The comparative analysis reveals how different impairments generate distinct possibilities for discursive resistance. Chib's cerebral palsy affects communication, requiring her to develop technological strategies through her "one little finger" for asserting intellectual capacity: "My one little finger was a powerhouse of strength. I used email all the time" (131). Monga's visual impairment creates different challenges but generates her concept of 'other senses,' positioning blindness as developing alternative ways of knowing rather than representing a deficit.

Educational Exclusion and Institutional Barriers

Other aspects of their lives also reflect the stigma and subjugation they endure. The educational experience in India shows how educational institutes become the site of exclusion for both of them. Various educationists consider this space as a place where a child can flourish, not only in acquiring knowledge but also in learning about community, coordination, and relationships. Chib's retrospective analysis of her special school education reveals a deep understanding of how progressive educational discourse can perpetuate oppression through patronising practices: "Everything we did was special. We were perceived as a new breed of people who were praised for whatever we did... Nobody challenged us" (22-23).

Monga's experience with educational discrimination demonstrates systematic exclusion:

> [O]n the fateful day of my exclusion from formal education, I recall with particular clarity the cane chair at the school's reception area on which I sat brooding. Awaiting my transfer certificate, thinking to myself. I will never again come to school again; what I have done to deserve this? (Monga 45)

The experiences of both Chib and Monga demonstrate how the school functions as a gatekeeper, creating a work environment that excludes these extraordinary individuals. Projecting disability as an internal fault of the individual justifies their exclusionary practices.

Chib's later success in mainstream education becomes a powerful counter-narrative to special education discourse: "I was Malini Chib, BA!" (75). This exclamatory statement functions as both a personal celebration and a political assertion, which challenges the assumptions about disabled women's intellectual capacity. Similarly, Monga's entrepreneurial and marketing skills

reflect her strong desire to be financially independent as a woman, which challenges the narrative of perceiving disabled women as helpless and dependent.

Gendered Disability Discourse and Economic Disparities

Chib's detailed account of social exclusion during college and Monga's experiences with love affairs and groom-searching provide rich material for understanding how gendered assumptions about disability create unique forms of marginalisation. Her description of the college prom demonstrates the intersection of ableist and gendered expectations about social participation. "The organisers came up and said rather patronisingly, 'Why don't you sit down? You are bound to fall. You can't dance with crutches'" (65). This interaction depicts multiple layers of discrimination operating simultaneously, which reinforce the idea of disabled women as both physically incompetent and socially inappropriate for participating in simple joyful events.

Further, Monga's experience reveals different but related patterns of intersectional discrimination. Her difficulty in finding a suitable marriage partner shows how disability intersects with gendered expectations about women's roles. This concept can be understood through Monga's experiences of betrayal when a divorced man pursued her for marriage and, after knowing about her impairment, he went to marry someone else without informing her family. At that time, Monga stated,

> This was most shocking! What have I done now? Was I so bad that no one, no one at all, wished to have anything to do with me? First it was my school, then the music teacher denial... No one seemed to want to marry me. (Monga 87)

These narratives of both the authors reveal what critical feminist disability scholars identify as the intersection of ableist assumptions about marriage suitability with gendered expectations about women's primary roles as wives and mothers. Both authors face assumptions that disabled women cannot fulfil normative feminine roles, creating unique forms of exclusion where their identity as women has been sidelined due to their disability.

The autobiographies of both authors reflect these economic differences, which create distinct discursive possibilities and limitations. While both of them have impairments, their economic conditions build different trajectories for their lives. While Chib's international education and exposure to Western

disability rights discourse enable her to analyse the social model of disability and comparative cultural critique. Her economic security allows her to position herself as a critic of Indian systems while maintaining distance from economic vulnerability.

Her reflection on employment discrimination in London "Despite my two masters', I had not got a job in London, not through want of trying but I felt sure because of my disability" represents the perspective of someone whose economic security was never fundamentally threatened (183). Her ability to eventually return to India and help her mother in the growth of the institution, Centre for Special Education, which her mother established for her education, shows how class privilege enables certain forms of activism and social entrepreneurship.

Monga's narrative, conversely, reveals the additional pressures faced by disabled women from middle-class backgrounds in Indian society who must achieve economic independence despite systemic barriers. Throughout her autobiography, Monga's narrative reflects how she tried to seem normal and was hardly able to question the society, which was never equipped enough to create space for her. Her abusive marriage with Keith includes economic vulnerability: "How would I look after my children? Where would the money come from?" (107). This economic anxiety shapes her discursive strategy, emphasising practical achievements and financial independence as forms of resistance.

