ISSN 2278 - 7208
VOL. XII-XIII, 2023-2024

indraprasth

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An International Journal of Culture and Communication Studies
(Double-Blind/ Peer-Reviewed Academic Journal)

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Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University
New Delhi, India

ISSN 2278 - 7208
VOL. XII-XIII, 2023-2024

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An International Journal of Culture and Communication Studies

Contents

Note from the Editors

It gives us immense pleasure to present this edition of *Indraprasth –An International Journal of Culture and Communication Studies* devoted to art, literature, and films by Indian Women.

Conceived with a thought to engage scholars in creative and critical enquiries and meaningful dialogues, it brings together articles that map the aesthetic, social, political and intellectual trajectories of women who have shaped—and continue to reshape—the cultural landscape of the nation. Their works register silence and performance, desire and dissent, intimacy and insurgency, memory and vision. The articles grouped here attend to these layered negotiations and articulations; viewing creative production not merely as representation but also an intervention.The works discussed here demonstrate that art, literature, and films by Indian women do more than mirror social realities; they actively participate in transforming them. They challenge inherited idioms, articulate new solidarities, and imagine futures grounded in justice and creative freedom.

Srija Sanyal's article on the literary works of Ashapurna Debi looks at familiar ground with renewed and vigorous interest. Through the close examination of the nuanced portrayals of female protagonists in familial structures and domestic spaces, the essay indicates how Ashapurna Debi's corpus provided a "foundational grammar for feminist literary mappings in South Asia," helping map resistance in deeply entrenched patriarchal structures.

Monbinder Kaur, in her exploration of Easterine Kire's novels, attempts to place her within the broader framework of decolonial aesthetics and indigenous resistance both against the colonial powers of the past as well as the current militarized dispensation of the postcolonial state towards the North East. The indigenous subjectivity is shaped and affirmed by foregrounding the oral nature of knowledge-formation and cultural dissemination amongst the Naga people.

Deepshikha Kumari delves deep into the intricacies of poetry through the works of Jacinta Kerketta and Nirmala Putul, to unearth the deeply powerful political vision that marginalised voices carry. Using the framework of intersectionality, the article advocates for a "justice-oriented feminist praxis" that enables the expansion of feminist discourse towards greater inclusivity.

Himanshu Kumar's article provides a close reading of Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows*, in order to delineate the ways in which the protagonist navigates power and gender dynamics. The use of trauma theory to understand Rachita's coping and gradual coming-to-terms enables a powerful existential reading of her strained circumstances as well as a complex understanding of mobility and its interlinkages with ideas of privilege and access.

Santhi U.'s article examines the representation of Kurdish identity, resistance, and displacement in Haritha Savitri's Malayalam novel, *Zin*. As she eloquently puts it, the essay situates Zin within "broader discourse on trauma literature, postcolonial resistance, and global minority representation, ultimately affirming the power of storytelling to reclaim silenced histories, confront geopolitical injustices, and inspire cross-cultural solidarity in an increasingly polarised world."

Dhivyaa Rajeswaran's exploration of Dalit feminist poetry through the works of Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani, is undergirded by a detailed analysis of the use of corporeality to assert agency, autonomy, and selfhood. The Dalit female body becomes a site for radical self-affirmation. The use of many feminist theorists provides a robust scaffolding for the analysis which views the poetic works as expressions of political resistance against historical violence.

Suman Chaudhary's article delves into the intersections of gender and disability. Her examination of the autobiographies of Malini Chib and Preeti Monga, provides a crucial study of the experiences and negotiating tactics employed by women with disabilities. The use of critical feminist disability studies and its furthering through this research offers much to the greater need for understanding of the complexity of the gendered experience of disability in the Indian context.

Martine Mussies breaks new ground with her article as she explores the world of fanfiction and the ways in which writers negotiate the porous and unstable world of digital storytelling in order to "reshape dominant cultural narratives through transformative fan practices that extend far beyond entertainment value." Martial arts narratives become sites for feminist agency and cultural reclamation as storytellers imaginatively break the sociocultural assumptions inherent within these embodied practices and its normativising of hypermasculine ideals.

Divya Shah explores the taboo that surrounds the idea of a disabled body as a desiring subject. The article provides a close reading of Bindu Bhatt's novel, in order to expose the ableist and heteronormative assumptions that define the ambit of desire in Indian society. The diary form of the novella provides a searing insight into the protagonist's interiority and longing and a rich engagement with questions of disability, desire, and queer subjectivity.

Gauri Shankar Jha's article is a broad-based exploration of trends in literatures that shaped the modern world. The article particularly foregrounds women writers, exploring how they assert their identities, narrate their histories, and envision new possibilities through literary expression.

Anagha Agnes brings into our midst the world of being a female Indian doctor and its costs through a detailed psychoanalytic reading of Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angeri*. The article positions Nambisan's work as, "an essential intervention in feminist medical humanities and contemporary Indian literature by women," as it charts the "gendered and psychological costs of caregiving in a postcolonial rural landscape."

Dinisha Nayak and Punyashree Panda analyse the comic anthology by Priya Kurian, *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* (2015) to better comprehend the "visual stylistics" used by women in modern-day India to render their experiences through the comic form. The graphic narrative form offers great scope for understanding both material embodiment as well as visual regimes and the interrelation between the two.

Gaurav Singh's exploration of three films from Hindi cinema offers some crucial insights regarding gendered depictions in mainstream film culture and the imaginative possibilities that inhere within the cinematic medium. The filmmakers discussed, attempt to portray a "new woman" who redraws the circle of familial boundedness that defines her very identity.

Muneera KT and Hashmina Habeeb examine the Malayalam film, *Nishiddho*, and its portrayal of migrant labourers working in Kerala. The article offers a perceptive reading of caste and gender and the precarity that shapes the lives of those living in a contested spatial order.

Sangeeta S. brings in her analysis a close reading of Tagore's story, "Monihara," and Aparna Sen's film, *Goynar Baksho*. The article argues that

"Sen's adaptation does not merely modernize Tagore's narrative but critically reworks its symbolic economy, extending his concerns into a contemporary feminist discourse that foregrounds solidarity, historical consciousness, and women's evolving relationship to material culture."

Sadia Afreen's article looks at two films from the *Lust Stories* anthologies and offers a close analysis of the portrayal of female desire, sexuality and its inhibition within the class-ridden cityscape of Mumbai. Zoya Akhtar and Konkona Sen Sharma's films become the texts for investigating the narrative shifts that appear as female desire is presented as subject rather than object for consumption and its negotiation with the power structures that produce it. The article also examines the anthology format and the OTT platform distribution logic that enable these discussions even as it curtails the viewing to a niche audience.

Garima's article is a detailed analysis of Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, and its depiction of female sexual agency within the patriarchal structures that each of its characters belong to, as well as subject to the gendered visual regime of Hindi cinema or Bollywood as it is called. The article painstakingly draws out the multiple nuances of the film as it negotiates ideas of social mobility, fantasy, personal aspirations, as well as other modes of freedom, both individual and collective.

In the final article in the volume, Moumita Biswas, presents a feminist reading of the enduring legacies of two outstanding artists of the Indian subcontinent, Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar. The article traces their status as celebrated but also stigmatised performers and their complex negotiations with the changing social scape of art and performance in India of the twentieth century. The article argues for them not merely as "passive subjects of societal norms," but as active agents of "cultural resistance and self-fashioning," who reshaped the role of women in the performing arts.

We extend our gratitude to the contributors, whose scholarship animates these pages and offer this edition to our readers with a hope that it encourages future research, creative experimentation, candid articulation, and continued dialogue.

Editors, *Indraprasth*

Mapping Resistance and Domestic Rebellion: The Feminist Imagination of Ashapurna Debi's Trilogy

Srija Sanyal

Abstract

This article attempts to investigate and discuss the feminist literary works of Ashapurna Debi (1909-1995), the most notable Bengali woman writer of the twentieth century. Ashapurna Debi's expansive oeuvre carved out a critical space for the articulation of women's desires, resistances, and everyday negotiations in terms of patriarchal domesticity and their situation in familial structures. Ashapurna Debi is best known for her monumental trilogy: *Pratham Pratishruti* (The First Promise, 1964), *Subarnalata* (1965), and *Bakul Katha* (1974). Through her trilogy, Debi foregrounded women's interior lives and social entrapments within the conservative folds of colonial and postcolonial Bengali society. Through nuanced portrayals of female protagonists who challenge normative gender roles while remaining embedded in familial structures, Debi initiated a feminist discourse that was radical while being embedded in realism. Engaged in close readings of her fiction and autobiographical writings, the article reflects on how Ashapurna Debi's corpus resonated with successive generations of women writers in Bengal and beyond, supplying a foundational grammar for feminist literary mappings in South Asia.

Keywords: South Asia; Bengali Women's Writings; Ashapurna Debi; Feminist Realism; Domesticity

Introduction

Recipient of Jnanpith Award (1976) and Sahitya Akademi Fellowship (1994), Ashapurna Debi (1909-1995) remains one of the most enduring pillars of twentieth-century Bengali literature. She stands as a significant voice of feminist narratives with her prolific body of work, comprising novels, short stories, poems, and essays that spans over several decades and reflects an acute awareness of gender, class, and cultural transformations in Bengal under both

colonial and postcolonial regimes. This article seeks to analyze Debi's fiction works, with a particular emphasis on how her texts map resistance and domestic rebellion within deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. Best known for her monumental trilogy: *Pratham Pratishruti* (*The First Promise*, 1964), *Subarnalata* (1965), and *Bakul Katha* (1974), Debi provides a literary archive that is both a reflection of and a response to the historical constraints placed on women in Bengali society.

The essay attempts to situate Ashapurna Debi in the lineage of thought and literature from Indian feminism and to frame her work in relation to the prefigurative and dialogic impulses that are key to canonical debates in feminist discourse today. The ideological and literary lineage evident in the body of Ashapurna Debi's writing remains illustrative of its bold representation of women's reality, particularly with regards to the domestic environment that represents the same site where subjugation and liberation alternate systematically. Her female characters are neither idealized victims nor heroic revolutionaries in the conventional sense; rather, they inhabit a nuanced middle ground, where rebellion is expressed in subtle yet potent acts of defiance. They are regular people, not the idolized goddess figures that society portrays and defines all women as. Therefore, they are fully human and must have flaws and wants that need to be acknowledged and appreciated; however, those flaws and desires frequently go unnoticed or disregarded. Furthermore, in order to understand the radical import of Ashapurna Debi's work, it is necessary to contextualise it within the socio-historical fabric of Bengal. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a series of reform movements in Bengal, particularly focused on women's education, widow remarriage, and child marriage. While these reforms opened up new possibilities, they also imposed fresh constraints, often co-opting women into the narrative of the 'New Woman' as prescribed by nationalist and reformist ideologies.

Ashapurna Debi's oeuvre systematically dismantles this binary. Her narratives explore how the domestic sphere, far from being a site of passive femininity, is also a contested terrain where power, agency, and identity are constantly negotiated. This is evident in her depiction of characters, such as Satyabati in *Pratham Pratishruti*, who challenges patriarchal norms not through grand revolutionary gestures but through her insistence on education,

mobility, and self-respect. These seemingly 'private' acts acquire a political dimension in Debi's storytelling, revealing the domestic as a microcosm of larger social dynamics. Moreover, Debi's feminist vision is not merely oppositional; it is reconstructive, with the promise of ushering in reforms within the *andarmahal*, i.e., the inner sphere. Her fiction constructs alternative models of womanhood that resist the tropes of both the submissive wife and the militant feminist. In this way, her work anticipates later feminist engagements with intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the interconnected nature of social categorizations, such as race, class, and gender (Crenshaw). Debi's protagonists often grapple with multiple axes of oppression: class constraints, generational divides, and cultural expectations, underscoring the need for a multidimensional understanding of female agency. For example, Subarnalata, the eponymous protagonist of the second novel in the trilogy, must navigate a deeply repressive household while also contending with the limitations imposed by her class and caste position. Her resistance is slow-burning and internally negotiated, thereby exposing the layered complexities of subaltern womanhood.

Theoretically, this essay draws on the works of feminist scholars, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who interrogates the representational politics of the subaltern woman, and Judith Butler, whose notion of performativity can be mobilised to understand how Debi's characters perform and subvert gender roles within the normative frameworks of society. Debi's protagonists are constantly aware of the scripts they are expected to follow, yet they often find ways to rewrite or reinterpret these scripts, sometimes through silence, sometimes through speech, and often through the choice to endure or to walk away. For instance, in caste Hindu Bengali families, the girl child bore the heavy responsibility of upholding patriarchal structures. Raised as a refined *bhadramahila*, she was guided toward feminine pursuits, such as suitable games and reading, while discouraged from physical activities or adventurous spirit. A strict socialisation code ensured her seamless integration into the patrilineal and patrilocal family system of colonial Bengal (Bagchi 2214).

Ashapurna Debi's autobiographical writings, particularly *Ar Ek Asapurna* (2023) and her numerous essays, also offer insight into her personal experiences of gendered marginalisation, further enriching the interpretive possibilities of

her fiction. Debi fondly recalls how her mother sparked her early passion for reading. Denied formal schooling due to the conservative norms of her family, which largely opposed educating girls, she learned to read by eavesdropping on her older brothers' lessons at home (Debi 4). Unlike many households of the era, her mother actively encouraged her three daughters to explore books freely. In the essay *Jaa dekhi, tai likhi* [I Write Whatever I See], Debi credits both parents, her father's artistic pursuits and her mother's deep reverence for literature, for shaping a creative mindset distinct from that of her cousins (Debi 3). She also describes in *Khela theke Lekha* [From Playing to Writing] (Debi 4) how unrestricted access to adult literature, including Tagore's works, led her to memorise passages while grappling with their meaning: "Slowly and steadily a completely new world was getting created within my mind" (Debi 7).

After marriage, Debi faced a stark contrast: a bookless in-law's household that felt like living "behind an iron-curtain." She remarks satirically: "For girls, the in-laws' place is not really a place strewn with flowers" (Debi 8). Amid the rising tides of nationalism during India's independence struggle, she chose to focus her writing on ordinary middle-class lives she knew intimately. Her narratives highlight women's constant negotiations with societal demands, capturing the shifts in colonial and postcolonial Bengal.

Debi's acclaimed trilogy reflects these themes profoundly. As Indira Chowdhury interprets, the first two parts of Ashapurna's trilogy focuses on what it means to become a mother in colonial Bengal (Chowdhury 47-48). What are the responsibilities and what, if any, are the choices and the focus on the issue of female subjectivity. By offering alternative accounts of motherhood through her nineteenth century characters, Ashapurna attempts to portray the ideal and raw accounts of motherhood and while mediating the complexities and often, the impossibility of mother-daughter relationships within patriarchal parameters. The act of becoming a mother within patriarchy signifies the loss of one's own mother (Chowdhury 49). The first volume, *Pratham Pratishruti*, set in rural Bengal, follows child bride Satyabati; the second, *Subarnalata*, portrays her daughter's struggles in urban Kolkata; and *Bakul Katha* features the observant granddaughter Bakul analysing a rapidly changing society.

Politics of Domesticity and Everyday Resistance

Ashapurna Debi's fiction radically reconfigures the domestic sphere, not as a static and apolitical backdrop to women's lives, but as a deeply charged site where power is negotiated and resistance is enacted through the routines of everyday life. Making use of Michel de Certeau's theory of "everyday practices," and specifically his differentiation between institutional power strategies and individual tactics of resistance, we can see how Debi's protagonists resist patriarchal dominance not by dramatic break but by quiet, creative, and often covert defying (de Certeau 91). In *Pratham Pratishruti*, for instance, Satyabati's refusal to accept the denial of education, her critiques of ritual orthodoxy, and her persistent questioning of male authority signal a form of agency that is embedded in the very space intended to contain her. The kitchen, prayer room, and veranda in novels by Debi are no longer impersonal spaces of household; instead, these become symbolic arenas in which gendered power is reinforced and challenged. The kitchen is a space in which caste and gender orders get materialised and reconfigured through the ways food is consumed and labor practices, whereas the veranda, being neither private nor public, enables women to watch, mobilise, and act for change, albeit in an informal manner. These areas, by no means functional alone, are sites of everyday contestation and feminist improvisation.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's idea of "feminist consciousness through the everyday" further explicates how Debi builds the banal and everyday as politically meaningful (Mohanty 72). Rather than portraying her female characters as isolated revolutionaries, Debi offers a model of feminism that is relational and situated; one that evolves through intergenerational dialogue, emotional labor, and moments of interior awakening. Satyabati's resistance is not solitary; it draws strength from her mother's legacy and anticipates her daughter's future struggles, illustrating a continuum of feminist dissent grounded in familial contexts. This textured geography of resistance can be seen throughout the trilogy, most acutely in *Subarnalata*, as the heroine attempts to balance the repressive dictates of marriage with her inherited codes of independence and justice. Her resistance reveals itself slowly, even by gestures of refusal, silence, or quiet insistence, highlighting the restrictive boundaries of a binary between public activism and private conformity. In appropriating the domestic

as a political sphere, Ashapurna Debi challenges colonial-modernist discourses that identify freedom merely with public exposure or Western rationality. Her novels proclaim that the home, instead of being the opposite of freedom, can be its very forge: a sphere where feminine agency is shaped, disputed, and maintained through the everyday lives of women.

