

justice and protection of the vulnerable. The text preserves this spiritual dimension whilst expanding the weapon's significance to encompass anti-caste resistance and pedagogical authority. The *Fatehnâmâ* salute—"the crossing of her blade"—ritualises the encounter; the *kirpân* touches Vaidehi's forehead in a gesture of devotion that transforms weaponry into sacred objects. The text's conclusion, in which Vaidehi gifts Zuko a ceremonial *chakkar* inscribed in *Gurmukhi* script with the words "Let every circle return to stillness," enacts what Gajjala might term digital knowledge transfer: the movement of subaltern epistemology across boundaries of nation, caste, and canon.

Deg Tegh Fateh demonstrates how extended fanfiction narrative can function as a sustained theoretical argument. The text's deletion from Wattpad underscores the precarity of such digital cultural production: unlike institutionally archived academic texts, fanfiction exists at the mercy of platform policies, author decisions, and the ephemeral nature of digital storage. That a stable archival copy is maintained for research represents its own form of preservation labour—a profound irony, given that the text is itself explicitly concerned with preserving endangered martial traditions.

Comparative Analysis: Differential Logics of Embodied Resistance

This comparative analysis examines how *Scars in the Smoke* and *Deg Tegh Fateh* construct fundamentally divergent approaches to embodied resistance. Rather than cataloguing shared themes, this section demonstrates how the same conceptual terrain—embodied knowledge, cultural translation, anti-oppressive praxis—operates through incompatible temporal, semiotic, and pedagogical frameworks. These differences emerge from the structural affordances of their respective platforms and the distinct political projects informing diasporic versus India-based authorship.

Yet even this diasporic/India-based distinction risks obscuring internal heterogeneity within the category 'Indian women authors' that the analysis cannot afford to flatten. A Punjabi-Sikh woman writing from Toronto about Shastar Vidya occupies a fundamentally different relationship to that tradition than a Dalit woman in Maharashtra engaging with the same material—differences structured by caste position, regional language, religious community, generational distance from practice lineages, and differential access to both

the tradition and the digital platforms through which it circulates. Floya Anthias' concept of translocational positionality offers a useful corrective: identity categories like "Indian woman" are not fixed coordinates but intersecting locations that shift across contexts, producing irreducibly different vantage points even within apparently shared cultural projects. Nirmal Puwar's work on 'space invaders'—bodies occupying institutional spaces not designed for them—further illuminates how different authors enter fandom spaces carrying different histories of exclusion. My earlier work on misfitting extends this analysis, examining how bodies that do not conform to normative templates experience their non-belonging as both exclusion and creative resource, whereas Sharmila Rege's work on Dalit feminist standpoint epistemology further insists that caste experience produces irreducibly distinct forms of knowledge that cannot be subsumed under generalist feminist frameworks, demanding that researchers attend to the specific epistemic positions from which Dalit women authors engage with traditions of embodied practice. The comparative framework developed here, distinguishing diasporic from India-based authorship, is a necessary first step, but subsequent research must resist consolidating these into stable types, attending instead to the multiplicity of positions from which Indian women authors engage with martial traditions they variously inherit, recover, reclaim, or imaginatively reconstruct.

The two texts construct embodied resistance through opposing temporal logics. *Scars in the Smoke* operates through momentary intensity—resistance condensed into singular instants of heightened awareness where the body simultaneously becomes a weapon, archive, and poem. The "unspoken poem" metaphor encapsulates the text's commitment to embodied resistance as aesthetic revelation rather than gradual accumulation. Resistance exists in the charged space between bodies, in the held breath before contact, in the recognition that passes through gesture rather than speech.