These economic disparities demonstrate how class privilege creates different possibilities for different people. Chib's ability to pursue international education and maintain economic independence through family resources enabled her to develop sophisticated theoretical critiques of ableism and produce extensive written work.

Whereas Monga's middle-class background required her to develop practical strategies for economic survival while challenging disability stereotypes through professional achievement. Her narrative demonstrates how disabled women from less privileged backgrounds must often prioritise economic independence and lack the tools to question society's biased practices. The narrative exposes how Monga's initial gratitude towards her first husband reflects the internalised ableism that pervades society's treatment of disabled women. Her perception of being "blessed" by his acceptance reveals how disabled women are conditioned to view marriage as a charitable act rather

than a mutual partnership. This gratitude becomes a form of psychological imprisonment, making her more susceptible to accepting substandard treatment.

Her tolerance towards her abusive husband's behaviour illustrates how patriarchal structures exploit disabled women's perceived dependence. The cultural mandate that a woman's home is her husband's place only becomes particularly oppressive for disabled women, who are made to believe they have fewer alternatives. Monga's repeated forgiveness of abuse stems not from weakness but from a realistic assessment of her limited options within a society that views disabled women as burden rather than autonomous individuals. The day-to-day struggle she faces becomes a mechanism of survival that prevents her from developing the critical consciousness necessary to challenge these biased practices. Her energy is consumed by immediate survival needs, leaving little room for questioning the systemic inequalities that shape her experiences. This case demonstrates how disability, class, and gender intersect to create unique forms of oppression that require sustained analysis rather than surface-level understanding.

Both narratives reveal what feminist disability scholars call the heterogeneity of disabled women's experiences, showing how economic background mediates but cannot eliminate the impact of intersectional oppression.

Experiences of Sexuality, Desire, and Reproduction

The analysis reveals that both authors employ different, but related, discursive techniques to challenge what feminist disability scholars identify as the cultural desexualisation of disabled women. Both narratives function as what could be termed sexual counter-narratives that confront societal assumptions about disabled women's romantic and sexual possibilities.

Chib's approach to discussing sexuality demonstrates particular boldness– "Like everyone else, I did have the desire for sex. Once when I brought up the subject, people around me started whispering and I was told, 'Why would you need sex?'" (147). Her article, "No Sex, Please, You're Disabled" represents an explicit counter-narrative construction that directly confronts cultural assumptions, transforming what feminist theory calls private troubles into public issues.

Monga's narrative addresses sexuality more indirectly through her marriage experiences and relationships. Her description of her abusive marriage

with Keith reveals how disabled women's sexuality can become a site of exploitation: "He kicked my head with his leg... half pushing, half dragging me, he flung me out of the door of the apartment" (131). This passage demonstrates how domestic violence against disabled women often includes specific targeting of their disability status as a form of additional humiliation.

However, Monga's later relationship with Ashwani, described as ten years younger than her, represents a different model of romantic partnership. She proposed to him, and despite his initial hesitation, he agreed to marry her. Her second marriage with Ashwani counters assumptions about disabled women's desirability while asserting her agency in romantic relationships.

The comparative analysis reveals how both authors must navigate between acknowledging social barriers while asserting their right to sexual expression and romantic partnership. Their strategies demonstrate what Wendell calls the complex negotiations required for disabled women to claim sexual agency within cultures that position disabled bodies as inappropriate objects of desire.

Both authors fundamentally disrupt what feminist disability scholars identify as the systematic denial of disabled women's reproductive autonomy and maternal subjectivity through their embodied experiences of motherhood and intimate relationships. Their narratives function as powerful counter-discourses to pervasive cultural assumptions that place disabled women outside the traditional frameworks of family formation and child-rearing.

Chib's discussions of her family planning decisions and romantic relationships assert her sexual and reproductive agency in ways that directly challenge what Garland-Thomson calls the cultural construction of disability as asexuality (20). Her narrative positions her as a desirable subject, capable of making autonomous decisions about intimate relationships and refuting the infantilisation that typically characterises societal responses to disabled women's sexuality and reproductive choices.