Intergenerational Feminism and Steady Evolution

Ashapurna Debi's trilogy speaks of a deep reflection on intergenerational feminism, in which feminist awareness is not a fixed inheritance but a living, unfolding process. In the portraiture of three generations of women within a single family, Debi builds a nuanced history of resistance that occurs not in sudden breaks but in slow, situated negotiations. This model problematises liberal feminist discourses of progression as linear emancipation, instead advocating a feminist genealogy forged as much by structural limitations as by affective and moral inheritances. Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) becomes an especially relevant framework here. Feminism is not merely a collection of ideologies for Ahmed but a workday labor, a way of being in relation to the world that is exhausting, interrupted, and context-dependent (Ahmed 14). Satyabati's life, traced back to an early realisation of gender and caste injustice, can itself be described as the origin of this labor, as her pursuit of education and the demand for rational argument test patriarchal power as well as religious orthodoxy.

Yet, Satyabati's threat of rebellion remains unfulfilled in the liberation of her daughter. Subarnalata, forced to marry as a child, is held captive in a domestic space that actively negates the liberatory vision her mother had sought to instill. That is where Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality becomes invaluable. Subarnalata's subjectivity is formed through the intersection of class expectation, domestic violence, ritual conservatism, and restricted access to education. Her feminist defiance is therefore not simply inherited but refracted through the material circumstances of her new social position. Although she does not abandon her husband or reject the domestic world, her revolt has less obvious forms: the encouragement of critical thought, the refusal to support superstition, and the personal safeguarding of her mother's values. The affective registers that map Subarnalata's world, shame, regret, and yearning in particular,

are not indications of defeat but affective residues of feminist ideologies. Such feminist affects are repeated throughout the trilogy and operate as continuities joining generations.

Bakul, the third generation in the line, holds a more recognisable modern subject position. A working woman and published writer, she lives in a seeming world of greater permissiveness, but her liberty is not untroubled. Her musings about her mother and grandmother, frequently infused with ambivalence and respect, express the price of past struggles that afforded her mobility. Bakul is not the goal of a feminist teleology but a located subject whose autonomy is both realisation and encumbrance. She has to convert inherited resistance to a language that addresses her moment, to suffer the burden of lost dreams and unresolved loss. By mapping the emotional, political, and epistemological changes between these three generations, Debi formulates a model of gradual change, wherein feminism is visualised as a relay rather than a solution.

Language, Realism, and the Subversive Voice: Feminist Storytelling as Method

The narrative form of Ashapurna Debi serves as an important tool in articulating a feminism based on lived experience. Her use of colloquial Bengali, fragmented monologues, and emotionally laden dialogues challenges the literary hierarchies that historically excluded or trivialised women's voices. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the subaltern speak?" acquires fresh resonance in Debi's work, as her protagonists often speak from positions of gendered marginality but do so with agency, reflection, and affect (Spivak 287). Rather than granting voice through overt declarations of resistance, Debi constructs narrative spaces where voice emerges in the mundane – in conversations between sisters, letters never sent, and internal monologues that articulate dissent even when it cannot be acted upon.

This form of speaking-from-the-margins allows Debi's women to navigate a discursive field otherwise shaped by silence. Judith Butler's theory of performativity provides a further lens through which to understand the subversive power of language in Debi's fiction. Gender, as Butler argues, is constituted through repeated acts and citations of norms (Butler xv). Debi's characters often perform femininity in socially sanctioned ways but simultaneously disrupt these scripts through irony, questioning, and occasional refusals. These acts of

speech, if frequently underappreciated, represent a feminist intervention that recuperates the narrative agency of the domestic subject. Moreover, Debi's deployment of literary realism is not merely representational; it is a feminist method that insists on the legitimacy of women's interior worlds. Her realism refuses the aestheticisation of suffering and instead insists on documenting the textures of everyday life—the monotony, the compromises, the sharp moments of realisation. This epistemological commitment allows her to foreground cognitive and affective labour that often remains unacknowledged in both literature and life. The detailed rendering of domestic chores, kinship dynamics, and moments of solitude in Debi's work is not incidental; it is a deliberate narrative strategy that centers the lives of women as worthy of intellectual and artistic attention. In this way, Ashapurna Debi transforms the very tools of realist fiction into a subversive archive of feminist thought, one that continues to resonate in South Asian literary and political discourse today.

Crucially, Debi's narrative strategy also embodies what feminist theorist Shoshana Felman terms "testimonial literature" – a genre that does not simply recount women's pain but enacts the act of bearing witness, often in fragmented, interrupted, or coded forms (Felman and Laub 5). Many of Debi's characters do not possess full narrative control in the conventional sense; their stories are often mediated through memory, interior monologue, or reluctant confession. Yet this fractured narration is itself a feminist resistance to totalizing or patriarchal modes of storytelling. It foregrounds what Leigh Gilmore calls "the limits of autobiography," especially for female subjects whose identities are forged in the crucible of silencing and surveillance (Gilmore 27). In rejecting smooth, linear plots in favour of a polyphonic realism, Debi gives her protagonists narrative power without demanding heroic coherence.

Furthermore, Debi's feminist realism is deeply tied to the act of writing from the domestic, from within vernacular and cultural constraints, and is itself a political gesture (Moi 175). Her linguistic realism – rooted in middle-class Bengali idioms, domestic registers, and non-Western epistemes – disrupts both colonial literary standards and elite feminist vocabularies. This insistence on the everyday, the local, and the intimate allows Debi to build a women's archive that is neither romanticized nor universalized. Instead, her prose charts what Sara Ahmed might call the "affective economies" of the home – spaces saturated with feeling, fatigue, duty, and dissidence (Ahmed 4).

Ashapurna Debi's Feminism in South Asia: Relevance and Legacy

Building on the complex portrayal of intergenerational feminism and the radical narrative methods outlined earlier, it becomes crucial to situate Ashapurna Debi's feminist literary contributions within the broader South Asian socio-cultural and historical framework. Despite the vast transformations in gender politics across the region over the past century, Debi's work retains a distinct and enduring significance for contemporary feminist discourse, both as a foundational text and as a site of contestation and dialogue. Her work is remarkable not only for its historical grounding within Bengali society but for its sophisticated articulation of feminist agency which breaks through regional and temporal boundaries, making her a path-breaking figure whose influence continues to reverberate across South Asia's richly variegated feminist landscape.

South Asia's intricate fabric of colonial pasts, hierarchies of caste, religious diversities, and linguistic pluralism has given rise to diverse but interconnected feminist struggles. Ashapurna Debi's writings emerge from Bengal, a region with a rich legacy of social reform and literary experimentation, yet they engage deeply with universal questions of women's subjectivity, autonomy, and resistance that are critical across the subcontinent. Scholars such as Leela Gandhi and Uma Chakravarti have underscored the importance of locating feminist narratives in their specific cultural contexts while simultaneously reading them as interventions in global feminist dialogues (Gandhi 45; Chakravarti 139). In this regard, Debi's articulation of domestic rebellion and intergenerational dissent offers a powerful counterpoint to dominant Western feminist paradigms, particularly liberal feminism's emphasis on public emancipation and radical rupture. Rather, her work places at its center the complexly interwoven ways in which colonial-modernity and indigenous tradition intersect to yield a specific feminist consciousness based on negotiation, survival, and relation.

One of the most important reasons that Debi remains a persistent presence in the South Asian feminist imagination is that she refuses to erase or idealize the lived experience of women who live in the inextricably woven world of caste, class, religion, and patriarchy. As noted previously, her protagonists each represent various historic moments and social locations and how these construct their resistances. This intersectional awareness, while expressed prior to Kimberlé Crenshaw's codification of the term, prefigures present-day

feminist analysis that foregrounds the plurality of women's experiences and oppressions in South Asia (Crenshaw 140). For example, Subarnalata's inner struggle as a woman trapped by both domestic violence and the expectations of caste reflects contemporary discussions of gender violence and social hierarchy in rural and urban India. Likewise, Bakul's transformation into a professional woman who navigates modernity and tradition reflects current debates regarding women's work, urbanization, and the realignment of family forms in South Asia.

In a region where feminist histories have often been overshadowed by nationalist narratives privileging male political agency, Ashapurna Debi's literary intervention is particularly significant. As noted by historian Kumkum Sangari, feminist thought in India has consistently struggled to claim space within the nation-building project, which frequently valorizes women's symbolic roles as bearers of cultural tradition rather than as autonomous subjects (Sangari and Vaid 24). Debi's work, by placing women's interior lives and domestic struggles at the center of social critique, disrupts this marginalization. Her nuanced portrayal of female subjectivity challenges essentialist notions of Indian womanhood and exposes the tensions between public nationalism and private patriarchy. This intervention resonates deeply in postcolonial feminist scholarship, which critiques the colonial and nationalist imposition of rigid gender roles as a form of political control (Spivak 297). By revisiting the domestic sphere as a contested and productive space, Debi offers a corrective to both colonial and nationalist historiographies that often exclude women's agency from the political imaginary.

Moreover, Debi's narrative technique – grounded in linguistic realism and the deployment of colloquial Bengali – enhances her feminist intervention by making the everyday speech and interiority of women visible and audible. This approach aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument about the necessity of enabling the "subaltern" to speak, or at least to challenge imposed silences (Spivak 295). In a South Asian literary environment where women's voices were frequently marginalized or filtered through male authorship, Debi's work offers an authentic articulation of feminine consciousness. Her deployment of vernacular idioms, subtle dialogues, and interior monologues disrupts the elitist literary canon and claims the authority of women's lived experience as worthy of serious artistic and political engagement. In doing so, this linguistic

technique not only places her work firmly within a specifically Bengali cultural context but also aligns it with larger South Asian struggles to democratize literature and disrupt hegemonic narratives.

Another dimension that underlines Debi's singularity in South Asian feminist literature is her sustained focus on the slow, non-linear process of feminist change. Unlike many post-independence narratives that valorize rapid modernization or radical upheaval, Debi's trilogy embraces complexity and contradiction. Her identification of feminist consciousness as intergenerational and dialogic highlights the everyday struggles and incremental advances that constitute women's realities (Ahmed 5). This is especially fitting for South Asia, where structural inequalities and socio-political instability challenge linear constructions of progress. Debi's women resist through endurance, negotiation, and the reclamation of their own stories within patriarchal confines, a mode of agency that offers a realistic and hopeful model for feminist praxis in diverse contexts.

Also, the enduring influence of Ashapurna Debi on contemporary South Asian women writers underscores her canonical status and continuing relevance. Her work continues to be taught and debated in academic circles across South Asia, attesting to its critical role in shaping feminist literary canons. Furthermore, contemporary feminist activists and scholars often invoke Debi's texts as exemplars of situated resistance that address the complexities of caste, class, religion, and gender simultaneously, underscoring her work's continued applicability amid evolving feminist challenges.

Reflecting on her legacy, Debi notes the trilogy's acclaim but cautions that while women have gained opportunities, true emancipation remains elusive, with "Modernity" posing new entrapments (Debi 12).

Conclusion

Ashapurna Debi's literary legacy transcends her immediate historical moment to shape the trajectory of feminist thought in Bengali literature and broader South Asian contexts. Her influence is palpable in the works of later writers such as Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1938-2019), and Suchitra Bhattacharya (1950-2015), who extend her thematic focus on gendered resistance within familial and societal structures. As this article attempted to illustrate, Debi's feminist imagination resists dominant

historiographies of Indian womanhood and modernity precisely by placing women's mundane negotiations with patriarchal structures at the center stage.

Debi's novels provide a different cartography of resistance – one that is rooted in the culturally specific yet politically charged terrain of the home. In contrast with liberal feminist models of resistance that tend to prioritize individual freedom, Debi formulates a model of relational agency that takes place through incremental, intergenerational gestures. This vision is echoed in Nivedita Menon's idea of feminism as "a mode of seeing" (Menon 2), which enables challenging normalized hierarchies without discarding the cultural modalities through which they work.

From the lens of domesticity, intergenerational consciousness, and linguistic realism, Debi builds a feminist archive that is regionally specific as well as globally applicable. In revisiting and reinterpreting the roles of women in colonial and postcolonial Bengal, Debi's work not only anticipates key theoretical concerns, such as the subaltern's capacity to speak (Spivak) or gender as performative (Butler) – but also contributes a methodology of feminist storytelling rooted in realism and vernacular idioms. Her linguistic choices and narrative voice refuse to romanticize suffering, instead offering a textured portrayal of women's cognitive and affective labor within the *andarmahal*.

Ashapurna Debi, thus, marks the emergence of a distinctive figure in South Asian feminist literature – one that has relevance even today in the context of feminist thought. Debi's feminist imagination has been one that not only chronicled the aspect of resistance, but has also theorized it. In this way, Debi's feminist imagination provides not just a historical document, but an enduring intellectual resource for reimagining the politics of domesticity, agency, and dissent in South Asia and beyond.

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Telling Our Own Stories: Oral Tradition, Memory, and Resistance in Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* and *When the River Sleeps*

Monbinder Kaur

Abstract

Easterine Kire's innovative literary exercise of integrating indigenous Naga oral traditions into modern narrative forms as a deliberate strategy of cultural reclamation and resistance against the historical erasure of Northeast India. The two novels – *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), a historical novel based on the 1879 British invasion of Khonoma, and *When the River Sleeps* (2014), a spiritual quest narrative grounded in the cosmology of the Angami Naga people is taken here for reference to analyse how these texts challenges colonial historiography and Indian nationalist discourse, both of which have rendered Northeast India peripheral in dominant narratives. Postcolonial theory and memory studies support the argument that Kire's literary intervention is not merely about cultural protection but a form of political storytelling. She revives collective memory through localised idioms, orality, and myth, while simultaneously reshaping the novel form to suit indigenous epistemologies. The use of oral histories, ritual, and landscape in her writing situates indigenous subjectivities at the center, asserting the legitimacy of non-Western knowledge systems. By placing Easterine Kire's work within the broader framework of decolonial aesthetics and indigenous resistance, this essay shows how her fiction actively reclaims narrative authority from the colonial archive and the militarised discourses of the modern state.

Keywords: Easterine Kire; Oral Tradition; Memory; Resistance; Naga Marginalised Histories

Introduction

Easterine Kire stands as a pioneering voice in Naga literature, and her fiction plays a vital role in preserving and breathing new life into the oral traditions of

her people. She was born on March 29, 1959 into an Angami Naga family in Nagaland, India. She was awarded the Governor's medal for excellence in Naga Literature. Her contribution to Naga literature is very impressive – five poetry collections, nine novels, three short story collections, one essay collection, two novellas, eight children's books, and many translations and anthology books. Her stories emerge from a landscape stained by colonialism, political unrest, and cultural silencing, making her storytelling not just a creative endeavour but also a deeply political one. This article explores how Kire positions storytelling as a means of reclaiming historical memory and asserting indigenous ways of knowing. Her narratives emerge from Angami Naga cosmology, oral practices and collective memory, challenging foremost historiographical and literary frameworks that have reduced Northeast India as peripheral in both colonial and nationalist discourse.

The focus is on two of her most significant works, *Sky is My Father*: *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), which recounts the resistance of the village of Khonoma against British colonial forces, and *When the River Sleeps* (2014), a meditative journey of a lone hunter through the mystical Naga Hills, to examine how orality functions as a deliberate narrative strategy rather than a stylistic embellishment. Easterine Kire uses Naga oral traditions, myth, and lived landscapes as a sensible political approach to recover scratched pasts of Northeast India and challenge both colonial records and Indian nationalist narratives. By remodelling the modern novel through orality and indigenous ways of knowing, Kire turns storytelling into an act of resistance that re-establishes collective memory and proclaims the rightfulness of Naga epistemologies.

The Naga society

The Nagas, an indigenous people inhabiting the North-East Frontier of India, belong to the "Indo-Mongoloid group of the Tibeto-Burman branch within the larger Sino-Tibetan language family" (Shimray 2). Nagaland, a region often described as 'unexplored' in dominant Indian historiography, is home to sixteen major tribes, each characterised by its own distinct language, social customs, cultural practices, and belief systems. Naga social organisation is deeply rooted in tribal affiliation, village autonomy, kinship structures, and clan identity. Due to the linguistic diversity among these tribes, inter-tribal communication is

commonly facilitated through Nagamese Creole and English, which function as *lingua francas* in both informal and institutional settings.

Before British colonisation, headhunting was a prominent cultural practice, reflecting the warrior ethos and spiritual beliefs of the Nagas. However, with the arrival of Christian missionaries and the subsequent spread of formal education, the practice gradually diminished. "In Naga society the beginning of a new era can be traced back to the year 1872, when the American missionaries landed in the Naga soil" (Benjongkumba 27). Among the Nagas, storytelling continues to serve as a dynamic mode of cultural transmission, shaping the community's worldview, moral frameworks, and ontological assumptions. These narratives are typically shared in intimate communal spaces such as around the hearth where elders transmit ancestral knowledge and cosmological tales to younger generations, reinforcing both memory and identity.

Script, Education, Missionary and 'Cultural Neglect'

What did colonialism do to Naga knowledge systems? It is a very interesting and important concept related to the main argument of the article. The emergence of writing amid the Naga tribes was not an organic development rooted in indigenous epistemologies, but rather an externally imposed consequence of colonial intervention and missionary education. British colonial rule in the nineteenth century brought with it not only military and political control but a new systematic effort to 'civilise' the indigenous communities with the help of formal education. The imposition of Western literacy in colonial and missionary contexts functioned as a deliberate cultural intervention that privileged the written word over indigenous oral traditions, effectively marginalising Naga storytelling practices. This form of literacy was a colonial inheritance, privileging the written word over the oral and thereby contributing to the decline of ancient storytelling traditions (Elizabeth and Tsuren 83). The transition from orality to literacy not only disrupted the age-old ways in which knowledge was shared and preserved among the Nagas, but also silenced their ability to tell their own stories in their own voices—stories rooted in lived experience, memory, and communal wisdom passed down through generations. This disruption is part of what Linda Tuhiwai Smith refers to as the 'cultural assault' of colonialism, wherein indigenous ways of knowing were systematically

devalued and overwritten by Western epistemologies (Smith 34). In this context, the elevation of written language became a mechanism for reshaping identity and knowledge, distancing communities from their oral heritage.