Deg Tegh Fateh, by contrast, constructs embodied resistance through cumulative transformation—the slow, deliberate reorganisation of habitual patterns across sustained practice. Vaidehi's pedagogy rejects spectacular moments in favour of witnessing through *fatehnâmâ* ritual. When Zuko's firebending shifts from 'screaming' to 'intentional... contained bursts,' the text attributes this not to epiphany but to weeks of disciplined repetition. This

temporal difference produces distinct phenomenologies: *Scars in the Smoke* enacts Merleau-Ponty's motor intentionality—resistance as the moment when training crystallises into instinct—while *Deg Tekh Fateh* foregrounds pedagogical intentionality, resistance as the systematic construction of alternative embodied patterns.

The texts deploy martial arts as fundamentally different narrative strategies. *Scars in the Smoke* utilises martial arts as semiotic and affective medium, enabling extraordinary narrative efficiency: a single mudra can invoke entire cultural systems without requiring explicit explanation. Combat functions as textual performance, something to be read rather than merely witnessed. *Deg Tekh Fateh* constructs martial arts as didactic and ethical architecture—the *fatehnâmâ* structures the entire narrative, builds reader knowledge across chapters, and connects specific techniques to broader ethical frameworks. Neither approach is inherently superior; they serve distinct purposes within different reader communities and platform contexts.

These differences cannot be separated from platform contexts and authorial positioning. AO3's architecture facilitates semiotic precision: sophisticated tagging allows authors to signal highly specific cultural content, enabling compact, symbolically dense narratives that assume specialised reader communities. Diasporic authors writing from positions of cultural recovery produce texts like *Scars in the Smoke* where cultural elements appear as precious fragments to be preserved and honoured. Wattpad's mobile-first interface and serialised chapter structure enable moral and affective seriality—extended narratives that build emotional investment and ethical frameworks across sustained engagement. India-based authors (or those with stronger institutional connections to practice lineages) construct pedagogical narratives against structural exclusion, positioning fanfiction as gateway to living teachers and community practice.

Despite these fundamental differences, both texts perform crucial convergent work: they function as digital archives preserving endangered knowledge systems whilst simultaneously operating as experimental laboratories transforming those systems through feminist, queer, and anti-oppressive frameworks. Both engage in what might be termed embodied epistemology—the positioning of bodily practice as legitimate knowledge production rather

than mere physical skill. Both perform Lotmanian semiotic translation, creating hybrid cultural forms that are neither purely “traditional” nor simply “modern.” And both centralise feminist embodiment, insisting that women’s and gender-nonconforming people’s relationships to violence, training, strength, and vulnerability constitute legitimate subjects for narrative exploration.

A critical tension, however, runs beneath both texts’ engagements with embodied violence and demands explicit acknowledgment. The phenomenological framework deployed throughout this analysis—Merleau-Ponty’s motor intentionality, Csordas’s embodiment as paradigm—treats the body primarily as a site of experience, meaning-making, and cultural inscription. This framework illuminates much, but risks aestheticising forms of physical violence that are also, irreducibly, political facts. Vaidehi’s broken hands function powerfully within the narrative as a literary motif of reclamation: destroyed and rebuilt, they become proof of extraordinary resilience. Yet broken hands are also a documented form of caste enforcement—a specific, material act of violence aimed at permanent incapacitation. Shailaja Paik’s scholarship on Dalit women’s embodied experience cautions against frameworks that, in emphasising the body’s capacity for resistance and transformation, inadvertently subordinate the reality of violence to its narrative recuperation. The risk is not that these fanfictions aestheticise violence—both texts treat Vaidehi’s injury with gravity—but that the academic analysis, in its enthusiasm for embodied epistemology, moves too quickly from wound to meaning. A fuller analysis must hold both registers simultaneously: the broken hands as literary figures and as historical practice, the training as phenomenological reclamation and as political act, the healed body as narrative triumph and as evidence of injustice that warranted no triumph to overcome. Feminist embodiment theory is strongest not when it celebrates resilience but when it insists that resilience should not have been necessary.