Monga's lived experience as a mother to Fiona and Mark represents what could be termed reproductive resistance, a form of embodied activism that challenges the very foundations of ableist thinking about maternal fitness. Her successful mothering of two children demolishes deeply entrenched myths about disabled women's reproductive incapacity, myths that feminist disability scholar Susan Wendell argues serve to maintain hierarchies of worthy versus unworthy reproducers in patriarchal societies.

The stereotype that disabled women require a cure before assuming maternal roles reveals what Morris identifies as the medical model's fundamental denial of disabled women's full personhood. This assumption positions disabled women as perpetual patients rather than potential mothers, reducing their complex identities to their impairments while denying their capacity for the emotional labour and nurturing that motherhood entails (160).

However, Monga's maternal narrative also exposes the cruel paradox of ableist patriarchy: while society questions disabled women's fitness for motherhood, it simultaneously weaponises their disabilities against them when they seek to maintain maternal relationships. Monga's profound anguish stems from her separation from her children. However, the separation from her beloved children caused her anguish, illustrating what feminist disability scholars refer to as the double bind of disabled motherhood.

This separation represents more than personal loss; it constitutes what could be understood as state-sanctioned violence against disabled women's maternal bonds. The legal system's potential use of her disability as grounds for questioning her parental competence demonstrates how ableist assumptions about caregiving capacity intersect with gendered expectations about proper motherhood to create unique vulnerabilities for disabled women.

Monga's emotional devastation reveals the human cost of what Kafer calls compulsory able-bodiedness, the systemic assumption that only normatively abled bodies can successfully fulfil social roles like motherhood (85). Her grief challenges readers to recognise the violence inherent in systems that first question disabled women's right to become mothers, then punish them for succeeding at motherhood by threatening to remove their children.

Both narratives thus function as what Mintz terms counter-maternal discourse revealing how disabled women's experiences of motherhood expand and complicate feminist understandings of reproductive justice beyond issues of choice and access to include questions of recognition, legitimacy, and the right to maintain maternal relationships without state interference based on embodied difference (164).

Conclusion

The comprehensive FCDA analysis reveals how both Chib's *One Little Finger* and Monga's *The Other Senses* function as sophisticated sites of discursive resistance that challenge normative constructions of femininity, ability, and

cultural belonging. Both authors employ complex narrative strategies that simultaneously acknowledge social barriers while asserting agency, demonstrating what Lazar terms "analytical activism" through their critical consciousness-raising about the intersections of gender and disability (141).

The comparative analysis demonstrates how different impairments create diverse but related challenges to dominant discourse, with cerebral palsy, and visual impairment generating distinct possibilities for resistance while sharing common patterns of marginalisation and empowerment. Both authors contribute to expanding feminist literary discourse by demonstrating how disability perspectives reveal the limitations of feminist analyses that assume shared experiences of patriarchal oppression without accounting for the complex intersections of multiple systems of power.

Their autobiographical practices demonstrate how life writing can function as both personal healing and transformative intervention, creating counter-narratives that challenge traditional representations of disabled women in Indian society. Through their sophisticated discursive strategies, both authors contribute to broader conversations about disability rights, feminist theory, and cultural change while providing models for how disabled women can claim narrative authority and assert their complex identities within systems designed to marginalise them.

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Rewriting the Warrior: Feminist Embodiment and Martial Arts in Anglophone Fanfiction by Indian Women

Martine Mussies

Abstract

This research investigates how Indian women authors use fanfiction platforms to reimagine martial arts narratives as sites of feminist agency and cultural reclamation. Through analysis of anglophone fanfiction on platforms like Archive of Our Own and Wattpad, the article reveals how these writers challenge dominant gender scripts whilst engaging with both global martial arts traditions and South Asian practices like *Shastar Vidya*. The findings demonstrate that martial arts function as complex frameworks for exploring intersectional identity, embodied resistance, and cultural preservation within diasporic communities. These digital texts offer crucial insights into how marginalised voices reshape dominant cultural narratives through transformative fan practices that extend far beyond entertainment value.

Keywords: Fanfiction; Intersectionality; Digital Humanities; Gender Studies; Postcolonial Digital Studies

Introduction

The study of fanfiction has evolved from a marginal examination of amateur creative practice into a robust field of academic inquiry. Central to this discourse is feminist embodiment, which reconfigures the traditional warrior narrative through an intersectional lens. This article investigates how Anglophone fanfiction re-authorises martial arts and warrior tropes, infusing them with feminist, queer, postcolonial, caste-conscious, and neurodivergent perspectives.