The Nagas passed down their history, ethics, cosmology, and communal values through storytelling, songs, proverbs, and ritual performances. When writing displaced these practices, it disrupted the very modes through which the Nagas had preserved and transmitted knowledge for generations. Temsula Ao writes in *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition*, the Naga tribes' oral tradition is "not a mere form of 'storytelling' as opposed to a written recorded version", it is "in many ways the source of the people's literature, social customs, religion and history" (185). It is living repositories of communal wisdom, social norms, cosmologies, and ancestral memory. She describes it as a repository of traditional knowledge systems: "it has evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge-system, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination and the ideal with the practical" (Ao 185). For the Nagas, whose histories, ethics, and cosmologies were transferred primarily through oral tradition, colonialism ruptured the cultural continuity by separating knowledge from community and performance.

Orality as Narrative Epistemology

In oral traditions – stories, myths, songs, rituals, and communal performances are not merely modes of expression but are deeply embedded ways of knowing and accepting the world. Ong explains in *Orality and Literacy* (1982), oral epistemologies are performative and situational truth emerges through storytelling, songs, and speech acts that are repeated, remembered, and recontextualised across generations. "In an oral culture, knowledge is not separated from the knower; it is preserved by being embedded in the human experience, transmitted by memory and expression" (34). In her article "Opening up the Physical and the Spiritual Universe of the Angamis," Easterine Kire explains that her novels strive to "chronologise the socio-cultural and historical life of her community, drawing on information gathered from oral narrators within her society" (54). In "Decolonizing Methodologies," Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that storytelling is a decolonial act. For colonized peoples, oral traditions are "ways of knowing, ways of remembering, and ways of

resisting" (Smith 145). They are methods by which communities preserve their histories, assert their identities, and resist prevailing colonial accounts that often exclude or distort indigenous experiences. For the Nagas, oral forms such as folktales, clan genealogies, headhunting songs, and seasonal rituals function as what Ruth Finnegan calls 'performative knowledge genres,' where meaning is enacted, not inscribed. Finnegan emphasises that such traditions are not inferior to written texts; rather, they demand different modes of engagement and interpretation. "The performance, the interaction, the ritual context—these are part of how oral texts mean what they mean" (bvfrf41).

The Role of Memory in Challenging Colonial Discourse

Kire's debut novel, *A Naga Village Remembered*, echoes the rhythm and structure of oral storytelling. The novel which was renamed as *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, describes the war fought by the Nagas against British colonial forces. In establishing its colonial empire by force, the British uprooted the Nagas from their ancestral setting. The novel not only recounts a personal and communal narrative but also signals to readers that these stories function as a form of social documentation. Set between 1832 and 1900, the novel centers on the Angami-Naga resistance to British colonisation in Khonoma village. Intertwined with this central narrative are oral histories from three local clans – Mehrü, Thevo, and Semo shared through the voices of Sebi Dolie, Niu Francis Whiso, Thezavilie, and Nichüriazo Chücha. As a writer from an oral tradition, Easterine Kire, skillfully incorporates these collective memories into her fiction, transforming her work into both a literary act of resistance and a means of preserving Naga cultural history. Walter J. Ong's distinction between "primary and secondary orality" provides a foundational lens to examine the structure of Kire's novels (Vansina et al.). *A Naga Village Remembered* unfolds through episodic narration, with minimal linear development, mirroring the additive, situational style characteristic of oral cultures. The novel opens with community memory with elder voices recounting the past, suggesting that legitimacy derives not from documentation but from communal remembrance. "We will speak of those times. The words are still in our breath. The fire is not cold" (*A Naga Village Remembered*, 1). This invocation resonates with Ong's claim that oral cultures "store knowledge not in texts but in people" (34). He writes, "Knowledge is stored not in external

memory banks like books or computers, but in people who repeat and adapt it" (*Orality and Literacy* 34–35). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson also asserts, "Story is stored in the bodies of people and places and practices," he highlights that Indigenous knowledge exists within embodied experience, land-based relationships, ceremonies, and communal memories, rather than detached in written archives (152). This contrasts sharply with Western epistemology's emphasis on abstracted, decontextualised data. Oral narratives operate as counter-narratives to dominant historical accounts, preserving perspectives on sovereignty, land, spirituality, and social organisation. Oral literature is a significant part of Kire's narrative blends together oral tradition with fiction, merging the distinct forms of folklore and the novel to create a unique narrative style. Walter J. Ong commenting on the relationship between orality and writing writes:

> Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. (*Orality and Literacy* 14)

Vansina opines, "Oral tradition when systematically transmitted across generations serves as a valid form of historical knowledge" (*Oral Tradition* 13). Kire builds her narrative from village memory, generational testimony, and local myth which Vansina describes as historical consciousness through oral continuity. Kire's integration of orality is more than a stylistic choice; it's an epistemic intervention. It privileges indigenous knowledge systems and rejects colonial hierarchies that dismiss oral cultures as 'primitive' or 'unscientific.' Here Kire aligns with Ngig) wa Thiong'o's idea of 'orature,' which sees oral tradition as a legitimate and powerful alternative to Western literary forms. "Orature carries the heritage, the aesthetics, the philosophy, the ethics, and the communal memory of a people. It is not a precursor to literature—it is literature" (15).

Angami Resistance in *A Naga Village Remembered*

Set in nineteenth-century Khonoma, the novelrecounts the Angami resistance to British colonisation. Kire like a traditional indigenous storyteller explains the life of the Angami-Naga community through the ordinary, everyday experiences of characters whose lives are deeply embedded in the indigenous spatial and cultural landscape. The novel begins by depicting village life through the eyes of Kovi, a respected elder within the community. It is through his gaze that readers are introduced to the serene atmosphere of Khonoma at dawn, "where smoke gently rises from the clustered houses nestled along the hillside" (*Sky Is My Father* 1). This opening gesture is significant as it situates the narrative within an indigenous spatial framework, where the landscape is not merely a passive setting but an active presence deeply intertwined with cultural life, memory, and identity.

Kire's portrayal of Khonoma resonates with what Yi-Fu Tuan calls topophilia, the "affective bond between people and place" where space becomes meaningful through lived experience and emotional attachment (Tuan 4). In indigenous contexts, such spatial relationships are even more pronounced, as land is not merely territory but a source of identity, knowledge, and spirituality. The landscape is remembered not just geographically but experientially as a lived and storied space. Through Kovi's sensory perception of the village at dawn, Kire affirms the Naga relationship to territory as ancestral, sacred, and mnemonic. Through Kovi's sensory perception and deep connection to the village, Kire reclaims Khonoma as more than just a geographical setting; she renders it a living, breathing entity, it becomes a storied landscape where memory, resistance, and cultural identity converge. In doing so, the novel offers a form of spatial remembrance that counters colonial cartographies and reaffirms indigenous place-making as both an epistemological and narrative act.

Conscious Resistance to the Colonial Ideology

The novel integrates communal oral traditions to document pre-colonial Naga existence and the Angami struggle against British forces (1832–1880), positioning orality as both historical record and cultural epistemology. In this way, the novel becomes not only a historical reconstruction but also an act of

spatial remembrance that resists colonial mappings and instead reclaims Khonoma as a site of indigenous presence, resistance, and belonging. The events of the Battle of Khonoma are reconstructed from collective village memory, with an emphasis on how history is lived, felt, and passed down. This aligns with Jan Vansina's claim that oral tradition constitutes a valid and autonomous historical method, especially in societies where literacy was introduced late or through colonial coercion (Vansina *Oral Tradition as History* 27–29). The novel opens not with a colonial officer's logbook, but with a voice of cultural inheritance: "We will speak of those times. The words are still in our breath. The fire is not cold" (*Sky Is My Father* 1).

This metaphor of warm breath and fire recalls Walter Ong's assertion that in primary oral cultures, knowledge is "kept in active circulation" through speech, memory, and performance, rather than textual inscription (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 34). The preface-like voice here operates as a ritual invocation, echoing oral traditions where the authority to recount the past is sacred and intergenerational. The narrative centers on figures such as Tikhü, the warrior who represents both the physical and symbolic resistance of Khonoma. These characters are not merely fictional but serve as mnemonic anchors, embodying the values and traumas that persist in Naga collective memory. As Vansina notes, oral history often remembers "what is relevant to present cultural and political identity" (96).

The novel is punctuated by ritual moments, funerals, warrior oaths, ancestral invocations that demonstrate how oral tradition is embedded in spiritual and ceremonial life. History is, thus, not linear or secular; it is cyclical, sacred, and place-bound. These features align with Ruth Finnegan's observation that in oral societies, the genres of oral history, myth, and ritual are not strictly separated but interwoven and performative (40–47). Finnegan's foundational work on orality foregrounds the complexity and sophistication of oral literatures. She observes that oral traditions are rich, performative, and deeply embedded in the social and historical fabric of communities. This perspective is crucial when approaching Kire's fiction, which reclaims Naga oral traditions not merely as remnants of the ancient time but as living epistemologies. In the novel, storytelling serves as a powerful medium for passing down cultural knowledge, values, and narratives of resistance across generations. Kire's incorporation

of embedded myths, ritualistic language, and dream sequences reflects Finnegan's view that oral literature is not a "primitive precursor" to written texts, but a vibrant and autonomous form of expression and meaning-making (*Oral Literature in Africa* 40).

Erased Stories and Living Memories

The narrative itself mimics the rhythms and structures of oral storytelling. The novel recounts the 1879 British invasion of the Naga village of Khonoma, but it does so not through an official colonial archive, but through the voices and memories of the villagers especially elders – who transmit history as lived and embodied experience. The communal retelling of the Angami warriors' resistance, where memory and myth blend, and individual heroism becomes part of a collective narrative. The narrator often uses phrases like 'it is said' or 'they remembered,' echoing the cadence of oral speech and signalling that the authority of the story lies in communal remembrance rather than written documentation. The community's rituals are not just cultural texture; they are acts of historical transmission. For instance, during mourning rituals, elders retell heroic tales, passing on historical memory. These performances turn the community into custodians of history, where communal validation replaces documentary proof. Kire's narratives blur the lines between history and memory, portraying rituals as living acts that recall and re-enact the struggles, resilience, and values of the Naga people. Through oral storytelling and ritual performance, the community continually reconstructs its past, making history a collective, participatory process rather than an official chronicle.

When the River Sleeps

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* follows Vilie, a reclusive hunter from the *Angami Naga* tribe, who sets out on a solitary and spiritual quest to find a mythical 'heart-stone' – a river-stone believed to be imbued with magical power when retrieved from a river at the moment it 'sleeps,' or becomes completely still. This novel explores the adventurous quest of a hero as a narrative framework that reflects various dimensions of human experience, distinct cultural landscape of Nagaland, where the realms of magic and reality seamlessly intertwine. Significant to this narrative is the belief in the coexistence

of the spiritual and human worlds—a core aspect of Naga culture that is vividly conveyed through the oral traditions passed down across generations is what Kire is exploring in the novel.

Intersection of Myth and Dream in the novel

In *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire intricately weaves myth and dream to produce a narrative that is deeply rooted in indigenous Naga epistemologies. The novelmimics oral storytelling through its circular plot, digressions, embedded myths, and reliance on proverbs and dream sequences. This oral-formulaic pattern, as Ong theorises, promotes mnemonic retention and cultural continuity. The protagonist Vilie's journey is interrupted by tales shared by forest dwellers, monks, and spirits, echoing what Ong describes as a "homeostatic" narrative logic where stories evolve in response to the present (Ong 47). Vilie sets out on a quest to find the heart-stone, hidden beneath the bed of a mysterious river said to be asleep—a river believed to hold immense power and the promise of abundance. Stirred by strange and compelling dreams, he feels an irresistible pull to embark on this perilous journey, risking his life in search of the stone. They guide his decisions, warn him of moral danger, and test his restraint, aligning his actions with ancestral and spiritual laws rather than individual desire. Captivated by the river's mystical allure, he becomes deeply drawn to its hidden power and the secrets it holds.

> When the river is asleep, it is completely still. Yet the enchantment of those minutes or hours when it sleeps is so powerful, that it turns the stones in the middle of the river bed into a charm. If you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you. (*When the River Sleeps* 12)

Kire does not present myth and dream as escapist or fantastical; instead, they serve as cognitive and ethical tools that guide the protagonist's actions. For instance, Vilie's dream about the sleeping river becomes a spiritual quest, a retrieval of something sacred that symbolises inner peace and harmony with the natural world. The river itself, steeped in myth, is said to hold immense spiritual power when found in its sleeping state. This mythic quest is embedded in an indigenous cosmology where the land is not inert but sentient and sacred.

The novel's oral narrative structure - rich in folklore, proverbs, supernatural occurrences, and repetition mirrors what Walter J. Ong refers to as the characteristics of primary orality, where knowledge is shared through performance and embedded in communal memory (36-37). Kire's style, often nonlinear and episodic, reflects oral storytelling techniques, where digressions and spiritual interludes are as important as linear plot progression. This style aligns with Ngig) wa Thiong'o's notion of orature, where oral forms are not precursors to "literature" but represent alternative and equally legitimate literary traditions (15). In this context, Vilie's dreams are not symbolic in a psychoanalytic sense but are revelations with real-world implications, expressions of ancestral agency and cosmic order.

Collective Memory

Ruth Finnegan's analysis of oral genres in *Oral Literature in Africa* also informs a reading of *When the River Sleeps*. Finnegan emphasises that in oral cultures, performative storytelling is not about authorial ownership but about collective memory and participatory knowledge (40–47). Kire's use of shared myths such as the tiger spirit, the forest-dwelling guardian figures, and enchanted rivers positions her narrative within a tradition of communally held and orally transmitted knowledge. Vilie's survival depends on knowledge of medicinal plants, forest signs, weather, and animal behaviour all learned through lived tradition. Vilie's journey is not merely a personal quest but an act of performing oral knowledge transmission, where wisdom is accumulated through memory, experience, and ethical conduct. The learning process expresses the novel's broader epistemological intervention. By depicting knowledge as oral, relational, and spiritually grounded, Kire asserts indigenous ways of knowing that colonial systems sought to disregard. Vilie turned out to be a living repository of knowledge, indicating that in oral cultures, learning is not the accumulation of information but the cultivation of ethical and relational understanding. The story resists colonial-modern epistemologies by centering embodied, intuitive, and spiritual ways of knowing.

Dreams as knowledge

Dreams in the novel are not symbolic devices but sources of truth and action. When Vilie hears the river 'call' to him in a dream, it is understood not as

fantasy, but as communion with the spirit world, legitimising his quest. Vilie's dream of the river is a literal meeting with a spiritual being. The river 'sleeps' not as a poetic image, but as a living, intentional entity. Spirits of the forest, ancestors, and other entities communicate through dreams, guiding moral and physical survival. "He believed that the dream had not come by chance. It had chosen him" (Kire 17). Vilie's refusal to use the power of the sleeping river for violence or gain reflects a dream-informed ethics. Dreams in the narrative serve not only as revelations but they are tests of character, trials of moral integrity. He is repeatedly tested -will he exploit this sacred knowledge for self-interest? His dreams demand ethical control, not utilitarian action. The protagonist's true strength lies in his spiritual self-governance shaped by ancestral wisdom rather than in any magical ability. Kire highlights the meaning of interpreting dreams through the lens of indigenous cosmology. For the Angami people dreams are the signs from the creator deity Kepenuopfu for guiding messages.

River as ontological challenge to Western realism

The river is not a metaphor but a spiritual entity sleeping, alive, and possessing agency. In many Western literary traditions, natural elements like rivers are often used symbolically or metaphorically representing time, change, purification, etc. But in the novel, the river is not symbolic in that way. It is literally alive and spiritually sentient, rooted in the Naga animist cosmology, where nature and spirit are not separate. The river acts, chooses, responds, and withholds. It 'sleeps,' listens, tests human intention, and grants power only under ethically sanctioned conditions and refers to a real location believed to hold supernatural power when it is in a state of rest. It is a spirit-being, and its sleep is a real condition with consequences for humans. By presenting the river as a living agent, Kire shifts the novel away from Western realist or symbolic forms into a decolonial mode of storytelling.

> He saw the river once again. It was still, and a mist rose gently above it. The water glowed a silver white. This time, the dream was not just a dream. (*When the River Sleeps* 22)

The river becomes— a teacher (it reveals truth through dreams), a guardian (it resists unethical seekers), a witness (to violence, to change, to Vilie's growth),

and a participant in the unfolding story. In presenting the river as an animate actor, Kire not only challenges the objectification of nature in colonial-modernist thought but also restores Indigenous epistemologies wherein knowledge is relational, ethical, and mediated through spirit and dream. The river thus becomes both a geographical and ontological center of the novel; its sleep is not dormancy but a quiet assertion of power beyond human control. Vilie does not know the river in a Cartesian or empirical sense; he feels and remembers it through inherited belief systems and echoes of communal oral knowledge.

The river's ontological status reshapes narrative causality. The events do not unfold through rational sequence or human control but through spiritual readiness, dreams, and ethical comportment. For instance, the river 'reveals' itself only to Vilie because he approaches it with humility and restraint, indicating that access to knowledge depends on ethical alignment rather than rational inquiry. This way of knowing directly challenges realist epistemology, which honours reason, empiricism, and human authority.