Implications for Cultural Preservation and Conclusion

The analysis of these texts reveals how fanfiction functions as a complex site of cultural preservation—not simply recording endangered practices but actively transforming them through feminist, anti-caste, and queer frameworks. Both texts engage in layered archiving: simultaneously preserving linguistic heritage

(Sanskrit and Punjabi terminology), semantic access (English translation), and embodied description sufficient to enable approximate physical reconstruction. *Deg Tekh Fateh* archives not merely technique but the historical exclusions necessitating its reclamation, providing future readers with politically situated practice embedded within ongoing struggles for access and legitimacy.

Despite sophisticated archival strategies, both texts confront fundamental limitations inherent to textual preservation of embodied practices. Text can describe movement but cannot transmit the proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, and phenomenological dimensions constituting embodied knowledge. No amount of description enables readers to feel motor intentionality in their own bodies. The *Fatehnâmâ* sequences meticulously document breath patterns and weapon positioning, yet no textual description conveys what it feels like to maintain these practices under skilled instruction. These texts are best understood not as replacement for embodied lineages but as complementary preservation strategies—creating new access points whilst acknowledging their limitations.

A further preservation limitation specific to these Anglophone texts concerns the politics of translation embedded in the choice of English as medium. The article's focus on Anglophone fanfiction is methodologically necessary but analytically consequential: English is not a neutral vehicle for South Asian martial knowledge but a language shaped by colonial encounter, carrying assumptions about clarity, abstraction, and universality that sit uneasily with embodied, lineage-specific practices. Both texts negotiate this problem visibly—through Sanskrit and Punjabi terminology retained untranslated, through glossaries and in-text clarifications, through the strategic use of italics that mark certain words as resistant to full assimilation into English prose. Tejaswini Niranjana's work on translation and postcoloniality argues that translation is never innocent: it participates in the construction of the translated culture as object of knowledge, fixing what is fluid and rendering legible what is deliberately opaque. When *Scars in the Smoke* describes the *Padma Mudra* in enough detail for a non-practitioner to visualise it, it performs a kind of pedagogical opening that is simultaneously an act of cultural exposure. When *Deg Tekh Fateh* retains *degteghfateh* untranslated in its title, it refuses this exposure, demanding that readers meet the text on its own terms. These are not merely stylistic choices but translation politics: decisions about who the imagined reader

is, what prior knowledge she holds, and how much of the cultural work of comprehension should fall on author versus audience. Attending these micro-decisions reveals translation itself as a site of feminist and postcolonial negotiation within these texts.

The ephemerality of digital platforms fundamentally shapes these texts' archival functions. *Deg Tekh Fateh's* deletion from Wattpad illustrates how platform precarity threatens cultural memory. Unlike institutional archives with preservation mandates, fanfiction platforms operate through commercial viability or volunteer labour. This precarity operates unevenly: AO3's nonprofit structure provides relative stability for diasporic preservation projects, whilst commercial platforms subject to shifting business priorities remain vulnerable. These texts should therefore be understood as nodes within broader networks of cultural production, part of multi-scalar preservation strategies operating at individual, collective, institutional, and cultural levels.

Crucially, neither text engages in pure documentation. Both perform transformative preservation—archiving practices whilst arguing for their reconfiguration along feminist, anti-caste, and queer lines. *Scars in the Smoke* archives *mudra* through queer embodiment, refusing to gender Indian classical arts and positioning non-binary possibility as inherent rather than exceptional. *Deg Tekh Fateh* archives *Shastar Vidya* through anti-caste politics, constructing alternative transmission models where neurodivergent Dalit women teach exiled princes. This challenges preservation models positioning maintenance and transformation as opposed: cultures survive through adaptation, and fanfiction demonstrates how marginalised communities can claim authority over cultural transmission whilst transforming exclusionary gatekeeping structures.

The analysis of *Scars in the Smoke* and *Deg Tekh Fateh* reveals how Anglophone fanfiction by Indian women authors constitutes sophisticated cultural work extending far beyond entertainment or derivation. These texts function simultaneously as feminist critique, cultural preservation, theoretical intervention, and community-building practice—deploying martial arts narratives to reimagine embodiment, resist oppression, and archive endangered knowledge systems. Their differential logics—momentary versus cumulative,

semiotic versus didactic, diasporic versus India-based—reveal the multiplicity of approaches Indian women authors take toward martial arts representation.