Traditionally, martial arts narratives have been dominated by hypermasculine ideals. Genres such as wuxia and action-adventure often portray male combatants negotiating honour, trauma, and violence. Yet within fanfiction, creators frequently subvert these canonical templates. By re-imagining

the warrior through an intersectional lens, fan authors challenge not only gendered constructions of the body but also the broader sociocultural assumptions embedded in martial narratives.

This article examines how feminist embodiment theory manifests in the re-writing of martial arts narratives within Anglophone Indian fanfiction. Following a discussion of key theoretical frameworks, I analyse the depiction of martial arts in fan re-authorship and examine intersectional dynamics, with attention to queer, postcolonial, caste-based, and neurodivergent inflections. Through close readings and comparative case studies, I propose new directions for research at the intersection of media, embodiment, and resistance.

Research Paradigm

The theoretical foundation of this research draws on feminist media theory, embodiment studies, and fan studies. As Laura Mulvey established, media representations actively construct gendered subject positions that privilege masculine perspectives. This framework becomes particularly pertinent when examining how martial arts narratives have historically marginalised feminine, queer, and non-normative forms of agency. Contemporary feminist media scholars emphasise the importance of "amplification of marginalized voices" through resistant reading practices and alternative cultural production (hooks). The fanfiction examined here resists reductive portrayals that position women solely in objectified or domestic roles, foregrounding female characters as complex martial artists whose physical skill becomes metaphorical resistance.

Embodiment theory offers a crucial lens through which to approach these texts. Rooted in anthropological and feminist traditions, embodiment theory speaks to the ways that experiences are enlivened and situated in the world through the body (Csordas). Martial arts, in this context, are not just physical disciplines—they are lived epistemologies. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception offers insights into how embodied resistance operates through "motor intentionality"—the body's pre-reflective engagement with the world that precedes conscious thought. In these fanfiction narratives, training becomes a form of somatic reclamation through which marginalised bodies develop new relationships to strength, vulnerability, and agency.

Where South Asian martial systems such as *Kalaripayattu*, *Silambam*, or *Sikh Shastar Vidya* traditionally inscribe warriorhood onto male bodies, feminist fanfiction reclaims these techniques as fluid and culturally specific. The *Dasam Granth* frames the body as a vessel of divine justice and disciplined strength—a warriorhood enfolded within grace and femininity rather than opposed to it.

Fanfiction operates as a liminal space where canonical narratives are taken apart and rebuilt. As Henry Jenkins argues, fan practices represent *textual poaching* that enables marginalised communities to reclaim agency within dominant cultural narratives. Yuri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere provides a framework for understanding how fanfiction platforms function as bounded cultural spaces where meaning-making operates according to specific rules. Within this digital semiosphere, traditional martial arts signifiers undergo translation and transformation across cultural and linguistic boundaries, creating hybrid meanings that serve both preservation and innovation functions. Homi Bhabha's theorisation of cultural hybridity illuminates how such boundary-crossings produce new, unstable forms of meaning that belong wholly to neither source culture.

Sara Ahmed's work on affective economies further explains how emotions like pride, shame, and anger become attached to specific cultural practices and circulated through digital networks. In the context of martial arts fanfiction, training sequences function as affective landscapes where characters and readers navigate complex emotional territories around strength, vulnerability, cultural connection, and personal transformation. Radhika Gajjala's work on "cybersubaltern" practices reveals how these digital texts function as sites of postcolonial agency, with authors performing unpaid cultural work that serves both individual creative expression and collective cultural preservation whilst remaining embedded within global digital economies.

Methodology and Platform Analysis

This article adopts a qualitative, close-reading methodology rooted in feminist media analysis and embodiment theory. The primary corpus consists of Anglophone fanfiction texts drawn from Archive of Our Own (AO3), Wattpad, FanFiction.net, and curated Discord and Facebook archives. Texts were

selected based on explicit engagement with martial arts or warrior identities, thematic focus on gender, embodiment, trauma, or alternative epistemologies, and the presence of author signals indicating feminist, queer, caste-conscious, or neurodivergent perspectives.