Orality – As the Narrative Structure

Kire constructs the novel as an oral journey tale, complete with episodic structure, formulaic encounters, and moral testing. Vilie meets demonesses, hunters, strangers, forest spirits—each episode resembling the folktale format Finnegan describes, where "narrative progression is accretive and modular" (92). Repetition of motifs, phrases, and ethical dilemmas reflects the oral-formulaic tradition, where structure aids memory and transmission. Her narrative resists Western binaries of rational/irrational, real/fantastic, written/oral, and instead articulates a worldview where dreams, myths, and the land are interlinked sources of wisdom and power. Thus, *When the River Sleeps* exemplifies how orality can function as a living, decolonial epistemology that challenges Western literary forms and affirms indigenous subjectivity. This interplay of dreaming, place, and knowledge closely resembles what Walter Ong describes as oral cultures' emphasis on "empathetic, participatory knowledge" (Ong 45).

Conclusion

By foregrounding oral traditions, Kire's novel resists the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems by colonial and modernising forces. Her novels demonstrate how oral tradition functions as both a form of cultural resistance and a repository of memory. By weaving indigenous storytelling into her narratives, she preserves the unique heritage of the Naga people, empowers marginalised voices, and ensures that their stories endure in the face of change and historical amnesia. She retrieves and revitalises oral narratives, ensuring their survival in the face of cultural change and the decline of oral transmission. Kire elevates orality beyond folklore, framing it as an epistemological resistance that preserves Naga identity. Her novels demonstrate that stories are not merely artifacts but living systems of knowledge, where tellers and audiences co-create cultural survival.

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Exploring Intersectional Gaps in Gender Discourse : A Reading of Jacinta Kerketta and Nirmala Putul's Poetry

Deepshikha Kumari

Abstract

The feminist discourse often overlooks the layered oppression experienced by marginalised communities, including those based on race, class, ethnicity, disability, and trans identity. This essay examines the intersectional marginalisation faced by Adivasi women, one of the most excluded voices in the feminist analysis of patriarchal power structures. Despite being historically endowed with agency, women in Adivasi communities have become prey to modernity and subjected to both external socio-political structures and internal patriarchal hierarchies that have emerged due to contact with the non-Adivasi world in the process of progress. The essay reflects on the poetry of Nirmala Putul and Jacinta Kerketta as powerful narratives that expose these invisible spaces of oppression. To understand these intersectional gaps and the double marginalisation of Adivasi women within the gender sphere, the essay incorporates the framework of intersectionality, as conceptualised by Afro-American activist Kimberlé Crenshaw. It analyses the poetry of Putul and Kerketta as emerging women's voices of resistance from the community, challenging dominant narratives and highlighting grey areas within feminist and literary spaces. The poems also proclaim the resilience and agency of Adivasi women. The essay advocates for a justice-oriented feminist praxis that acknowledges the complexities of oppression and argues that these contemporary Adivasi women's narratives are crucial in expanding feminist discourse towards inclusivity.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Gender Gap; Adivasi women; Marginalisation; Resistance

Introduction

The poetry of Nirmala Putul and Jacinta Kerketta constitutes a significant site

of Adivasi resistance, exposing systemic exploitation and the sustained erasure of marginalised voices. As prominent contemporary Adivasi poets writing in Hindi, both authors powerfully engage with the socio-political realities affecting Adivasi communities today. By representing the lived realities of Adivasi women, their works illuminate entrenched forms of social, economic, sexual, and cultural exploitation. The poetic intervention functions not merely as testimony to oppression but as an articulation of resilience and resistance within Adivasi life.

Through a close reading of selected poems by Putul and Kerketta, this article examines the position and lived realities of Adivasi women within contemporary feminist discourse. It further explores gendered inequalities and the invisible spaces of marginalisation through the lens of artistic expression, particularly in the context of Adivasi women's struggles in India.

While gender discourse has evolved, mainstream feminist narratives often overlook the layered oppression faced by marginalised communities.

> Women scholars have not yet been able to carve out a niche where their position is secure. There is still a voice in the wilderness, a voice seldom heard even by women themselves. Moreover, it is not surprising that not a single woman scholar has ever tried to deal with the status of tribal women. (De xii)

It can be noted that although there are better research endeavours in the field of Adivasi studies, it lacks exploring the lives of Adivasi women, which needs particular attention due to the increased gender-based crises they are facing amidst modernity. De further elaborates that the tribal woman is constructed as a category or interest group perceived by policymakers primarily as a 'labour force,' 'victim,' or 'protester,' while tribal and non-tribal men increasingly reduce her to the status of a 'witch' or a mere 'sexual object,' respectively (xiv).

Empirical data also reflect the disproportionate vulnerability of Adivasi communities to varied assaults due to modernisation and development projects. As per a report on land dispossession, 40 percent of Adivasis have been displaced from their ancestral land due to a development project. Among the displaced population, the majority are women and young girls (Varughese and Mukherjee). In Adivasi areas, the problem of women and child trafficking has

increased recently due to developmental projects, land acquisition, and deforestation, causing the loss of livelihood and extreme poverty.

Additionally, the patriarchal influence in the communities has subjected women to domestic violence within the household, adding to the layered geometrical marginalisation.For livelihood, when women are forced to migrate, they end up being victims of various forms of exploitation of a sexual and financial nature, often inflicted by the agents. These women are mostly unprotected and underpaid. The systematic neglect in the case of Adivasi women's lives is seldom addressed in academic discourse.

The essay argues that the intersectional standpoint offers a crucial political and structural framework for analysing the complexity of Adivasi women's experience in India. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to how multiple axes of identity, such as gender, caste, ethnicity, class, and location, interact simultaneously to produce unique forms of marginalisation.The intersections of structural inequality, cultural genocide, economic exploitation, and patriarchal violence shape the experience of Adivasi women. The essay establishes how the intersectional framework is particularly relevant for marginalised women's communities, highlighting the limitations of mainstream discourses and policy-making bodies in capturing the complexity of their lived experiences.

Traditionally, Adivasi women have been known for their autonomy and distinct identity. Unlike in patriarchal mainstream societies, gender relations within many Adivasi communities have historically been more egalitarian. Women like Sengi Dai are revered for their bravery and sacrifice in defending the ancestral land. Birsa *ulgulaan* (upsurge) is famous for the fierce resistance of many women who led from the front, suggesting the agency that Adivasi women carry within the community.

The unfortunate infiltration of patriarchal structures, mainly due to the influence of dominant (non-Adivasi) civilised systems, has led to the subjugation of women in these communities. Subsequently, discriminatory practices, violence, and gendered marginalisation have taken root even within Adivasi societies. In this context, both Putul and Kerketta reflect these external and internal oppressions in their poetry. Their work is an effort to expose the

patriarchal distortions entering Adivasi life and give voice to the 'invisible' forms of violence that occur at the intersection of being both Adivasi and female. Their works are not merely literary expressions but acts of resistance that question, challenge, and attempt to reclaim space for Adivasi women in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

In analysing the invisibility of marginalisation, Crenshaw's framework of structural and political intersectionality can be crucial. It helps to uncover the complex interlinkages of gender, ethnicity, and power that shape the experiences of Adivasi women vis-à-vis Adivasi feminist voices in contemporary discourse.

Intersectional Feminism

Intersectional feminism is a framework that analyses how different forms of oppression, such as gender, race, class, caste, sexuality, disability, and colonial history, interact and overlap to shape women's diverse lived experiences. Coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term emerged from Black feminist thought, and was critical of white, middle-class feminism that excluded women of colour. Crenshaw introduces intersectionality not as a new identity category but as a methodological lens to examine how structures of power intersect. According to her: "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference... but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra-group differences" (Crenshaw 1242).

Intersectional feminism expands the scope of feminist analysis by refusing to treat gender oppression in isolation, emphasising how interlocking power systems create multiple, layered forms of marginalisation. Historically, the idea may be traced in the work of figures such as Sojourner Truth, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who exposed how race, colonialism, and class affect women differently. In postmodern discourse, intersectionality can be noted as an epistemological shift from identity to power. It challenges the post-modernists' tendency to dissolve identity categories in the name of fluidity and deconstruction. While postmodern theorists often emphasiseidentity's socially constructed, unstable, and fragmented nature, intersectionality insists that identity categories, though constructed, are not politically irrelevant. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in particular, argues that identities such as 'Black' or 'woman' must be understood not

merely as discursive constructs but as locations of structural power and social vulnerability. In doing so, the concept of intersectionality critiques postmodernism's abstract scepticism toward identity by grounding identity in material and lived experiences of oppression. Crenshaw states that "the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location," rejecting the postmodern urge to abandon identity in favour of total fluidity (1297).

In academic discourse, there have been certain objections to applying the frame in the context of third-world countries like India. Critics like Nivedita Menon argue that frameworks like intersectionality have been depoliticised and overshadowed by Western theoretical dominance. They are sceptical of its tendency touniversalise identity discourse. However, responses by Mary E. John and Meena Gopal rightly point out that intersectionality remains indispensable for recognising the layered, context-specific exclusions that Indian women—particularly Dalit, Adivasi, queer, and disabled women—face, which are often obscured by single-axis frameworks ("Re-thinking Intersectionality" 1-3). Jennifer C. Nash further adds to the argument by calling for an understanding of intersectionality not as a universal solution but as one among many analytical tools forged by women of colour to theorise subordination (Nash 4). Within this debate, the lived realities and literary expressions of poets such as Nirmala Putul and Jacinta Kerketta demonstrate the relevance of intersectionality in their creative voices. Their work reveals unique forms of exclusion based on interactions of gender, class, *adivasiyat* and state violence. Intersectional feminism thus functions not only as a critical theory but also as a political tool that demands more inclusive and justice-oriented feminist movements.

Mapping Intersectional Gaps

The tribal population of India is 8.6 percent, constitutionally recognised as the Scheduled Tribes (Census of India). The Adivasis are the oldest inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent, but have not been granted the status of indigenous communities. This has been an integral part of their continuous political struggle. The Adivasis of India are known for their distinct features and worldview. Their social structure does not recognise any caste, class or other hierarchy.

Still, due to their different life from the mainstream civil world, Adivasis are racialised and treated as socially inferior within the dominant caste society. Adivasis are forest and mountain dwellers. Their lands are rich in natural resources, which have been the central cause of their marginalisation, dating back to colonial policies that dispossessed them of land and disrupted their economies. Laws such as the Forest Act (1864), Criminal Tribes Act (1871), and Land Acquisition Act (1894) transferred ownership from indigenous communities to the state. Post-independence legislation, such as the Bonded Labour Abolition Act (1976), the Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989), and the Forest Rights Act (2006), has had limited impact due to poor implementation (Krishnan). Human trafficking reflects their acute vulnerability. Jharkhand, with a large tribal population, has the highest out-migration rate in India. (Economic Survey, 2017; NCRB).

Adivasi women are the worst victims of displacement and trafficking. In 2022, over 6,500 trafficking victims were identified, 60 percent of whom were Adivasi women and girls. Around 200,000 Adivasi women from Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal work as domestic workers in cities, often through exploitative placement agencies. These are on record, but the number could be much higher. (NCRB). Within their own communities, Adivasi women face limited access to land and decision-making. Practices like witch-hunting, polygamy, and domestic violence reinforce their subjugation. A particularly stark example of intersectional vulnerability is seen in uranium mining regions like Jadugoda, where locals are exposed to radiation through tailing dams and contaminated water, resulting in severe health hazards. (Mazumdar et.al.). While men work as miners, women in proximity to these men, doing chores like washing their clothes, are also exposed to radiation. The radiation exposure adversely impacts the reproductive system of women, causing miscarriages and other congenital disabilities. Such women are prone to be stigmatised as ill-fated women with bad omen or even branded as witches. In most cases, they are abandoned by their husbands and left to live in isolation and poverty.

Unfortunately, intersecting structures of oppression, grounded in colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and state neglect, constitute the lived realities of Adivasi women yet remain insufficiently theorised in mainstream media

discourse and sustained scholarly engagement. Justice frameworks must recognise this complexity. Policies or activism that treat them solely as 'women' or 'tribals' fail to address their actual conditions. The article argues that an intersectional approach is not theoretical but essential for equity, representation, and systemic change.

Poetic Voice of Resistance

Despite continuous systemic oppression, the Adivasi women have been assertive and played a significant role in the movements for land rights and self-determination. Even today, Adivasi women's resilience and participation in resistance movements against land alienation, state repression, and corporate exploitation are noteworthy in many states. In contemporary Adivasi poetry, the voice of activism is translated into creativity as the dry facts of victimisation often fail to create consciousness. Consequently, Adivasi poetic voices of resistance have emerged, and the poets are writing in the dominant language to reach a broader audience. Among them are poets like Nirmala Putul and Jacinta Kerketta, prominent Adivasi literary figures, who are not only writing about communities' century-old tales that survive amid oddities but also drawing attention to the conditions of Adivasi women who remain invisible in the struggle, both externally and within the community.

Both Putul and Kerketta strongly intervene in mainstream literary representations of Adivasi life, particularly of Adivasi women, who are frequently portrayed as innocent, ahistorical figures and romanticised for their proximity to nature. Such representations erase the material realities of labour, deprivation, and survival that structure Adivasi women's everyday lives. Far from being passive or carefree, these women are shaped by continuous physical toil. Both the poets critique dominant literary practices that ignore these conditions and instead derive aesthetic or voyeuristic pleasure from the sexualised Adivasi female body.

In "Adivasi Ladkiyon ke Baare," Putul condemns such representations as the outcome of a voyeuristic and exploitative imagination, exposing the ethical failure of mainstream literary practices. Her poem exposes the falsity of imposed identities and questions the ideological foundations of mainstream descriptions of Adivasi women. She writes:

ऊपर से काली
भीतर से अपने चमकते दाँतों
की तरह शांत धवल होती हैं वे
...
फसलों को रोपती–काटती हुई
गाती हैं गीत
भूल जाती हैं जिंदगी के दर्द...
किसने कहे हैं उनके परिचय में
इतने बड़े–बड़े झूठ? (*Nagade* 17).

(Dark from outside, /Yet inwardly as calm and white/As their shining teeth…/ Sowing and harvesting crops, /Singing songs, /Forgetting the pain of life…/Who has written/Such enormous lies/In their descriptions?)[1]

Through these lines, Putul dismantles romantic binaries that frame Adivasi women as primitive yet pure, labouring yet untouched by suffering, thereby reclaiming their lived complexity.

Similarly, Jacinta Kerketta's "Adivasi Ladkiyan" confronts the voyeuristic gaze that reduces Adivasi women to objects of sexual curiosity, even within ostensibly progressive literary spaces. She writes:

किसी आदिवासी गाँव से गुजरती कविता में
कुछ लोग ढूँढ़ रहे हैं
नदी में नहाती किसी आदिवासी स्त्री की नंगी पीठ... (*Ishwar* 116).

(*In a poem passing through an Adivasi village, /Some people are searching/ For the bare back of an Adivasi woman/ Bathing in the river…*)

Kerketta not only exposes the assumption of sexual availability imposed on Adivasi women but also articulates an act of resistance through poetic form. In a striking reversal, poetry itself becomes a tool of defiance against sexual and symbolic violence:

...कविता चलाती है उसकी पीठ पर हँसिया
तोड़ देती है उसकी गंदी उँगलियाँ
और चीखती है–
कविता में ढूँढ़ना बंद करो
आदिवासी लड़कियाँ। (117).

(*Poetry swings a sickle at those backs, / Breaks those filthy fingers, /And screams—/Stop searching for Adivasi girls in poetry.*)

This violent imagery signals the urgency of breaking hegemonic frameworks that define Adivasi identity from outside. Contemporary Adivasi women's poetry thus functions as a counter-discourse to mainstream stereotyping and patronising attitudes, foregrounding labour, resistance, and agency while demanding ethical modes of representation.

These poems reflect an intersectional feminist vision where gender, Adivasi identity, and labour cannot be separated. By challenging patriarchal and dominant literary gazes, Adivasi women poets reveal how creative spaces often repeat social inequalities. Their poetry speaks from lived experience rather than imagination alone. In doing so, it turns literature into a space of resistance rather than a mere aesthetic pleasure.

Nirmala Putul's poem "Woh Aksar Jo Tumhari Pakad Se Chhut Jata Hai" describes this layer of marginalisation, exposing the site of structural oppression within the feminist discourse. The poem serves as a medium to understand the need for a political intersectional framework to analyse the layers of women's issues missed in mainstream discourses on gender and identity.

एक स्त्री पहाड़ पर रो रही है
और दूसरी स्त्री
महल की तीन मंजिला इमारत की खिड़की से बाहर
झाँककर मुस्कुरा रही है।
ओ, कविघोष्ठी में स्त्रियों पर
कविता पढ़ रहे कवियों!
देखो, कुछ हो रहा है
इन दो स्त्रियों के बीच छूटी हुई जगहों में,
इस कहीं कुछ हो रहे को दर्ज करो
कि वह अक्सर तुम्हारी पकड़ से छूट जाता है।... (*Beghar*18).

(*A woman is crying out on the hill / And another is smiling / Gazing out from the window of / Her three-storeyed palace. / Oh, poets / Reciting*

poems on women / In your poetic gatherings! / Watch out, something is happening / in the space left between these two women. / Record this something somewhere happening, / for it so often slips out / through the grasp / of your carefully chosen words…)[2]

The lines highlight the unequal realities of women shaped by caste, class, ethnicity and geography. The contrast between a woman weeping on a mountain and another smiling from a palace window exposes how dominant narratives often overlook the complex experiences of marginalised women. Addressing male poets, the poem urges recognition of the spaces in between, symbolic of those excluded from both patriarchal and elite feminist frameworks. It calls for an intersectional approach that accounts for layered oppressions, emphasising the need to centre the voices and struggles of women at the margins.

Putul further extends the critique of dominant discourses by highlighting the neglect towards Adivasi women's lived realities. Portraying a woman planting rice with a child on her back in contrast to another engaged in political power struggles exposes the socio-economic and cultural gaps between the women of different classes and locations. The poem critiques this selective visibility within feminist narratives. Addressing both male writers and elite feminists, particularly those speaking on Adivasi identity, the poet questions their failure to include the voices of women whose labour and lives remain unseen.

