a pine, immersed in a classic; yet, it becomes a torment when one is trapped in traffic, suspended between impatience and motionlessness.

I found myself on Nigeen Bridge, my two-wheeler crawling inch by inch. The sun melted my face, tanned my hands, and seemed to mock my impatience. Yet, in spite of the chaos, the city revealed its mystical beauty. Grandiose Chinar trees lined the road, their roots deep as if holding onto centuries of memory. Zabarwan peaks rose like stoic sentinels in the distance, while Nigeen Lake stretched like a silver ribbon, reflecting the generosity of the sun and the grandeur of clouds that drifted as if bearing messages from the heavens. A scene to marvel at, if only the incessant honking and stifling heat did not punctuate it.

I wondered, in that moment, would hell feel like this? Thousands of times hotter than our solar star, unrelenting and punishing. And yet, heaven, I imagined, must offer streams of honeyed light, gardens that breathe and whisper, and serenity beyond human reckoning. But perhaps these binaries—hell and heaven, pleasure and torment are mere illusions, façades for deeper truths. Perhaps human life is a quest for the divine, and materialism blinds us from the real pursuit: the discovery of something eternal, something beyond our mortal grasp.

So, what is human life? Perhaps a waiting room for a world far more real, more enduring than this transient existence. Horrid and blissful simultaneously the recognition that this mortal life is

fleeting yet leads to something infinitely greater. Life, with its conventions, clichés, and relentless cycles, feels suffocating at times, liberating at others, fleeting in ways that make you long to bottle a single moment of happiness and uncork it at will, to relive a memory whenever despair encroaches.

Yet, what is life, if not a single breath? A pendulum swinging between moments of joy and suffering, reminiscent of Sisyphus's eternal toil. And yet, even in its futility, it bears meaning, shaped by how we navigate the oscillation of existence.

"Khudai sinde paase! Madad!" (By the grace of God, help me!)

The words of the beggar echoed in my ears as he knocked on car windows, shunned, ridiculed, yet persistent. A soul weary, trudging under the sun, bound to the merciless test of survival. Life's futility manifests differently for each of us. Pain and bliss coexist in cyclical patterns for the natural world trees shed, die, and bloom again but for humans, life is finite; once extinguished, consciousness dissolves into the unknown.

The traffic tested my patience, and I honked impulsively, only to stop at the absurdity of its sound. Harsh, grating, unnatural, a stark antithesis to the wind's gentle voice, to birdsong, to the subtle murmur of trees. I tilted my head back and let my eyes roam the sky. Puffy clouds drifted in scattered formation, the sun blazing above. In a blink, everything went dark—a sudden, intrusive vision of corpses scattered on hillsides, semi-decomposed bodies floating in the lake's serene expanse.

Pomp! Pomp!

I startled awake. The traffic had not moved; I had not moved. One hour had condensed into a fleeting instant. And yet, in that moment, I appreciated the cacophony of honks, the chaos that once irritated. Life teaches us to honor even the maddening, for

beauty is inseparable from its thorns. One cannot admire the crimson rose without acknowledging its prickly defense.

My hand rose to my heart as thoughts of Vincent van Gogh surfaced, and a sudden pang of empathy coursed through. His life, cold and alienating, expressed itself through a medium that transformed anguish into creation. How extraordinary, I thought, that pain is not merely endured but can be translated into art—brushstroke, color, and canvas becoming a vessel for the human soul. In our own small ways, each of us searches for that medium, that craft, that sanctuary which soothes and transcends, binding the scattered pieces of ourselves into wholeness.

We search for utopia, a fleeting sanctuary amid the dystopia of mortal life. And in that pursuit, even the smallest interactions: the beggar's plea, the honking cars, the sun's unrelenting glare become part of a larger odyssey.

The traffic inched forward. I accelerated my scooter, only to brake sharply when the red car ahead jolted to a stop. The near collision evoked a momentary surge of panic, yet instinct prevailed. In these ordinary moments, life's lessons unveil themselves quietly, almost imperceptibly.

Across the street, I noticed a crippled vegetable vendor, his hands weathered, his smile bright, selling his vegetables under the relentless sun. Watching him, patient and uncomplaining, Rumi's words whispered to me: 'If you are irritated by every rub, how will your mirror be polished?'

There is a humility in observing such souls. The journey matters more than the destination; the odyssey itself, with all its interruptions, detours, and encounters, is the true essence of life. The people, the circumstances, the small joys, and the trials—they are the mirrors reflecting the infinite within the finite.

"Hey! Move, move!"

The crowd pushed past, unaware of the introspection unfolding within me. And yet, I smiled, feeling liberated from the tyranny of time. Unlike the others, obsessed with arrival, I was ensnared by no clock. I understood then that freedom is found in perception, in the awareness that life's significance lies not in reaching, but in traversing the odyssey.

Philosophy, like art, demands that we wrestle with life's chaos and call it contemplation. Mortality and eternity keep playing their endless tug-of-war, while suffering insists on waltzing with joy like an old married couple who can't stand each other but won't file for divorce. The mundane and the transcendent keep flirting, pretending not to notice the other's presence. And here we are, poor spectators, trying to make sense of this absurd theatre. To live consciously, then, is to accept that nothing lasts—and yet we keep searching for permanence, like people refreshing the Wi-Fi signal of existence. Every breath, every glance at the sky, every fleeting encounter- tiny, ridiculous, magnificent, carries both the trivial and the infinite, depending on how poetic or sleep-deprived we feel that day.

I remembered Van Gogh again, his obsession with capturing light and shadow, his relentless pursuit of beauty despite despair. What is genius but the audacity to confront the ordinary with extraordinary vision? The chaos of Nigeen Bridge, the oppressive sun, the incessant honks, all became part of this canvas, moments rendered eternal by reflection.

Even the beggar, whose existence is defined by the mundane struggle for sustenance, participates in this cosmic rhythm. His persistence, humility, and visible exhaustion are gestures of resilience, an embodiment of life's paradoxes. Observing him, I felt both compassion and awe. Life's futility, its cyclicality, its apparent absurdity yet within it, the potential for insight and transcendence.

As my scooter continued its slow progress, I realized the lesson traffic imparts: the external world mirrors internal states. Frustration, impatience, awe, compassion—all are accessible simultaneously, contingent upon our willingness to perceive. Life's odyssey, much like this road, is punctuated by stops and starts, collisions narrowly avoided, and moments of unexpected grace.

And then, as if a final epiphany, I embraced the present entirely. The crowd surged past, the sun blazed overhead, and I moved forward - not in haste, but in mindful observation. Free from the tyranny of destination, liberated from the illusion of urgency, I savored the odyssey itself. This, I understood, was life: a flux of sensation and reflection, an interplay of fleeting pain and ecstatic awareness, a journey whose meaning is constructed moment by moment.

It is in such moments amid traffic, heat, honking, fleeting visions, and human perseverance that the essence of life reveals itself. A single breath, a glance at the sky, a smile from a stranger, a throb of frustration. All are parts of the same infinite odyssey. The search for the divine, the eternal, and the transcendent continues within this ephemeral frame, urging us to witness, to reflect, and to create.

By the time I reached the university, the chaos had faded, leaving only the residual warmth of the sun and the inner illumination of reflection. I had traversed more than roads; I had traversed consciousness itself.

The odyssey is perpetual, unbounded by time or place. It is in the navigation of existence, the conscious awareness of the fleeting and the eternal, that life becomes meaningful. And so, I continued riding through sun and shadow, honks and silence, despair and delight immersed in the profound, in the ordinary, in the eternal: my odyssey.

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