Most significantly, these texts demonstrate how marginalised communities seize digital platforms to perform cultural work institutions have failed to accomplish. Where museums treat martial arts as historical artefacts, these fanfictions render them living practices. Where universities exclude embodied knowledge from legitimate scholarship, these texts insist on bodily experience as epistemology. Where caste and patriarchal systems gatekeep traditional transmission, these fanfictions construct alternative access points. The future of cultural preservation increasingly depends on recognising fanfiction's legitimacy as knowledge production. These texts deserve recognition not as derivative play but as vital cultural labour preserving endangered practices whilst transforming them toward more just futures.

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Author Note on Stable Archives

Stable archival copies of the analysed fanfiction texts are hosted on the author's personal academic domain. "Scars in the Smoke" is archived at <https://martinemussies.nl/web/scars-in-the-smoke/>. "Deg Tegh Fateh" is archived at <https://martinemussies.nl/web/deg-tegh-fateh/>. These URLs may be cited in accordance with MLA 9th edition guidelines for online sources.

Disability and Desire: Reimagining Sexuality in *Mira Yagnik ni Dayri*

Divya Shah

Abstract

Since the 1980s, Disability Studies has shifted away from the medical model, no longer viewing disability as a product of personal tragedy. Instead, it challenges dominant ableist discourses that deny disabled individual's agency, especially in matters of sexuality. The disabled body, as a desired and desiring subject, remains largely unacknowledged in mainstream culture. Scholars like Shildrick argue that such bodies disrupt normative ideas of embodiment, while Tremain notes that "socially intelligible sexuality" is often denied to the disabled. This article explores these ideas through the lens of *Meera Yagnik ni Diary* (1992), a Gujarati novella by Bindu Bhatt. The novella, written in diary form, unveils the inner world of Meera—a bisexual young researcher living with vitiligo. Her romantic and sexual relationships first with Vrunda and then with Ujaas and throughout this journey of search for love brings out her constant struggle for acceptance with desire where vitiligo also metaphorically separates her life between dark and white spots. Through Meera's voice, the novella exposes the emotional and psychological complexities of Meera's world which incorporates her futile efforts for negotiating love, intimacy, and identity while living in a body marked by visible difference. Using Foucauldian notions of sexuality, the article examines Meera's sexuality as a series of acts that challenge normative constructs. The concept of anomalous embodiment helps frame how Meera's 'black and white' body contests ableist and heteronormative assumptions. Finally, the article also evaluates the novella's reception in Gujarati literary circles, with a focus on its contribution to disability, desire, and Queer discourse.

Keywords: Desire; Sexuality; Disability; Gujarati Literature

Introduction

Since the 1980s, Disability Studies has shifted away from the medical model,

foregrounding disability no longer as a product of personal tragedy but as a socially constructed category (Thomson 6). Central to this shift is that it challenges dominant ableist discourses that deny disabled individual's agency, especially in matters of sexuality. The disabled body, as a desired and desiring subject, remains largely unacknowledged in mainstream culture. Scholars such as Margrit Shildrick argue that disabled bodies disrupt normative assumptions of embodiment, while Tremain highlights how “socially intelligible sexuality” is systematically denied to disabled people (222).

This essay examines these theoretical concerns through the lens of *Meera Yagnik ni Diary* (1992), a Gujarati novella by Bindu Bhatt. Written in diary form, the text opens an intimate window into the emotional and inner world of Meera—a bisexual young researcher living with vitiligo. Her relationships with Vrunda and later with Ujaas reveal her constant struggle to negotiate desire, intimacy, and self-worth, while vitiligo also metaphorically separates her life between dark and white spots. The diary form becomes a crucial narrative device which captures her interiority, self-doubt, and longing.