ओ, स्त्रीविमर्श में शामिल लेखकों!
क्या तुम बता सकते हो
एक स्त्री पीठ पर बच्चा बाँधे धान रोप रही है
दूसरी सरकार गिराने और बनाने में लगी है।
ओ, आदिवासी अस्मिता पर बात करनेवाली झंडावदार औरतों!
इन दो पंक्तियों के बीच गुम हो गई उन औरतों का पता
जिनका नाम तुम्हारी बहस में शामिल नहीं है। (*Beghar* 18).

(*O, writers of feminist discourse! / Can you tell / A woman carrying a child on her back, planting paddy / While others busy toppling and forming governments. / Oh, flag-bearing women talking on Adivasi identity! / Spare a thought for those lost women between these two lines / Spare a*

thought for the women / whose names do not make it into your debates.)[3]

By questioning both patriarchal gatekeepers and the flag-bearing feminist actors, the poem reflects how intersectionality is often invoked but rarely practised. The lost women between these lines symbolise those excluded from mainstream debates, revealing the cracks between representation and reality.The poem calls for an intersectional feminist praxis that moves beyond tokenism to centre the experiences of those at the margins.

It is well-known that the tribal forest economy is primarily a women-led economy. Women are most directly connected to forest land for their livelihood and daily sustenance. However, rapid industrialisation and deforestation have severely impacted their socio-economic conditions. Traditionally, forest products such as brooms, mats, baskets, *datun* (natural toothbrush sticks), and leaf plates were in demand and sold by Adivasi women in local *haats* (markets). Today, these goods compete with mass-produced plastic alternatives that are more readily available and sold at lower prices in the capitalist market economy. As a result, the demand for traditional forest goods has sharply declined, and in many regions, their usage has all but disappeared. Even where these items are still sold, consumers are often unwilling to pay fair prices that reflect the hard labour involved in gathering raw materials from the forest and crafting them by hand. The rise of plastic culture not only poses serious environmental hazards but also breaks the economic backbone of women who have traditionally depended on these occupations for survival. The situation reflects a deeper political intersectionality. Although growing eco-consciousness has generated some demand for forest products labelled 'organic' and 'sustainable,' such demand remains limited. The resulting profits largely accrue to intermediaries, who purchase these products from Adivasi communities at meagre prices and sell them to large brands. Thus, the wages of these women remain incredibly low. Nirmala Putul, in her poem "Bahamuni," powerfully and ironically exposes this form of exploitation, which rarely receives attention in mainstream emancipatory or developmental discourses. To quote:

तुम्हारे हाथ बने पत्तल पर भरते हैं पेट हजारों
पर हजारों पत्तल भर नहीं पाते तुम्हारा पेट
कैसी विडम्बना है ये

जमीन पर बैठ बुनती हो चटाईयाँ
और पंखा बनाते टपकता है पसीना...
तुम्हारे करिये देह से टप–टप पसीना!
जिन घरों के लिए बनाती हो झाड़ू
उन्हीं से आते हैं कचरे तुम्हारी बस्तियों में? (*Nagade* 12).

(*On your handmade plates, thousands fill their stomachs / But even thousands of these plates cannot fill your stomach / What an irony it is / You weave the mats sitting on the floor / And the sweat drops / Drip off your dark skin / While making the fan / The brooms you make for those homes / Who sends the garbage to your colonies*.)

These lines are striking for the use of irony, where the stomach of countless people is filled on the leaf plates made by the local Adivasi women who are victims of poverty and prone to starvation. Women like Bahamuni in dire conditions make products of comfort for others, yet their work remains undervalued. The poem intersectionally examines gender based economic exploitation. It also highlights the commodification of the environment under market-oriented cultural capitalism. The poetic voice here is a vehicle urging a shift from exploitation to empowerment, where women like Bahamuni are no longer alienated from the fruits of their labour.

A recent report on the working conditions of Adivasi women highlights this stark reality: Adivasi women in the Bakura district of West Bengal who collect Sal leaves for the small-scale leaf-plate industry earn only 5 rupees for every 100 leaves (Gaon Connection). Their work involves spending long days in dangerous terrain to collect these leaves, which remain underpaid and unrecognised. Jacinta Kerketta also portrays this systematic exploitation based on gender, class, and ethnicity, emphasising the political failure to see through the intersectional gaps faced by the Adivasi community, particularly their women. Kerketta's poem "Kash Imli Khatti Na Hoti" highlights the interconnected identity between the Adivasi women and the forest. The poet reflects how their agency is interdependent and losing one is the cause of the erasure of the other. In the poem, a girl is a tamarind seller, which has been her traditional occupation. She picks up the tamarind and carries the basket full on her head to sell in the market, suggesting her socio-economic reality of hard labour.

With her cries, "Get tamarind for two rupees," the poet hints that the girl cannot sell five dona (leaf bowls) of tamarind. The passerby comes to taste it and ironically comments that it is too sour. The livelihood of the young girl in the poem amid the abundance of nature is under threat within the framework of capitalism. The system transforms the *imli* she collects into a marketable product where the cultural symbol is stripped off, and the worth of her product becomes a mere fraction.

वो लड़की
नंगे पाँव, सिर पर
इमली की टोकरी ढो कर
हाट की ओर जाती हुई।
बनाती है पाँच हिस्से
मुट्ठी भर इमली डालकर
सखुआ के पत्तों के दोनों में,
चिल्लाती है–
"दो रुपये में इमली ले लो!" (*Ishwar* 132).

(*That girl, / barefoot, balancing / a basket full of tamarind on her head, / walks toward the marketplace. / She divides it into five parts / Putting a handful of tamarind in / In each bowl of sal leaves, / Calls out— / "Get tamarind for two rupees!"*)[4]

In addition, the poem illustrates the simple and modest life of forest people. Their sustainable practice includes using *sakhua*leaves to package the product and passing knowledge to the next generation. However, the livelihood of the young girl in the poem amid the abundance of nature is under threat within the framework of capitalism.

Further, Kerketta exposes the patronising attitude of mainstream elite women towards the underprivileged and politically marginalised communities. She appropriately traces this to highlight the unheard and intersectional failure of elite voices of feminism. The girl in the poem finally sells off a dona of tamarind to a city woman who cannot control salivation, pity the girl and throws

two rupees towards her, making the girl look at the coin and ponder, "wish the tamarind were not sour!" Jacinta writes:

बहुत इंतजार के बाद
शहर की स्त्रियों का
झुंड उधर से गुजरा।
लार बचाकर
एक स्त्री ले गई
दोना भर इमली उठाकर,
जाते–जाते फेंक गई
बस, दो रुपल्ली।..
लौटते हुए हाट से
देखा मुट्ठी में दो रुपये।
सोचा–
"काश! इमली खट्टी न होती!" (*Ishwar* 132).

(*After a long wait, / a group of urban women / Passed by her. / Salivating, / One of the women / Took away a bowlful, / Throwing just a coin of two rupees / While going away. / The girl / Stared at the four left-out tamarind bowls / Earned only two rupees / By the evening. / On her way back from the market, / She looked at the coins in her fist / and thought / "Wish the tamarind! / Hadn't been sour!"*.)[5]

Through these works, poets like Putul and Kerketta bring forth unheard stories, subjectivity, and political failure in academic discourses, where gender issues are selective or leave the peripheral voices behind, eventually lost among the voices of the visible majority. The girl's poverty is not due to personal misfortune or individual tragedy. It is systemic failure that leaves Adivasi women in such a state of crisis. Thus, it critiques the invisibility of these women's struggles within economic frameworks and feminist discourses.

These intersectional gaps in the lives of Adivasi women can be further understood by analysing their position within their communities. The Adivasi worldview does not follow rigid hierarchical or hegemonic divisions that create social inequalities. Historically, women have held significant agency in decision-

making processes in these societies. However, the egalitarian value inherent in the Adivasi worldview has been increasingly disrupted and compromised over time due to the infiltration of outsiders or non-Adivasis (*diku*) into Adivasi regions. The infiltration occurred primarily for developmental projects and access to land and natural resources. As a result, previously alien to these societies, patriarchal norms have begun to take root. Customary laws, which once upheld gender equity, are being replaced by formal civil laws. Consequently, in many Adivasi communities today, women find themselves marginalised, deprived of rights over land or property and facing rising instances of domestic violence. "To the question of patriarchy in tribal society, it is pertinent to say that a tribal woman generally bears a double burden of patriarchal inscription on her body within the dominant-subaltern power contestation" (De xvi). This can be captured in the lines of Jacinta from her poem "Striyon Ka Ishwar":

पिता और भाई की हिंसा से
बचने के लिए मैंने बचपन में ही
माँ के ईश्वर को कसकर पकड़ लिया।
अब कभी किसी बात को लेकर
भाई का उठा हाथ रुक जाता
तो वह सबसे बड़ा चमत्कार होता।
धीरे–धीरे हर हिंसा हमारे लिए
ईश्वर द्वारा ली जा रही परीक्षा बन गई।
और दिन की ताकत
मैं ईश्वर के सहारे जीती रही
और माँ ईश्वर के भरोसे मार खाती रही।
मैं बड़ी होने लगी
और माँ बूढ़ी होने लगी।
हम दोनों के पास अब भी वही ईश्वर था।... (*Ishwar* 26).

(*To resist the violence / of my father and brother, / In childhood, I tightly clung / to my mother's God. / Gradually, every blow / became a test from God. / I survived each day / leaning on faith, / While my mother / endured*

beatings / trusting the same. / I grew up, / And my mother grew old. / We both still had the same God.…) [6]

The poem reveals how patriarchy functions not solely as an external structure imposed upon marginalised communities but as an internalised and deeply embedded force within them. The poem articulates well the vicious atrocities on the woman, who is the sole provider and central to domesticity, and is consistently subjected to violence and economic disempowerment by the male members. The speaker's early belief in faith as a protective force against domestic abuse gradually gives way to the realisation that religious belief often serves as a mechanism to normalise suffering and silence resistance. The mother's hard-earned money is claimed by her husband and son, highlighting the economic exploitation within the household. The poem portrays the father, whose authority is unquestioned despite his abusive behaviour, as the normalised figure of male dominance. Through this portrayal of the family life of an Adivasi woman, the poet highlights how women are denied agency and remain entrapped in systems of control within their communities. The internal marginalisation is further reinforced by religious fatalism, another influence of outside contact, where suffering is appropriated as a test of the divine will. The poem powerfully illustrates the normalising and internalising of violence through faith. In the context of marginalisation, faith becomes a coping mechanism that unintentionally justifies and sustains the very powerful structures of oppression.

The poem also highlights the escalating issue of alcoholism and the resulting mental, physical, and emotional violence inflicted upon women by the men within their households. Traditionally, the moderate consumption of alcohol made from rice and mahua has been an integral aspect of Adivasi cultural practices. However, this cultural element has been exploited by *dikus* who, after ingratiating themselves within Adivasi communities as well-wishers, push them towards alcohol intoxication. Many such instances of wrongfully seizing the Adivasi lands under the influence of alcohol have been historically reported.

Furthermore, the displacement of Adivasi people due to state-led land acquisition for development projects has led to the extermination of traditional livelihoods. As a result, many of the displaced turn to alcohol, leaving women to carry the burden of dual responsibilities of contributing to the household

economy and managing domestic chores while also becoming increasingly vulnerable to the alcohol abuse inflicted by addicted men of the house.

The following lines of the poem capture this aspect within the household where male figures, fathers and brothers, reproduce patriarchal hierarchies that Adivasi communities were historically known to resist. Thus, Adivasi women face a dual burden of oppression: externally through the forces of the state and the capitalist market and internally through the gradual loss of their autonomy and voice within their own cultural and familial spaces.

माँ की मेहनत का हिस्सा
अब भी भाई छीन ले जाता,
और शाम होते ही पिता
पीकर उस पर चिल्लाते।
वे कभी नहीं बदले,
ना माँ के दिन कभी सुधरे। (*Ishwar* 26).

(*Brother still / Took the fruits of Maa's labour, / And by evening, / My drunken father / Still shouted at her. / They never changed. / And neither / Did my mother's fate*.) [7]

Violence surrounding land and natural resources in Adivasi regions manifests in multiple, deeply troubling forms, many of which are gendered and specifically target women. One of the most alarming of these instances of inflicted violence on women is the continued practice of witch-hunting in some of these regions. Despite legal prohibitions, these practices persist in various forms. It involves inhuman ways of ostracising women by character assassination. Such convergence of patriarchy and superstition is observed in these areas for controlling women, particularly those who are landowners and without men in their lives. This stigmatisation isolates women from the community, stripping them of dignity and, in many cases, from access to basic resources and protection. Women accused of witchcraft are subjected to brutal killings or mob lynchings.

Nirmala Putul's poem "Dhepcha Ke Babu" illuminates a gory incident narrated by a woman whose husband migrated to Kashmir for labour. The poem captures the plight of economic hardship and patriarchal prejudices that

these women face. The poem depicts how women without male protection are more prone to blame and victimisation. The accusation of witchcraft is the most dehumanising and terrifying tool of control and punishment in some communities that can strip a woman of her dignity, safety, and even life. The community's display of such brutalities reveals how patriarchal violence intersects within the very structures that are themselves marginalised. Through its unsettling imagery, the poem serves as a powerful indictment of the gendered violence that remains pervasive and normalised within marginalised communities.

ढेपचा के बाबू
तुम तो सब कुछ छोड़–छाड़
चले गए कमाने कश्मीर
भाग गया ढेपचा भी
अपने साथियों के साथ असम
गाँव का हाल तो जानते ही हो
जिसका मरद साथ नहीं होता
उसे कैसे–कैसे सताते हैं
गोतिया–भाई, आस–पड़ोस के लोग...
और एक दिन तो गजब ही हो गया
लखना के बेटे को साँप ने काटा
तो सब के सब आ धमके हम पर
कहने लगे, "डायन है ये!
कुछ कर दिया है उसके बच्चे को!"
वो तो अच्छा हुआ सरबतिया ने साँप देख लिया
नहीं तो पकलू बुढ़िया की तरह
मुझे भी घसीट कर ले जाते लोग कुंली में
और भरी पंचायत में सिर मुंडवा
नचा देते नंगा
कर देते मुँह पर पेशाब
ठूँस देते मैला!... (*Nagade* 47).

(*Dhepcha's babu, / You left everything behind / And went off to earn in*

Kashmir. / Even Dhepcha ran away / To Assam with his friends. / You know well / The affairs of the village / How a woman without a man / Is tormented / By relatives, neighbours, everyone… / And then one day, / Things went completely awry. / Lakhna's son was bitten by a snake, / And suddenly they all stormed on me / Saying, "she's a witch! / She's done something to the boy!" / Thank God Sarbatia saw the snake herself. / Otherwise, like old Paklu, / They would have dragged me / To the village square, / Would have shaved my head / In front of the whole panchayat, / And forced me to dance naked, / Urinated on my face, / And stuffed faeces in my mouth.) [8]

The lines reflect how Adivasi women stand at the lowest rung in multiple hierarchies. They suffer not only from systemic state and economic violence but also from the cruelty of their immediate social surroundings. Elina Horo and Annisa Burgos, both Adivasi women activists, persuasively argue that such acts represent some of the most tragic and horrifying forms of discrimination faced by Adivasi women today. These practices are not only the reflection of legal failure and institutional protection but also the loss of traditional communal ethics under pressure from economic marginalisation, cultural distortion, and the encroachment of dominant societal norms that often fail to value or protect women's lives.

Conclusion

Any meaningful discourse on gender can only happen by examining the voices whose struggles remain invisible. The lived experiences of women of Adivasi or Dalit communities and others involve the layered and intersectional nature of oppression. If feminist praxis fails to incorporate these intersecting realities, it risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to dismantle. Intersectional feminism does not reject feminism; instead, it refines and expands it by foregrounding how overlapping systems of caste, class, gender, and state violence compound inequality. Therefore, the day-to-day struggle of Adivasi women must be seen through a nuanced socio-political and economic standpoint. Their specific issues, such as land dispossession, economic marginalisation, trafficking, and systemic neglect, must be addressed through structural changes.This includes understanding our own privileges and

advocating for gender-responsive public policies to address these gaps.

As asserted by Crenshaw, "if we cannot see the problem, we cannot fix it." Internal voices of resistance, such as those of poets Jacinta Kerketta and Nirmala Putul, play a vital role in highlighting and addressing the problem through creative assertions. Their works document pain, proclaim strong cultural agency, and reimagine justice. These poetic expressions offer counter-narratives that challenge both patriarchal oppression and external colonising forces. Through a close reading of these poems, the essay ultimately argues that the struggle for gender equality must be directed toward concrete policy outcomes rather than confined to questions of identity alone. It must include those intersecting multiple forms of marginalisation created by layers of power structures. We can move toward justice and empowerment of the most marginalised by exploring these voices and addressing the structural roots of inequality.

Notes

1. All English translations of original Hindi poems quoted in this essay are by the author for academic analysis and accessibility. These excerpts are from Nirmala Putul's poetry collection *Nagade Ki Tarah Bajte Shabd* (Vani Parakshan, 2004, 17) and Jacinta Kerketta's *Aur Bazaar* (Rajkamal Prakashan, 2022, 116-17).
2. These quotes are from Nirmala Putul's *Beghar Sapne* (Adhar, 2014).
3. These quotes are from Nirmala Putul's *Beghar Sapne* (Adhar, 2014).
4. This poem appears in Nirmala Putul's collection of poems *Nagade Ki Tarah Bajte Shabd* (12).
5. These excerpts are from Jacinta Kerketta's poetry collection *Ishwar Aur Bazaar* (132).
6. These lines are also from Jacinta Kerketta's *Ishwar Aur Bazaar* (26).
7. The lines are also from Kerketta's *Ishwar Aur Bazaar* (27).
8. This narrative poem appears in Nirmala Putul's *Nagade Ki Tarah Bajte Shabd* (47).