The emergence of digital fanfiction platforms has fundamentally transformed cultural production, creating unprecedented opportunities for marginalised voices to participate in narrative creation. AO3, with its nonprofit ethos and sophisticated tagging architecture, allows authors to signal engagement with specific martial arts traditions whilst indicating key identity positions. This precise metadata facilitates discoverability and the formation of micro-communities within the broader fandom ecosystem. Wattpad, by contrast, skews younger and more commercial in orientation, but its real-time commenting features and algorithmic recommendation system amplify themes around intersectional identity politics, casteism, queerness, and feminist resistance. These platform differences create what Ian Hutchby calls *material agency*—where technological affordances actively shape cultural production rather than merely facilitating it.

Yet platform affordances must be interrogated as well as celebrated. AO3's tagging architecture, frequently praised within fan studies for enabling marginalised communities to find one another, was built by and for a specific demographic: predominantly Western, Anglophone, university-educated fandom cultures whose classificatory intuitions shaped the folksonomy from its inception. An Indian author writing about *Kalaripayattu*or *Shastar Vidya* must render her work discoverable within a taxonomy not designed for her knowledge systems, translating culturally specific practice into searchable categories legible to audiences whose frameworks of reference may be fundamentally different. Safiya Umoja Noble's work on algorithmic oppression demonstrates how apparently neutral information architectures reproduce cultural hierarchies even when—perhaps especially when—their designers hold progressive commitments. The very features that make AO3 hospitable to marginalised fandoms in Western contexts may simultaneously function as gatekeeping mechanisms for non-Western cultural content, rewarding texts that make their South Asian references maximally legible to non-South-Asian readers whilst disadvantaging texts that assume cultural competency. This does

not diminish the real affordances these platforms provide, but it complicates the celebratory framing that treats platform accessibility as straightforwardly emancipatory, insisting instead that the material conditions of digital cultural production remain uneven even within spaces explicitly committed to inclusivity.

Crucially, these platforms act as archives and laboratories—preserving endangered cultural forms whilst making space for new hybrid expressions. For *Shastar Vidya*, where offline transmission faces challenges due to the decline of traditional *akhara* systems, digital fanfiction becomes a parallel preservation strategy. For diasporic authors in particular, these platforms offer tools of translation: not merely linguistic, but cultural. A fanfiction might include glossaries, footnotes, or in-text clarifications introducing readers to complex ideas such as the caste implications of certain fighting styles or the significance of saffron robes in Sikh martial philosophy.

The corpus's depth requires methodological clarification. Qualitative close reading need not be statistically representative, but the analytical claims made here oscillate uneasily between 'these texts are illustrative examples' and 'these texts evidence a broader pattern.' Two texts cannot substantiate claims about Indian women fanfiction authors as a category; what they can do is illuminate specific mechanisms through which embodied cultural knowledge is negotiated in Anglophone digital spaces. This distinction matters: the value of this analysis lies not in breadth but in the granularity of its attention to semiotic translation, platform affordance, and embodied epistemology as they operate in particular texts, at particular moments, within particular communities. Future research should expand the corpus systematically—ideally through participatory methods involving author communities—to assess whether the differential logics identified here recur across wider fandom networks. The present study is; therefore, best understood as generative rather than comprehensive: mapping conceptual terrain and developing analytical tools applicable to a larger field that remains substantially understudied within both fan studies and South Asian digital humanities.

My position as a non-Indian researcher analysing these texts is not a neutral limitation to be briefly acknowledged and set aside. It is a constitutive condition of this research that shapes which questions I ask, which patterns I recognise, and—crucially—which meanings remain opaque to me. I bring to

these texts a martial arts background and familiarity with the theoretical frameworks deployed here, but I lack the embodied and social knowledge that comes from navigating caste, diaspora, or the specific cultural losses these authors write against. There is a real risk that my application of Western academic frameworks—Lotman, Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed—imposes analytical categories that misalign with how authors and communities understand their own work, effectively re-enacting the colonial gesture of making non-Western knowledge legible only through Western theoretical translation. I have attempted to mitigate this through sustained engagement with South Asian scholarship and through treating the fanfiction texts themselves as theoretical objects rather than mere illustrations. But mitigation is not resolution. This research would be strengthened by participatory methodologies that position fan authors as collaborators in the analytical process—not subjects whose texts are interpreted from outside, but interlocutors whose own frameworks and intentions shape the research questions from the start.

Case Study One: *Scars in the Smoke*

Scars in the Smoke, published on Archive of Our Own on 27th May 2025 by the author WisdomTeef, exemplifies the sophisticated cultural work performed by Indian women fanfiction authors who reimagine martial narratives through explicitly feminist and postcolonial frameworks. Set within the Naruto universe yet radically departing from its canonical logic, this 1,200-word vignette transforms the hypermasculine combat sequences characteristic of shônen anime into what the text itself terms 'an unspoken poem'—a choreographed exchange between two bodies that refuses the violent epistemologies of dominance central to the source material.