Despite its rich thematic engagement with disability, desire, and queer subjectivity, the novella has received limited critical attention within Gujarati literary discourse – particularly regarding its representation of disabled female sexuality. This gap leads to some important questions such as How does *Meera Yagnik ni Diary* construct Meera's sexuality in relation to her disabled body? In what ways does the novella challenge dominant ableist and heteronormative discourses? How have Gujarati literary critics responded to the text and what does their reception reveal about broader silences around disability and queer desire? To address these questions, the article does the textual analysis based on: Foucauldian notions of sexuality to understand how Meera becomes a subject of desire within discursive constraints. Rosemary Garland Thomson's concept of normate, to analyse how Meera's vitiligo marked body disrupts normative ideals of femininity and desirability. The concept of anomalous embodiment (Shildrick) to frame Meera's body as a site of anxiety, desire, and social unreadability. Finally, the essay also evaluates the novella's reception in Gujarati literary circles to examine how disability and queer desire are interpreted, ignored or romanticised.

Intersection of Disability and Desire

The diary opens on 31st December with a New Year's Eve celebration in Meera's hostel and concludes one year later, framing the diary as a record of Meera's evolving awareness of desire, intimacy, and selfhood. At the party, Meera wins the first prize for her long, beautiful hair. When her friends tease her about enchanting men with her flowing locks, Meera remains uncertain about who would truly reach her, crossing the variegated touch of her vitiligo as her question is: "*aa kabarchitra sparsh ne olangi ne kon pahochshe mara sudhi?*" [Who will reach to me crossing this variegated touch?] (Bhatt 7). (*This and the subsequent translations have been done by me)

This uncertainty, reflected in her question, foregrounds the tension between her longing for intimacy and the stigma attached to her vitiligo. Drawing on Foucault's notion of sexuality as a discursive formation as discussed in his book *History of Sexuality*, Meera's self-understanding is also affected by or reshaped by how society reads her black and white body (Foucault 5). The question not only highlights Meera's desire to be loved but also underscores how her understanding of sexuality is interwoven with the societal discourse of normalcy and ablebodiedness. (Loeser, Pini and Crowley 1).

As the narrative unfolds, Meera's yearning for love unfolds through two significant relationships—first with Vrunda, and later with Ujaas. Vrunda, once Meera's schoolteacher, had been a rare source of affirmation during Meera's childhood, when she was mocked as '*kalidholi*' (black and white) for her vitiligo. When Vrunda re-enters her life as a hostel roommate, their relationship develops into a space of emotional and physical intimacy. For the first time, Meera experiences herself as both a desiring subject and an object of desire.

The diary becomes the primary site through which Meera articulates her desire. Her entries record moments of intense physical intimacy, "*Amara sharir ekbija ne famfosta, bhista bhista ketlay moja na chadhan chadta ne utarta ogalye jata hata... ane taras to hati andhlibhi?*" [Our bodies rummaging each other, crushing each other were melting while climbing on and off...and yet this blind thrust] (Bhatt 45). Elsewhere, she writes, "*koi raakh valela angara ne funktu hatu?*" [Someone was fanning the burning embers] (Bhatt 38). Her sensory awareness is equally vivid, "*Hufala pani no*

sparsh, ek tivra romanch ane angeang chhalkatu sukh” [A touch of warm water, an intense thrill, and overwhelming happiness in body parts] (Bhatt 40). These passages challenge the cultural desexualisation of disabled bodies by asserting Meera’s erotic vitality and sensory richness (Shildrick 230-33). Meera’s assertion complicates the assumption that a body marked by vitiligo is unattractive, asexual, or emotionally numb. Meera’s diary entries reclaim her body as desiring and erotic - disrupting the normate ideal that equates desirability with unblemished able-bodiedness (Thomson 11-14).