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Oscillation between Past and Present: Physical and Emotional Mobility in Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows*

Himanshu Kumar

Abstract

This essay explores how Namita Gokhale's novel, *The Book of Shadows* (1999), shows that Rachita Tiwari's journey after an acid attack is not just about her personal struggle with trauma and recovery, but also about how she navigates power, gender, and her surroundings. By applying Tim Cresswell's mobility theory, which distinguishes between movement and mobility, the article analyses three connected aspects: physical mobility, temporal mobility, and spectral mobility. It argues that having a privileged background allows Rachita to escape to her family's ancestral house in the hills, but the violence and shame she faces because of her gender greatly limit her ability to move around and be seen, highlighting the unequal access to mobility that Doreen Massey discusses. Trauma theory (particularly Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra) helps us understand why Rachita has trouble sleeping, flashbacks, and a fragmented narrative, seeing these as symptoms of the 'belatedness' of trauma rather than just memories. The haunted house in Kumaon becomes a place where different mobilities, from colonial to postcolonial times, intersect, showing how Rachita's healing is tied to older stories of missionary work, forced labour, and local superstitions. By the end of the novel, Rachita's claim to a 'right to exist' marks a shift from merely surviving to what Cresswell calls 'meaningful [im]mobility': a feminist way of taking control of movement, stillness, and visibility that changes both her sense of self and the spaces she inhabits.

Keywords: Gender; Mobility; Recovery; Space; Trauma

Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows* (1999) is a novel about Rachita Tiwari, an English lecturer at Jesus and Mary College (Delhi), who has her whole world turned upside down when her fiancé (Anand) commits suicide

and his sister throws acid on her face. The novel describes Rachita's odyssey in coping with her new life. She escapes to her ancestral home in the Kumaon hills, and her past is overlaid with her present and her future desires in a swirling melee of emotion. While the novel is about Rachita's quest to deal with her shame and her injuries—physical and psychological—it is also about the Indian woman's search for an existence where she can have her rightful place in society in the late twentieth-century, an existence where her past and her history are taken cognizance of.

Recent work in mobility studies (Tim Cresswell and Doreen Massey) argues that movement is never simply physical displacement but an intricate social phenomenon. This essay uses 'friction' as a theoretical model to conduct a literary reading of Gokhale's novel and analyse the thematised and embodied experience of mobility through Rachita's life. It examines the varied forms of bodily and psychic mobility that Rachita experiences across the three registers of space, time, and the spectral, thereby illustrating the general principle that friction can be a powerful device to organise and enrich what is otherwise a one-way or asymmetric relation. The essay argues that Rachita's experience of modernity in India was one of considerable amounts of friction: trauma, gendered norms, and social stigma.

This essay draws on trauma theory (Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra) to argue that Rachita's multiple temporalities repeat the trauma structure of repetition in the form of the recurrence of the traumatic event and the belated realisation of its effects. At the same time, drawing on feminist theories of gendered mobility, it examines how Rachita's physical disfigurement, withdrawal from the public sphere, and partial return to it point to unequal citizenship in terms of the right to mobility, visibility, and civic recognition. The haunted house in Kumaon is a site where several narratives of mobility intersect: the colonial missionary's travels, the forced labour to which the local villagers are reduced to protect themselves from malevolent spirits, and Rachita's search for her own identity as a modern woman who seeks to make good on her loss of self, following trauma.

The Book of Shadows uses Rachita's journey to tell the story of her recovery from trauma; in the process, it brings to light the politics of mobility and gender. Trauma and the rearrangement of space in the novel force Rachita

to renegotiate her identity and sense of belonging. By the end of the novel Rachita comes to realise that "defined in time and space and dimension, I had the right to exist!" (Gokhale 213). This journey from immobility and effacement to mobility and existence is thus an example of "meaningful [im]mobility" that reveals and recreates social inequality (Cresswell, *On the Move* 239).

To engage with the novel through the perspective of mobility studies, it is essential to understand the difference between movement and mobility. According to Tim Cresswell, "Movement is rarely just movement; it carries with it the burden of meaning" (*On the Move* 6). In contrast, mobility is "a fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations, and practices" and exists as a delicate connection between actual movement and symbolic representations (Cresswell, "Towards a Politics" 18). Cresswell outlines six essential components of mobility: "motive force, velocity, rhythm, route, experience, and friction" (17). These elements create "constellations of mobility" that organise every human practice (29).

Movements develop meanings through specific "social, cultural and political contexts" (Adey 63). Drawing on Doreen Massey's concept of extension, Cresswell states that time–space compression "needs differentiating socially" because it affects distance and time perception due to social and technological advancements (Massey, "Power-geometry" 62). Mobility is "accessed and experienced differently by different social groups" (Adey 117). The narratives about trauma, healing, and belonging in *The Book of Shadows* function as social negotiations between mobile and immobile states that develop through history, power, and memory. The protagonist's movement between static and dynamic areas demonstrates the 'meaningful [im]mobility' defined by Cresswell and Massey.

The trope of physical, temporal, and spectral mobility/immobility is central to *The Book of Shadows* and informs three of its strands. The first is the physical mobility of the protagonist, Rachita: her journey from Delhi to Kumaon and then back again, her comings and goings from her home and the hospital, and her aspiration and desire to step out into the world. Here, we focus on the forces that propel her in her physical travels (healing, escape, concealment, and forgetting), as well as the obstacles she encounters (social shame, the fear of being visible and reduced to nothingness), and her sense of isolation or

belonging to a social world. The second is the temporal mobility of the trauma of the acid attack, as illustrated by Cathy Caruth's assertion that because a traumatic event occurs in a state of clinical unconsciousness or delirium, it does not enter into the before-and-after narrative structure of time and so remains "belated" in relation to the personal narrative of the self (4). Rachita's ongoing attempt to return to the time of the attack as well as her being haunted by images and voices that invade her present illustrate this temporality of trauma and also the otherworldliness of her traumatic experiences that exist alongside her everyday life. The third is spectral mobility, by which Rachita escapes from her bodily and temporal trauma and accesses alternative worlds. These include her world of fantasy, her memories of childhood, and her relation to the colonial past embedded in the old bungalow in which she lives with her adoptive family and discovers through the missionary journal of William Cockrell.

Finally, because Rachita's mobility is unmistakably gendered, this framework is aligned with feminist accounts of women's constrained movements. Viola Klein opines that women have been "restricted by a century-old history of submissions, which had bred in them a sense of inferiority" (34). In this essay, we observe how the acid attack on Rachita, the social boycott she suffers at the hands of her neighbours, and the unrelenting pressure to look beautiful that she has to undergo in order to not be seen as rebellious by her society encapsulates the idea of gendered mobility and restriction in the most brutal possible terms. The struggle for Rachita to assert her right to exist may be seen as a feminist interpretation of the concept of mobility in a world where she is seen and recognised.

At the outset of the novel, Rachita's life in Delhi is characterised by her inner world being disconnected from her outward actions. As an English lecturer, she performs competence and authority in the classroom, yet confesses that she is "an earnest overgrown student masquerading as an academic" (Gokhale 3-4). Her infidelity in relation to her fiancé, Anand, causes his suicide. After Anand's death, his sister attacks Rachita with acid. According to Terry Eagleton, there exists an impression of distortion as "we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify" (143). The acid attack disrupts Rachita's fictional self and her face.

In terms of mobility, acid attack is a violent and non-consensual act of imposition of immobility on Rachita's body. She is restricted to hospital beds, her home, and on specially created routes to take her from one place to the other without being harassed by onlookers. On the one hand, Rachita's subsequent mobility is determined by the desire to extricate herself from the very social world that has marginalised her, and on the other, to find a place where she can recuperate. Divorced from the workplace, her colleagues, her students, and her family, Rachita resists the hurried and modern manner of living her life in the cosmopolitan city. Her withdrawal from the world of work and social relations and from the domain of kinship is not merely a static rebellion against the relentless daily pace of movement. Rather, it is a calculated act of immobility that resists the various forms of compulsion to move that have become necessary for the modern and cosmopolitan female subject in the city.

Movement can be defined at two different levels: physical and existential. It was the physical movement that prompted Rachita to shift to her ancestral home in the Kumaon hills. It is a centrifugal movement from the centre to the periphery, from the college to a more ancient and secluded environment of the hills, to escape the public world and to "heal, to hide, to forget" (Gokhale 6). She wishes to reach the hills to recover herself and to have an opportunity of "solitude and soliloquy to come to terms with what had happened" (7). Cresswell contends that "movement is rarely just movement" (*On the Move* 6). Similarly, Rachita's movement to Kumaon had a host of implications for her relations with space, time, and self.

The ancestral house becomes a prime location in the story of Rachita and her lived experiences of memory, mobility, and selfhood. Rachita affirms "we have closed ranks together, me and the house" almost at the very beginning of the story (Gokhale 1), and also later on when she expresses that "the house soothes my hatred, hushes my sorrow" (7). Thus, Rachita and the house form a coalition with each other, thus amalgamating the social and historical relations present with the house and its surroundings.

In Cresswell's terms, Rachita's experience of time in the house is as an entanglement of place, performance, and discourse. Although confined to the house, the practices she adopts, such as reading, smoking, listening to stories,

and roaming around in rooms, ensure an active internal space of mobility. While the cold taps of the college washroom provided her with no respite during her assault, the house felt like something that was embracing her. It acts as a womb for Rachita and serves as both a "repository of my youth, and the custodian of my dreams" (Gokhale 7).

This spatial reorganisation exemplifies Cresswell's claim that "mobility is the dynamic equivalent of place" (*On the Move* 3). When Rachita escapes to the hills, it is not merely a physical change of location. As Iain Chambers points out, it is "shifting constellations of meaning, identities, openings and possibilities" (193). Through all these different constellations of mobility, the colonial past of the house and all the people involved in it are reinterpreted when Rachita enters it as part of her own personal history.

Gender complicates Rachita's relationship with a place as well as her movement. The acid attack strips away her identity as Rachita, leaving her feeling alienated from "my face, the familiar index of my being, has dissolved into absurdity and abstraction" (Gokhale 7). According to Viola Klein, women are "restricted by a century-old history of submissions, which had bred in them a sense of inferiority" (34). Rachita's withdrawal from the world is thus both a defensive strategy and an enforced immobility against the violence she experiences as a woman—violence of the intimate, gender violence and social violence.

The house becomes her personal prison and increases her self-awareness. This stagnation of her life ultimately leads to self-realisation, in which she recognises that she is more than just her appearance or her roles as fiancée, lecturer, and sister. Throughout the day, she reads, reflects, and observes the world around her, describing her state of mind with the banal description of tedium and a feeling of inertia. At the same time, she recognises the ability to cope with her current state of mind through an inner struggle with herself: "if one loses—one's sense of self, there is no remedy but to proceed on a simulated model" (Gokhale 216). Therefore, in the novel, the house becomes a unique space or what Cresswell has termed as a crucible of "meaningful [im]mobility"— a place which is being interrupted; and this leads her to realise the importance of her movement in that place and the purpose behind that movement (*On the Move* 239).

Rachita moves physically in the space of Kumaon but her narrative expands in time. Her experience of trauma disrupts the timeline of her narrative, preventing her from separating her present from her past. The events of her past are in a continuous state of flux with her present. Trauma theorists suggest that it is not the temporal position of an event that makes it traumatic, but rather the structure of the subject's present experience that the event occupies. Caruth describes trauma as an "unclaimed experience" that returns through the media of nightmares, flashbacks and other symptoms long after the event has supposedly receded into the past (10). LaCapra explains "acting out" as the mechanism by which the subject of trauma re-enacts the traumatic event repeatedly but fails to integrate it into conscious experience (41).

Rachita is unable to sleep because of the fear that Anand's sister's face instilled in her. The stillness of the mountains was such that every time she shut her eyes, Anand's words came flooding back. Thus, nights became a dislocated time in which the linear progression of time was disrupted, and she lived in a state of non-linearity. What has changed is the affect or the manner in which the attack impacts her. It is now fear, or guilt, or anger, or hopelessness. The instability of her present, her insomnia, can thus be seen through the lens of trauma's "belatedness", as described by Caruth (17). "Traumatic recall" is belated because what is being recalled is not simply an event, but an event whose meaning has not yet been fully absorbed into experience (117).

The Book of Shadows explores the concept of temporal oscillation. Instead of narrating Rachita's story in a linear fashion from her college days to her relationship with Anand, her assault, her days in the hospital, and her subsequent movement to the hill house, the narrative is non-linear. The non-linear structure of the narrative, which disrupts the linear progression from cause to effect and from wound to cure, shows that Rachita's journey to healing is not linear. Instead of narrating her journey through her traumatic events in a linear fashion, the narrative shows Rachita oscillating through a cycle, and with each iteration of this cycle, she gains more understanding of her role in her story and the choices she has in life.

Thus, temporal mobility is as important to a novel as spatial mobility. In Rachita's journey from the city to the hills, her transformation is multi-layered. It is not just about her journey to the hills; it is also about her ability to negotiate

and manipulate time. Her memories begin to resurface, and she is able to look at them from a different perspective. She is also able to negotiate her self and time, thereby freeing herself from the sole traumatic incident that has dominated her. As she remarks towards the end of the novel, "my selfhood had for a while abandoned the confines of skin and bone, abandoned my cage and run away" (Gokhale 213).

However, the path to recovery from trauma is also full of barriers. Many times, remembering everything leads to being overwhelmed by memories. Rachita walks through her memories trying to deal with them in a way that exemplifies Cresswell's "constellations of mobility", which is not limited to physical space but also extends to time ("Towards a Politics" 26). He explains that every individual's life is driven by the force that creates meaning from their experiences, the rhythm of their memories, and the friction that fills their lives (such as pain, fear, and guilt).

Spectral mobility can be studied through Cresswell's troika of "movement, representations, and practices" ("Politics of Mobility" 18). Here, movement is mental, representations are characters, roles, and scripts the subject 'acts out' in the mind, and practices are reading stories, daydreaming, and avoiding family relations. At the very least, Rachita's imaginatively induced spectral mobility seems to be about fleeing from her present situation. It has multiple effects, and it is the mediatory forms of her fiction that enable Rachita to acquire other personas and consequently to experience or act out different attitudes towards her trauma. Crucially, through her imaginative mobility, some of her self-hatred is shifted to the figures of her fiction.

Rachita stumbles upon the most elaborate instance of spectral mobility in the form of William Cockrell's *Journal of Missionary* that she discovers in the house. Cockrell, who was stationed in the hills far from the valley, believed the local people to be almost subhuman. He narrates his struggles in building the house and how the local people thwarted his efforts by objecting to the site of the house being inauspicious. As Rachita turns the pages of the journal, she is transported to nineteenth-century colonial India and inhabits the space of the male stranger who had lived in the house that had now become her shelter.

This documented journey explores a second constellation of mobility and power. It is brought to life through the imperial travels of Cockrell and his wife, Fanny, who lived an unusual amount of imperial mobility as they travelled from Britain to India and from the plains to the hills to establish themselves in a house on a piece of land that the local Indians thought was evil. In contrast to the imperial elite, the local population had their mobility constrained in a multiplicity of ways: through beliefs and practices, economic needs, and the apparatus of colonial rule. Cockrell's problem was solved by recruiting labourers from Bareilly. The house stands on a terrain of colonial-induced asymmetrical mobilities that "alter[s] space, to participate in its continuing production" (Massey, *For Space* 360).

Rachita's engagement with the journal and the lurking ghost exemplifies the movement that is embodied in the line that connects two points – the line which is "both meaningful and laden with power" (Cresswell, *On the Move* 9). Here, this line connects colonial and postcolonial ways of inhabiting the house and the different kinds of movements attached to them: different kinds of imperial and missionary travels, the forced movements of labour from the villages, and the modern academic's retreat from the world into the house. Imaginative and spectral movements complicate the straightforward idea of Rachita entering the house as an individual searching for personal healing. Her recuperation takes place in a space inhabited by the literal and metaphorical ghosts of historical violence and immense disparities of movement that have accompanied them.

While power is the principle of mobility in *The Book of Shadows*, gender is one of the principles of power that regulates mobility in the real world. The acid attack that disfigured Rachita was not an ordinary case of a woman seeking revenge for her partner insulting her. Rather, it was a gendered attack on the part of Anand's sister, who threw acid on Rachita while claiming that Rachita was involved in immoral sex and her body should be punished with shame. Anand's sister manages to turn her moral outrage to a lasting physical injury on Rachita's body. Her goal was not only to humiliate Rachita but also to deprive her of her future as a beautiful woman. This act of violence had immediate ramifications on her mobility. Suddenly, those five miles between her home and college seemed like a long distance. Fearing ridicule, mockery,

and harassment, Rachita avoided public spaces, evaded colleagues and students, and refused to look at herself in the mirror.

Rachita's gradual re-engagement with the mirror indicates an important shift in her journey. Her sister rings from Bangalore to tell her about a plastic surgeon who might be able to restore her face. Rachita looks into the mirror and is shocked to discover that "the deep disturbances in my self-image, my body ego, the sense of depersonalization that was dogging me, simply vanished" (Gokhale 218). She realises that the changes have not been so dramatic that she no longer recognises herself, that she does not miss her former self, and that she has come to accept her new state as legitimate. It is not simply a refusal of the feminine role but a movement towards visibility on her own terms.