The narrative centres on Roshni, whose they/them pronouns immediately signal a queering of the traditionally gender-binary Naruto universe, and Arin, a woman in a 'glowing exosuit' whose technological augmentation destabilises assumptions about 'natural' versus 'enhanced' bodies. Together, they confront an Akatsuki minion not through *chakra*-based jutsu but through mudra—symbolic hand gestures drawn from Indian classical dance and spiritual practice. This substitution constitutes what Lotman would recognise as a fundamental semiotic boundary-crossing: the translation of Japanese anime martial logic

into South Asian embodied epistemology, performed within the contested digital space of anglophone fanfiction.

The text's opening establishes this translational work: "Roshni fights like they're writing verses into the air—sharp, measured, burning with purpose." The simile linking combat to poetry reframes violence as signification—as the production of meaning through bodily inscription upon space. When the Akatsuki minion performs the *Surya Mudra* crudely, summoning fire merely for mechanical propulsion, Roshni's assessment— "They would have done differently. They would have done better"—establishes a hierarchy of cultural competency. The gap between them is however not one of skill alone: for Roshni, *mudra* is a living system of meaning; for the minion, it is a stolen gesture.

When Roshni subsequently performs the *Padma Mudra*— "mounted their right foot into the crook of their left knee and with one graceful swish, formed the Padma mudra with their palms cupping air and their fingers outstretched"—the precision of description enacts what Lotman calls *internal translation*, where a text must render visible the codes that native participants might take for granted. The *Padma* (lotus) *Mudra* carries profound symbolic weight in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, representing spiritual emergence from material existence—a metaphor the text literalises when Roshni fights within a sphere of water. This layered signification demonstrates how the fanfiction operates simultaneously in multiple semiotic registers: as Naruto fanfiction, as Indian cultural text, and as feminist intervention.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology proves crucial for analysing how the text constructs combat as lived bodily experience. The choreographic interplay between Roshni and Arin— "The girl knew when to stop, Roshni knew when to begin. It was an unspoken poem between them"—exemplifies the concept of *motor intentionality*: the body's pre-reflective engagement with its environment that precedes conscious deliberation. Arin's eyes track Roshni's palm not to receive verbal instruction but to attune her defensive movements to Roshni's offensive buildup. This is embodied communication operating at the level of rhythm, breath, and spatial awareness.

The text's most radical feminist intervention emerges in its final sequence,

where combat transitions into tenderness without rupture. After Roshni defeats the antagonist, the narrative immediately shifts to intimate attention: "Roshni slowly raised a hand, still shaking from the sudden burst of energy... Arin mirrored their actions, raising a cupped palm and resting it against their neck." The text refuses the stoic warrior ideal. Arin as "the strongest woman they knew—yet so fragile, she was like glass" articulates what feminist embodiment theory insists upon: strength and vulnerability are not opposites but coexistent conditions of embodied existence. Drew Leder's phenomenology of bodily absence further illuminates how the body becomes most visible precisely in moments of breakdown.

Scars in the Smoke demonstrates how fanfiction operates simultaneously as cultural archive and experimental laboratory: preserving knowledge of *mudra* and *Bharatanatyam* within a digital format accessible to diasporic communities and global audiences, whilst testing the possibilities of hybrid cultural forms that refuse the binary of authentic tradition versus inauthentic innovation.

Case Study Two: *Deg Tegh Fateh*

The second case study examines *Deg Tegh Fateh*, a four-chapter narrative that deploys sustained character development to construct a 'pedagogy of unlearning.' Where *Scars in the Smoke* operated through compressed poetic imagery, this text builds its theoretical interventions gradually, transforming canonical Avatar: The Last Airbender character Zuko through sustained encounter with Vaidehi, a Dalit woman master of Shastar Vidya who exists entirely outside the source material's narrative universe. The text was removed by the author in late 2024, which underscores the precarity of cybersubaltern cultural production, even as its preservation in research archives enables continued analysis of its sophisticated engagement with Sikh martial philosophy, neurodivergent phenomenology, and anti-caste resistance.