After Vrunda’s abrupt departure, Meera, attends a poetry workshop, where she becomes increasingly drawn to Ujaas, a Marxist poet whose presence unsettles her in new ways. Her diary captures this shift, “*Ujaas nu sanindhyay, enivaato, enikavita game chhe. Kadach hu ena taraf dhalti jau chhu.*” [I cherish Ujaas’ presence—his words, his poetry. Perhaps I’m slowly leaning toward him. (Bhatt 113) and “*satat thay chhe dodi jau Ujaas pase! Jyare e hajar hoy tyare eni aankh jirvay nahi ane same na hoy tyare satat zankhya karu ene*” [Constantly feels like rushing to Ujaas! When he is present, cannot face his eyes, and when he is not in front of me, I constantly long for him] (Bhatt 117). These expressions reveal a longing that oscillates between shyness and desire. A moment of sudden self – awareness occurs when she sits beside him in the mess. “*Bapore messma akasmik rite ujasni baju ma bethi. Parntu khurshi par besta j kaik bani gayu mari bhitar. Achanak anubhavayu ke hu nari stri chhu.*” [I sat suddenly beside Ujaas in the afternoon in the mess. But the moment I sat on the chair, something happened inside me. All of a sudden, I felt that I was a woman—a feminine woman] (Bhatt 114). Through these reflections, Meera discovers a femininity that is both embodied and affective, and challenges the assumption that the disabled are as Robert Murphy argues ‘asexual or malignantly sexual’ (Quoted in Shakespeare 10).

On 30th November, Meera records a poem she has written for Ujaas, only to correct herself: “*mari kavita? Na Ujaas mate ni lagnio*” [My poem? No feelings for Ujaas] (Bhatt 134). The poem plays with the metaphor of *Suraj* - sunlight as brightness, warmth, touch, and erotic presence: *Mari sathle salvale suraj; Mari chhati e hillole suraj* [Sun crawling on my thigh; Sun shaking on my chest] (Bhatt 134). Through these reflections, Meera not only

asserts the sensual autonomy of her body but also challenges the ideal of the normate. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's term for the culturally constructed ideal body that renders all other bodies deviant or deficient. Her expression of desire destabilises the assumption that eroticism belongs only to flowless, able-bodied forms, revealing instead the emotional and sensory richness of a body marked by difference.

And yet, as the diary progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that Meera is never fully recognised as the central object of desire, neither by Vrunda nor by Ujaas. Her partners remain unable or unwilling to fully embrace her despite Meera's longing for them or explicit intimacy with them. Her relationships remain fragmented, emotionally unfulfilled and marked by abandonment. Meera's vitiligo renders her sexually invisible—always seen, yet never fully embraced. The following section discusses how Meera's disability makes her sexually invisible. The following section explores this erasure, examining how her bodily difference complicates intimacy and desirability.

Bodily Difference, Desire, and Invisible Sexuality

The moment Vrunda whispers, "I Love You Meera," Meera cannot stop herself asking about Vrunda's former lover K.M. and asks, "*To pacchi K.M.?*" [Then K.M.?] (Bhatt 39) which Vrunda replies as, "*Ene j to khayu tu ke tu maro adhar chhe ane K.M. haal ahi chhe pan kya?*" [He only said that you are my support and, in any case, he is not here, isn't he?] (Bhatt 39). The exchange given above marks the first rupture in their intimacy. Vrunda positions Meera not as a chosen partner but as a provisional substitute, a realisation that profoundly shatters Meera's fragile sense of belonging. She confesses in her diary, "*Etle ke K.M. ni gerhajri ma Meera ... chadhelu pur ekdam j osri gayu. Shu Vrunda mane K.M. niaveji ma svikarti hashe?*" [This means that Meera is in the absence of K. M. Suddenly, the flood receded. Is Vrunda accepting me as a substitute for K.M.?(Bhatt 39).

The metaphor of a receding flood captures the sudden collapse of her emotional certainty. The euphoria of being desired immediately collapses into grief as Meera realises she is not Vrunda's choice. Her childhood nickname "*kalidholi*" (black and white) resurfaces, revealing how deeply her spotted