Cresswell notes that every form of mobility experiences friction that both "hinders and enables mobilities" (*Handbook of Mobilities* 113). The main type of friction that Rachita faces is constraint — trauma, shame, and fear. As time passes, this friction is transformed into motive friction. It is the 'snap' that wakes Rachita to her various sources of empowerment. The three major events in the narrative that result in this empowerment are her sister's telephone call, the illness of Lohaniju, and the birth of Lady's puppies.

The three episodes together paint a narrative of Rachita's movement towards recovery through the transition from guilt to an interest in caring for others and to dynamism and sociability in her life. It is a deeply relational form of mobility with others (sister, caretaker, and dog) that facilitates her physical, emotional, and social motility. They form a network of relations that supports her bodily freedom, multiplies her motive forces, reduces the weight and burden of her movement, and opens up new possibilities for action.

From being a detached literary critic, Rachita transforms into an individual appropriating literature to her own needs and from a dummy to a person in her own right. She is fully aware of the importance of not losing herself. Throughout the novel, the protagonist proceeds on a simulated model: she poses as an English lecturer, a distant and unemotional person, and an ascetic living in the hills. Later, she begins to learn the difference between a model and imagination. Rachita realises that one can live in a false world of make believe, or that one

can create for themselves an image of existence or character with which one can identify themselves.

By the time Lohaniju dies and the house is filled with grief, Rachita has changed. She ponders whether she "will return to that other world, the world I have left behind" (Gokhale 231). She worries that if she stays in the house, she will be frozen in time. Her statement, "we must know what to hold on to, what to discard, in this radical flux which is life" illustrates her ability to cope with change (229). She is no longer longing for the complete erasure of her old life, but rather for the selective remembrance of it.

The home in Kumaon that was meant to be her safe permanent home becomes for her a transit point—a place where she has done her work of survival, but which she must leave in order to assert her existence in "time and space and dimension" (Gokhale 213). That she can leave the house that had become her abode implies that she has been able to regain her place in the social flow of life. Her determination to survive knows no bounds, and as the novel reaches its conclusion, Rachita regains her strength and holds hope for a future in which "the garden will bloom again" (229).

Thus, this article shows how a postcolonial novel about trauma and its recovery can be studied through the lens of mobility studies. Various forms of physical, temporal, and spectral mobilities and the frictions between them are exemplified in *The Book of Shadows*. The text explicates the representation of mobility and its relationship with power, gender, and history. It highlights the various forms of mobility that Rachita traverses in her journey from Delhi to the Kumaon hills, from the hospital to the haunted house, and from mirror refusal to self-discovery.

It discusses the physical and social structures that make her withdrawal possible as well as restrictive along the axes of class and gender. Rachita's experience of time is non-linear, constantly oscillating between states of reliving the trauma through flashbacks, auditory hallucinations of traumatic sounds, and compulsive reenactments of the traumatic event until it is rendered manageable. Through her journey in the realm of the imaginary, where her personal memories, colonial texts, and ghostly narratives of the past intersect, this essay explores the multiple histories embedded in individual and personal

experiences. The house in Kumaon emerges as a critical site where these different trajectories intersect. Built on colonial ideas of space, the house becomes the site of a modern woman's struggle for independence.

Friction—trauma, guilt, gender, and the social gaze—is that thickening force that keeps Rachita confined and restricted within the domestic space. Through the three snapping events of her everyday—the call from her sister, Lohaniju's sickness and Lady's puppies—friction is transferred into a mobilising force that takes Rachita out of the home and into the wider world of action and care for others, and a dream of a more imaginative future beyond the drudgery and poverty of their present circumstances.

By the end of *The Book of Shadows*, Rachita is not fully cured, and the various scars on her body and psyche are not erased. Rather, she achieves a certain kind of 'meaningful [im]mobility': the ability to negotiate spaces of flow and stagnation, memory and oblivion, solitude and togetherness in a way that is neither one of rejection or unthinking assimilation. In a world marked by violence and an unequal distribution of mobility and access, Rachita is finally able to negotiate the flows and currents of life on her own terms, having struggled long and hard with the question of whether she ought to exist or not.

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Narrativising Resistance and Resilience: Depicting Kurdish Struggle and Cultural Identity in Haritha Savitri's *Zin*

Santhi U.

Abstract

This article examines the representation of Kurdish identity, resistance, and displacement in *Zin*, the 2023 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award-winning Malayalam novel by Haritha Savitri, translated into English by Nandakumar K. The narrative centers on Seetha, an Indian woman who travels to war-torn Turkey in search of her Kurdish lover, Dewran, who is framed as a terrorist by the Turkish state. Set against the backdrop of political turmoil, state-sponsored violence, and cultural erasure, the novel offers a poignant exploration of the intersection of personal trauma and collective suffering. Employing postcolonial theory and intersectional feminist frameworks, this article analyzes how *Zin* captures the multidimensional oppression faced by the Kurdish people, particularly at the crossroads of gender, ethnicity, and authoritarianism. Through a polyphonic narrative structure and shifting points of view, the novel depicts the emotional and psychological toll of resistance and exile. Despite occasional structural disjunctions, the novel contributes significantly to the tradition of resistance literature by foregrounding female agency, ethical witness, and transnational empathy. This article situates *Zin* within broader discourses on trauma literature, postcolonial resistance, and global minority representation, ultimately affirming the power of storytelling to reclaim silenced histories, confront geopolitical injustices, and inspire cross-cultural solidarity in an increasingly polarised world.

Keywords: Kurdish Identity; Postcolonial Theory; Trauma Narrative; Cultural Erasure; Transnational solidarity

Introduction

In academic discourses surrounding Kurdish struggles, much of the focus has

traditionally been on the Kurdish question within the framework of national identity, geopolitics, and the ongoing quest for autonomy (Gunter 2008; Natali 2005). This literature has explored the sociopolitical forces shaping Kurdish identity, including the historic marginalisation of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Scholarly works have examined how Kurdish resistance movements reflect broader themes of resilience and agency in the face of repression, with some analysing the narratives of Kurdish exile communities that have sought to maintain their heritage while advocating for political recognition on the global stage. However, the representation of Kurdish experiences by non-Kurdish authors remains an underexplored dimension, offering fresh perspectives that often speak to global audiences less familiar with Kurdish history and culture. Haritha Savitri's *Zin*, here serves as an important cultural bridge, connecting the realities of Kurdish life to readers across diverse sociopolitical contexts. Through literature, Savitri constructs a compelling narrative that speaks to universal themes of suffering, survival, and the search for identity, thereby fostering empathy and awareness beyond regional boundaries.

The Kurdish people, often referred to as the largest stateless nation in the world, have endured systemic oppression, displacement, and cultural erasure for centuries. Literature, as a medium of resistance, plays a significant role in articulating such struggle for self-determination and cultural survival. A particularly poignant symbol that encapsulates the urgency of the Kurdish struggle is the tragic image of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Kurdish boy whose body was found washed ashore on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey, in 2015. This heartrending image, which went viral worldwide, depicted Aylan lying face-down in the sand, highlighting the desperate journey of many Kurdish families fleeing violence in Syria. His tragic death underscored the harrowing choices facing Kurdish and other displaced families and became emblematic of the broader humanitarian crisis faced by refugees. The photograph galvanised international response, drawing attention to the consequences of prolonged conflict and statelessness affecting Kurdish communities. Aylan Kurdi's death has been referenced not only as a moment of collective grief but also as a symbol of systemic failures that have left millions vulnerable. The media portrayal of this tragedy stirred global conversations about the human cost of conflict and displacement, pushing governments, NGOs, and policymakers to confront the underlying political and social factors contributing to such crises. This image

became a catalyst for renewed calls for international cooperation and humanitarian support, pressing the need to address root causes—such as violence, persecution, and statelessness—that fuel the ongoing Kurdish diaspora.

By incorporating this incident into the broader narrative, Haritha Savitri's *Zin* deepens the discourse on the Kurdish plight.Savitri's narrative is rooted in 'ethical witness,' born from a chance encounter with a Kurdish woman at a demonstration in Barcelona regarding the offensive in Afrin. This real-world spark led Savitri to Diyarbakir, where she stayed in the district of Sur—an area scarred by iron fences and bullet holes. In the novel, this physical landscape is mirrored in Seetha's journey. Refusing to rely on secondary digital data, Savitri draws from her time living with families in remote villages, capturing the 'screams' of a conflict that went largely unnoticed by the global stage.

Originally written in Malayalam and translated into English by Nandakumar K., *Zin* is a poignant narrative of love, loss, and political resistance set against the backdrop of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. The story follows Seetha, a pregnant Indian woman, who journeys into war-torn Turkey, where "to speak Kurdish is to invite suspicion; to love a Kurd is to become the enemy," in search of her Kurdish lover, Dewran—branded a terrorist by the state (87). Arrested and subjected to harrowing torture, Seetha becomes a symbol of the collateral damage inflicted on innocents in nationalist conflicts. Her transition from a woman seeking a lost lover to a political prisoner subjected to torture mirrors the broader Kurdish experience of being 'othered' within their own geography. Savitri utilises the setting of Sur—with its iron fences, scorched roads, and bullet-riddled walls—not just as a backdrop, but as a living witness to cultural erasure. The novel vividly portrays the Kurdish struggle through multiple narrative voices, highlighting themes of resilience, cultural identity, and global solidarity.

Zin underscores not only the immediacy of the Kurdish struggle but also the enduring resilience of a people caught in the crossfire of geopolitical forces. Through her portrayal, Savitri brings the Kurdish story into a more personal and humanised framework, capturing the complexities and tragedies faced by Kurdish communities while advocating for their recognition and justice on a global scale. *Zin* emerges as a compelling narrative that sheds light on these

issues from a unique, cross-cultural perspective. The novel's literary significance was further recognised when it received the prestigious 2023 Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, highlighting its impact on contemporary Malayalam literature. By situating the Kurdish struggle within a Malayalam literary framework, Haritha Savitri has expanded the boundaries of regional literature, bringing global human rights issues to the forefront of Indian literary consciousness. This accolade has brought wider attention to the novel's thematic depth and narrative innovation, encouraging further scholarly exploration of its portrayal of marginalised communities. In the Foreword to the novel, N. S. Madhavan states that, "This novel takes Malayalam literature- which has never stepped beyond north India or the Gulf Nations at best-directly to Diyarbakir"(vii). As Natali (2005) notes, the global visibility of such narratives is crucial for challenging dominant discourses and advocating for the rights of stateless peoples.

Historical Context of Kurdish Nationalism

The Kurdish national movement has deep historical roots, emerging in response to centuries of oppression, cultural erasure, and political marginalisation faced by the Kurdish people, who inhabit a region spanning Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.The roots of Kurdish nationalism can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during a time of rising national consciousness among various ethnic groups within the Ottoman Empire.The Kurds initially faced a fragmented political landscape, with many local chieftains and tribal leaders exercising power rather than a cohesive national identity.

The Kurdish people, estimated numbering between 25 and 35 million today, have historically inhabited a mountainous region spanning southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran, and parts of Syria and Armenia. Although the Kurds share a common ethnic identity, they were not unified under a single political or cultural banner during the Ottoman era. The empire ruled Kurdish regions with a degree of autonomy, allowing Kurdish chieftains to govern their areas in exchange for loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan. This decentralised structure fostered a fragmented Kurdish identity, where tribal affiliations and local loyalties often took precedence over a unified Kurdish nationalism.

In the late nineteenth century, however, as the Ottoman Empire faced

increasing pressure from European powers and nationalist movements gained momentum within its territories, the Kurds began developing a sense of ethnic identity and self-awareness. Intellectuals and Kurdish elites began advocating for Kurdish rights and cultural recognition, setting the foundation for a national consciousness. Nonetheless, Kurdish nationalism remained secondary to tribal and local allegiances, and it was only later, amid the political upheaval surrounding World War I, that Kurdish nationalism would crystallise as a coherent political force.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the Allied powers proposed new boundaries and state formations in the Middle East. The Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 was the first document to formally recognise the possibility of a Kurdish state. Article 64 of the treaty included provisions for a potential independent Kurdish nation in parts of the former Ottoman Kurdistan. For many Kurds, this moment symbolised the long-awaited possibility of autonomy and recognition within an international framework.

However, the Treaty of Sèvres was never implemented. The geopolitical dynamics of the region and the rise of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who led the Turkish War of Independence, quickly rendered the treaty obsolete. Turkish forces rejected foreign intervention and asserted control over what they deemed Turkish territory, including the Kurdish regions. The subsequent Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, formalised the boundaries of the modern Turkish Republic and entirely disregarded Kurdish claims. This diplomatic reversal led to profound disillusionment among the Kurds and sowed the seeds of a prolonged struggle for autonomy and recognition.

Under the leadership of Atatürk, the newly established Turkish Republic pursued a policy of creating a homogeneous national identity based on Turkish ethnicity and language. This policy, known as *Turkification*, aimed to eliminate ethnic and linguistic differences within the population to foster a cohesive Turkish identity. Kurdish language, culture, and customs were suppressed, with the Kurdish identity either outright denied or reclassified as 'Mountain Turks' to obscure any ethnic distinction. The Kurdish population resisted these assimilationist policies, leading to several uprisings, including the significant Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925. Sheikh Said, a religious and tribal leader, mobilised Kurdish forces against the Turkish state, demanding recognition of

Kurdish identity and Islamic governance. The rebellion was quickly quashed by the Turkish military, and the aftermath saw an increase in repression against the Kurds. Kurdish leaders were executed, Kurdish villages were destroyed, and laws were enacted to restrict the Kurdish language and cultural practices. This period marked a turning point, as it intensified Kurdish nationalism and reinforced the perception of the Turkish state as an oppressive force.

Beyond Turkey, Kurds in Iraq, Iran, and Syria faced similar struggles. In Iraq, British mandate authorities initially promised Kurdish autonomy, but these assurances were never fulfilled. Kurdish regions in northern Iraq remained marginalised, and subsequent Iraqi governments, particularly under Saddam Hussein, adopted policies of forced relocation and Arabisation to weaken Kurdish political influence. The Anfal campaign in the 1980s epitomised this repression, with the Iraqi regime committing atrocities against the Kurdish population, including the use of chemical weapons in Halabja. In Iran, the Kurdish movement encountered both cultural suppression and military opposition. The Kurds of Iranian Kurdistan sought autonomy within a federal system, but the Pahlavi dynasty and later the Islamic Republic consistently denied these aspirations. Briefly, in 1946, Kurds established the Republic of Mahabad with Soviet backing, but the fledgling state was short-lived, falling within a year due to Iranian and international pressure. In Syria, the Ba'athist regime marginalised the Kurdish population through policies such as the denial of citizenship to thousands of Kurds, rendering them stateless. Kurdish political activism was consistently repressed, though Kurdish identity remained resilient, resurfacing in the context of the Syrian Civil War, where Kurdish groups established autonomous regions in northeastern Syria.

The Kurdish nationalist movement today is deeply influenced by these historical legacies of repression and fractured identity. In Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), founded in 1978, initiated an armed struggle for Kurdish autonomy. Although the PKK has evolved over time and now advocates for democratic autonomy rather than outright independence, the Turkish state continues to view it as a major security threat, resulting in ongoing conflict. Meanwhile, in Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) emerged as a semi-autonomous entity in the aftermath of the Gulf War and gained further autonomy following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In 2017, the KRG

held an independence referendum, which passed with overwhelming support among Kurds but was met with opposition from the Iraqi government and neighboring states, underscoring the persistent international opposition to Kurdish statehood. In Syria, the Syrian Civil War provided a unique opportunity for Kurdish groups to assert autonomy through the formation of Rojava, a self-administered Kurdish region based on principles of direct democracy and gender equality. However, the future of Rojava remains uncertain due to regional power dynamics and international interests.

Methodology: Postcolonial Theory and Resistance Literature

Postcolonial theory, as developed by scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, provides a crucial lens through which to analyse the intersection of colonial legacies, identity, and resistance within marginalised communities. Said's concept of "Orientalism" (1978) offers a foundational critique of how Western discourses have constructed the 'East' as an exoticised and inferior 'Other,' serving as a tool of domination that justified colonial interventions. This theoretical framework becomes relevant when examining the Kurdish experience, where Kurds have been marginalised not only within Middle Eastern nation-states but also in Western narratives that often reduce them to an oppressed minority. These portrayals frequently fail to capture the full depth of Kurdish identity, resistance, and cultural richness, instead reinforcing stereotypes that frame them either as threats to state unity or as passive victims in need of rescue.

Spivak's influential work on representation, particularly her critique of who speaks for the marginalised, adds another dimension to the Kurdish struggle. In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak underscores the need to interrogate how narratives are constructed about marginalised groups and who is afforded the authority to articulate these narratives. The Kurdish experience of systematic exclusion and erasure by hegemonic states across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria mirrors Spivak's concept of the 'subaltern'—those who are denied a voice within dominant sociopolitical frameworks. This concept is especially pertinent to Haritha Savitri's *Zin*, which centers on characters who actively resist state-sanctioned oppression. The novel highlights voices that are otherwise marginalised within Kurdish society

itself, such as those of women who confront patriarchal norms and state violence. This focus aligns with Spivak's insistence on listening to subaltern voices as they articulate their own experiences, rather than having their stories mediated or spoken for by outsiders.

Bhabha's theory of 'hybridity' and 'Third Space,' further enriches the understanding of Kurdish identity and resistance. In his analysis, hybridity challenges the binary opposition between coloniser and colonised by suggesting that colonial encounters create new, hybrid identities that defy simplistic classifications. Kurdish identity is similarly complex and multifaceted, shaped not only by the influence of the dominant states that have sought to assimilate or suppress them but also by internal dynamics that reflect a blending of traditional values with modern political ideologies. The emergence of Kurdish political parties, cultural expressions, and literature serves as an assertion of a distinct Kurdish identity that resists easy categorisation. This hybridity can be seen in Kurdish art, literature, and activism, which often incorporate elements of both traditional Kurdish customs and contemporary social and political themes, creating a unique cultural narrative that challenges monolithic views of nationalism and identity.