The opening scene establishes Vaidehi's position at multiple semiotic boundaries simultaneously. Zuko crosses into territory where "light no longer traveled in a straight line, and silence wasn't emptiness… it pulsed"—enacting what Lotman terms movement across the semiosphere's boundary, where one cultural logic gives way to another. Vaidehi's first appearance operates through strategic withholding: initial perception registers only sound, then the

chakkar's visual trace, then her full presence. The text emphasises her dark skin, barefoot stance, and clothing Zuko cannot "place in any nation he recognized." Her wrapped hands—"bound up tightly in linen strips, stained with herbs and charcoal"—carry multiple significations that the text unpacks across subsequent chapters, ultimately revealed as a visible archive of caste violence and embodied resistance.

The text's most sophisticated intervention emerges through its construction of Vaidehi's neurodivergence not as narrative obstacle but as epistemic resource that structures her martial practice and pedagogical method. Details accumulate across chapters: sensory sensitivity to sound and proximity, stimming through finger-tapping, adherence to numerical patterns ("her movements cycled in fours"), and pattern-focused visual attention. Crucially, the text refuses pathologising language. Vaidehi herself articulates: "Like rhythm in a world that wants noise." This repositions neurodivergence through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework—her embodiment constitutes a different mode of world-having rather than a failure to access a 'normal' world. Mia Mingu's concept of access intimacy offers a complementary framework, attending to the relational conditions that enable or foreclose full participation in embodied practice, and Margaret Price's work similarly resists deficit framings. The breath pattern central to fatehnâmâ practice ("4 counts in, 4 counts out, 4 counts held, 4 counts released") aligns with her broader adherence to fours, suggesting that her neurodivergence does not oppose her martial practice but fundamentally organises it.

The text's explicit engagement with caste operates through direct revelation of historical violence and the construction of alternative community structures. Vaidehi's disclosure— "I was born into a caste that was historically even regarded as polluting... or even just my shadow"—articulates Dalit experience through the concept of untouchability. The revelation of childhood violence crystallises anti-caste politics: "I picked up a sword when I wasn't supposed to. I was ten. The upper-caste elders said I had defiled the weapon. They broke my hands." This violence carries specific historical weight that the text implicitly mobilises. *Shastar Vidya*'s transmission has never been socially neutral: access to weapons training within Sikh communities was historically stratified along lines of caste and class, shaped further by British colonial policy

that actively intervened in who could legally bear arms. The Arms Act of 1878 systematically disarmed large portions of the Indian population, with enforcement falling disproportionately on lower-caste and non-martial-class communities, consolidating colonial and upper-caste interests simultaneously. Purnima Dhavan's scholarship on Sikh martial culture documents how the Khalsa's egalitarian ideals around weaponry and warriorhood existed in ongoing tension with caste hierarchies that structured access to training lineages in practice. The childhood violence Vaidehi describes, upper-caste elders breaking a Dalit girl's hands for touching a sword, represents a historically documented logic of bodily incapacitation as caste enforcement: destroying the physical capacity for practices deemed polluting or transgressive. By having Vaidehi not only recover but teach *Shastar Vidya* to a prince, *Deg Tegh Fateh* performs a direct inversion of this historical structure, constructing subaltern transmission as both personally reclamatory and politically corrective. The fanfiction's intervention is thus not merely imaginative but historically argued: it positions embodied martial knowledge as a site where caste hierarchies were enforced and where they can, through practice and pedagogy, be refused. In the fanfiction, the specific injury targets precisely the body parts required for weapon mastery, attempting to permanently disable her martial capacity. Her response demonstrates what Gajjala theorises as cybersubaltern resistance: "But I learned to handle the blade differently. I trained through the pain. Until the act itself became something like a prayer."

The *fatehnâmâ* ritual structures the text's central pedagogical relationship, transforming combat from dominance assertion into what the text terms "witnessing." Vaidehi defines the practice through negation: "This isn't a duel." "We spar not to win, but to witness." Her question—"What is left when you let go of all the ideas of proving yourself that you are worth being?"—positions *fatehnâmâ* as a practice of subtraction, the gradual removal of ego investments that distort embodied presence. Vaidehi's question cuts past technique altogether, landing precisely on the wound Zuko has carried since his exile: the compulsion to earn the right to exist.

The *kirpân* functions throughout as what Lotman would term a nuclear element of the semiotic system—a symbol condensing multiple meanings. Within Sikh tradition, the *kirpân* is one of the five Ks, representing commitment to