Within this framework, *Zin* functions as a work of resistance literature, depicting how Kurdish individuals and communities navigate the complexities of identity under oppressive regimes. Savitri's portrayal of characters such as Seetha—a woman embodying resilience, defiance, and agency in the face of systemic violence—illustrates Spivak's notion of "speaking with" rather than "speaking for" the subaltern. Seetha's character is not merely a passive victim of the oppressive forces surrounding her; she actively challenges these forces, reclaiming her voice and asserting her identity within a patriarchal and politically hostile environment. Her narrative not only personifies Kurdish women's struggles against patriarchal norms but also symbolises a broader collective fight for cultural preservation and recognition within a hostile political landscape. This aligns with Spivak's view that subaltern voices must be both heard and respected, with attention given to the structures of power that have historically suppressed them.

The relevance of postcolonial theory in this context extends beyond literary analysis to contribute to a broader understanding of how colonial legacies

inform contemporary Kurdish struggles. Said's insights into Orientalism reveal how the portrayal of Kurdish identity in regional and international discourses often reinforces stereotypes and marginalisation, while Spivak's concept of the subaltern underscores the importance of Kurdish voices being represented on their own terms. Bhabha's theory of hybridity helps scholars recognise the fluid and evolving nature of Kurdish identity as it interacts with modern political movements and cultural expressions, creating a dynamic and resistant form of self-representation. This framework illuminates how Kurdish resistance literature, as exemplified in *Zin*, serves as a counter-narrative that challenges dominant representations, amplifies marginalised voices, and reclaims Kurdish identity and agency in the face of ongoing oppression. *Zin*, thus, becomes not only a narrative of Kurdish resilience but also a critical commentary on how colonial histories and present-day state policies continue to shape the Kurdish quest for autonomy and recognition.Rather than reiterating theoretical definitions, the subsequent analysis applies these frameworks directly to the narrative strategies, characterisation, and thematic concerns of *Zin*.

Conflict, Displacement, and Cultural Identity

Zin unfolds in a world torn apart by conflict, where the Kurdish people struggle to maintain their cultural identity against the backdrop of systemic violence.The novel moves between Istanbul and the devastated Kurdish regions, especially Amed (Diyarbakýr). The narrative follows Seetha, an Indian student from the University of Barcelona, who travels to Diyarbakir while pregnant with her love child. Her personal journey to find her Kurdish lover, Dewran, quickly descends into a nightmare of state violence when she is apprehended by the Turkish secret police. The novel offers an unflinching look at the 'genocidal state machinery' as Seetha is subjected to brutal torture and gang-rape, strategically 'staked as bait' to lure Dewran and his siblings, who have been branded as terrorists by the regime.

The novel's portrayal of displacement is reminiscent of what Said describes as the "exilic condition" where the sense of belonging is disrupted, and identity becomes a site of contestation (Said 2001). The Kurdish people, spread across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Armenia, are depicted as living in a state of perpetual exile, their existence marked by the constant threat of

erasure.The novel's setting, which alternates between the cosmopolitan city of Istanbul and the desolate Kurdish regions, serves as a metaphor for the fractured identity of the Kurdish people. This duality is further complicated by the protagonist's journey into the depths of Kurdish suffering, revealing the deep-seated cultural and emotional scars that define the Kurdish experience. Seetha's fight for liberty becomes incidental, trapped within the 'diplomatic haggling' between two nations where humanitarian concerns are sidelined for commercial and political interests. Through this lens, Savithri depicts a state that 'breaks all bounds to mercilessly exterminate' its Kurdish minority, forcing the protagonist into a transnational struggle for survival.

Female Agency and the Subaltern Voice

The representation of female agency in *Zin* is one of the novel's most significant contributions to the discourse on Kurdish resistance. Seetha, embodies the resilience and defiance of Kurdish women, challenging the patriarchal structures within both Kurdish society and the oppressive state apparatus. Her wrongful detention by Turkish authorities and her refusal to be silenced is a powerful act of resistance exemplifying what Spivak conceptualises as the subaltern's struggle to speak within hegemonic power structures. While state mechanisms attempt to silence her through incarceration and violence, Seetha's body and voice become sites of resistance, transforming personal suffering into political testimony. Rather than portraying her as a passive victim, *Zin* presents her as an ethical witness whose endurance mobilises transnational solidarity across borders. Her search for Dewran is initially a personal quest of love. However, as she witnesses the systematic 'Turkification'—where speaking Kurdish invites suspicion and loving a Kurd makes one an enemy—her identity shifts from an observer to an active participant in resistance. Her experience mirrors the collective trauma of Kurdish civilians subjected to state violence, thereby linking individual pain to a broader history of repression. In doing so, the novel affirms that subaltern resistance need not always be articulated through armed struggle but may also emerge through survival, empathy, and refusal to be erased.

Mojab (2001) argues that Kurdish women's participation in the resistance movement disrupts traditional gender roles and redefines the concept of nationhood. *Zin* reflects this disruption, portraying women as active participants

in the struggle for a free Kurdistan. The novel challenges the stereotypical depiction of women in conflict zones as passive victims, presenting them instead as empowered agents who fight not only for their people's freedom but also for their own rights and dignity.The brutal torture Seetha endures in Turkish custody is not portrayed simply as an act of victimisation but as a catalyst for collective mobilisation—one that compels students, journalists, and activists from Turkey, Barcelona, and India to unite in her defense. This cross-border solidarity underscores the ways in which women's bodies, voices, and experiences can incite political consciousness and action. Savithri also portrays the everyday resistance of Kurdish women who live under constant threat, highlighting how acts of care, storytelling, and survival are themselves political. In this way, *Zin* redefines the contours of nationhood by placing women at the center of the narrative, not as adjuncts to male revolutionaries but as agents whose struggles for bodily autonomy and voice are inseparable from the larger quest for Kurdish self-determination.

Resistance and the Dream of a Free Kurdistan

The recurring dream of a free Kurdistan, uniting all Kurdish-majority regions into a sovereign nation, is central to *Zin*. This dream is a symbol of hope and resilience, much like what Bhabha describes as the "Third Space," where cultural negotiation takes place, allowing for the emergence of new forms of identity and resistance (Bhabha 1994). The novel portrays this dream as not merely a political aspiration but as a manifestation of the collective desire for self-determination and cultural survival.Seetha's story, in particular, operates within this hybrid space—an Indian woman whose personal journey becomes entangled with the Kurdish struggle, making her both an outsider and a participant. Her transformation throughout the novel reflects how cultural and political identities are not inherited or static, but forged through conflict, empathy, and shared purpose. However, as Natali notes, the Kurdish struggle is complicated by the geopolitical realities of the region, where international powers often use the Kurds as pawns in their strategic games. *Zin*addresses this complexity, depicting the betrayal of the Kurds by powerful allies like the United States, which uses them in the fight against ISIS only to abandon them to Turkish aggression. This portrayal of geopolitical manipulation highlights the

precariousness of the Kurdish situation and the immense challenges they face in realising their dream of a free Kurdistan.

Zin ultimately demonstrates how literature can function as an ethical archive of resistance, preserving silenced histories while forging transnational solidarities. By narrativising the Kurdish struggle through female agency, trauma, and intimate acts of resilience, Haritha Savitri transforms a distant geopolitical conflict into a deeply human narrative. The novel challenges state-sponsored erasure while affirming storytelling as a vital mode of cultural survival and political witness. Situated within global resistance literature, *Zin* not only amplifies marginalised voices but also invites readers to recognise the shared human stakes of displacement, dignity, and freedom.

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Embodied Resistance: Corporeality and Agency in Poetics of Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani

Dhivyaa Rajeswaran

Abstract

This essay critically compares and analyses Kutti Revathi's *Body's Door* and Sukirtharani's *My Body*, two Dalit feminist poems that engage with the theme of corporeality. Through an exploration of the body as a site of both oppression and empowerment, the article examines how these poets use the materiality of the body to assert agency, resistance, and self-reclamation. The analysis highlights how both poems reject the historical objectification and marginalization of the Dalit female body, positioning it instead as a space for radical self-affirmation. By employing metaphors such as the door in Revathi's poem and the sensuality of the body in Sukirtharani's poem, both poets challenge patriarchal and casteist norms, reclaiming their bodies not as passive sites of violence but as active agents of change. The article further incorporates the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler's 'performativity,' bell hooks' 'self-love' and 'resistance,' and Anjali Arondekar's application of 'intersectionality' to caste, sexuality, gender, and colonialism, to deepen the understanding of these poets' embodied expressions of political resistance. The essay concludes that the theme of corporeality in both works is not only a critique of the historical violence done to Dalit women's bodies but also an assertion of their autonomy, sexuality, and embodied power in the face of oppressive systems.

Keywords: Corporeality; Feminism; Empowerment; Political Resistance; Oppression

Introduction

Tamil feminist poetics encompasses a rich literary tradition which explores the experiences, perspectives, and voices of Tamil women. This genre often critiques, and challenges the dominant patriarchal norms, societal expectations, and it questions the social, cultural, and economic structure that perpetuates gender-based discrimination. Tamil feminist poetics provide clear insights into

the lives of Tamil women, focusing on their pain, obstacles, and power to survive. Tamil feminist poetics provide a platform for women to voice out and promote a sense of agency and solidarity. Poets delve into themes such as identity, body autonomy, love, and resistance. Poets have contributed to the Tamil literary landscapes, pushing boundaries and challenging societal norms through their poems. The history of Tamil feminist poetry is rich and complex spanning centuries. Starting from Olavai, Adhimanthi, Velliveedi, Avvaiyyar, Karaikkal Ammaiyar to present sensational poets like Meena Kandasamy, Malathy Maithri, Ku Uma Devi, Sukirtharani, Kutti Revathi, Salma, poets have stood for the right space for women folk.

The essay discusses the works of two famous poets, Sukirtharani, and Kutti Revathi. They have made a remarkable contribution to Tamil literature. Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani emerge as revolutionary voices articulating the body as a landscape of resistance. For poets like Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani, the body is not just an image — it's a battleground. In the context of Tamil literature, especially where women's voices have often been controlled or erased by dominant narratives, both poets use their work to reclaim the body as a site of power, resistance, and memory. Revathi and Sukirtharani do not write about the body in safe or sanitized ways. Instead, they show it as alive, unpredictable, and deeply tied to both nature and history. This essay explores how Tamil feminist poets Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani represent the body in their poetry — not just as a physical form, but as a space of memory, power, and resistance. Both poets reclaim the female body from a tradition that has rendered it either invisible or violable. In doing so, they construct a poetics that is both corporeal and insurgent, transforming private affect into public dissent.

Existing scholarship on Tamil feminist poetics has largely focused on the controversies surrounding the body and the public backlash against women who write about desire and sexuality. Scholars such as S. Anandhi, and Mini Krishnan have explored how Tamil women's writing confronts the patriarchal control of language and space. Similarly, Meena Kandasamy has highlighted the role of caste and sexuality in shaping contemporary Dalit women's writing. In the context of Sukirtharani, Dalit literary scholars like Gopal Guru, and Y. S. Alone have framed her poetics within a broader discourse of Dalit aesthetics,

focusing on the themes of anger, survival, and memory. However, what remains underexplored is a comparative, theoretically grounded reading of how Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani use corporeal metaphors and poetic form to perform embodied resistance.

While individual poems have been anthologized and translated, there is a critical gap in examining their works together through the intersecting lenses of gender performativity, radical self-love, and archival resistance. Most readings tend to isolate their work within either feminist or Dalit frameworks, without addressing the overlap between bodily autonomy, caste marginalisation, and poetic form. This article aims to address this gap by offering a comparative close reading of three poems, Revathi's two poems from "கூட் டிரவேதிகவிதகைள்"(Poems of Kutti Revathi) under the subdivision "உடலின் கதவு" ("Body's Door") — "இங் கஒரகவிதை" ("Here is a Poem") "சோழிகள் ஆக் கியஉடல்" ("Body Made of Seashells"), and Sukirtharani's poem "My Body." It examines how each poet reimagines the body—not as a static site of oppression but as a performative space of agency. The poems "இங் கஒரகவிதை" ("Here is a Poem") and "சோழிகள் ஆக் கியஉடல்" ("Body Made of Seashells") were roughly translated by the researcher.

The analysis is informed by Judith Butler's "Theory of Gender Performativity," bell hooks' "Politics of Love and Resistance," and Anjali Arondekar's "Intersectional Archival Critique." These frameworks provide valuable insights on how Revathi and Sukirtharani employ language, metaphor, and sensuality to reclaim their bodies and challenge dominant norms surrounding beauty, silence, and submission. By doing so these poems transcend the mere literary artifact, emerging as political interventions calling attention to complexities of inhabiting a body that resists entrenched systems of oppression, including caste, patriarchy, and textual traditions which have historically excluded the body.

Feminist Legacies

Judith Butler's theory of performativity, as developed in *Gender Trouble:*

Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), challenges the traditional notion that gender is a stable, innate identity tied to biological sex. Instead, Butler argues that gender is not something one is, but something one does—it is performative. This means that gender is constituted through a repeated set of acts, gestures, behaviours, and speech that are socially recognized as "masculine" or "feminine" (Butler 25). Butler emphasizes that performativity is the way discourse and actions bring gender into being through repetition over time (Butler 33). This understanding allows for a critical engagement with how bodies become intelligible or unintelligible within cultural regimes. In the context of Tamil poetry, this is particularly relevant, as female or Dalit bodies are often subjected to erasure, hypervisibility, or abject within both literary and social traditions. Revathi and Sukirtharani subvert these conditions by inscribing new embodied narratives in their poetry, disrupting expected scripts of femininity and caste propriety.

bell hooks' concept of self-love is deeply intertwined with her vision of radical resistance, particularly in the context of Black feminist thought. In her work *All About Love: New Visions* (1999), hooks argues that self-love is not a narcissistic or individualistic pursuit but a revolutionary act, especially for those whose identities have been historically devalued or oppressed. She asserts that "loving ourselves means that we are no longer willing to be victims," positioning self-love as a crucial foundation for personal and collective liberation (hooks 61). For hooks, love is both an ethic and a practice that enables individuals, particularly Black women, to resist internalized racism, sexism, and dehumanization. She emphasizes that the act of affirming one's worth in a society that constantly seeks to deny it becomes a political gesture of defiance. Self-love, then, is not passive but rather a form of radical resistance that enables people to care for themselves and others while actively challenging oppressive systems (hooks 67). Through this lens, hooks reframes love as a transformative force central to social justice and community healing. The Dalit woman's body, often inscribed with historical violence and erasure, becomes, in hooks' terms, a site of radical love when spoken, celebrated, and defended through language. This love is not merely emotional but structural as it challenges caste, gendered expectations, and the politics of invisibility.

Anjali Arondekar's approach to intersectionality extends beyond a simple

layering of identity categories to explore how histories of sexuality, colonialism, and archival knowledge intersect in complex ways. Rather than treating intersectionality as a fixed framework of race, gender, and class, Arondekar emphasizes the need to consider how these identities are historically and discursively produced, especially within colonial and postcolonial contexts. In her book *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (2009), she critiques the limits of identity-based analyses and urges scholars to consider how archival silences and erasures shape the very construction of marginalized subjects (Arondekar 14).

Intersectionality, for Arondekar, is not merely about recognizing multiple forms of oppression but about interrogating the structures of knowledge and power that determine who becomes visible in history and who remains absent. This epistemological approach challenges liberal models of inclusion and instead calls for a deeper engagement with the material and ideological conditions that produce difference itself (Arondekar 22). Through this lens, intersectionality becomes a method of reading and resistance that is attentive to both presence and absence in the production of knowledge. It offers a critical tool for examining how the poetics of Revathi and Sukirtharani refuse singular categorizations.

Poetics of Kutti Revathi

Kutti Revathi's poetics radically reclaims the female body from its historical suppression in Tamil literary culture, where women have been traditionally portrayed as passive, silent, and spiritual rather than desiring, embodied, and vocal. Her work disrupts these norms through rich corporeal metaphors that center fluidity, sensuality, and interiority. In both the poems, "Body Made of Seashells," "Here is a Poem," Kutti Revathi uses images of the sea, sand, coral, and light to articulate a feminine self that is both natural and insurgent. These poems offer a vision of the body not as a bounded entity, but as a dynamic space, constantly in motion, always becoming.

"அவளுக் கூள் / உயிரூள் ளகடலொன் றவைரைந் திரூக் கிறாள்" (இங் கஜேரூகவிதை)— "Within herself / she has drawn a living sea" ("Here is a Poem") where the speaker announces her internalization of the sea. The body becomes not merely a metaphor for nature but a living

ecosystem—teeming with life, refusing containment. The sea does not just exist outside her; it becomes her. Through this identification, Revathi collapses the boundary between the inner and outer world, challenging normative conceptions of feminine containment and modesty. The poem speaks in sensual tones: fish frolic in her hair, moonlight spreads across her skin, and coral shells graze her loneliness. In the moonlit landscape of the body, Revathi finds a space to articulate female desire, not as shameful or hidden but as central to existence. This lyrical reclaiming aligns closely with Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity, where gender is a stylized repetition of acts across time. Revathi's poetic body does not adhere to the gendered scripts of submission or silence; instead, it performs resistance by affirming corporeal autonomy. The poem's refusal to mark the body as polluted, sinful, or invisible directly contests heteropatriarchal constructions of femininity. The speaker does not wait to be desired; she desires, she contains a sea, she radiates light. In this way, the poem "Performs" an alternative femininity that subverts gender norms through language and metaphor.

The second poem "Body Made of Seashells",continues this aesthetic of insurgent embodiment, but with an intensified engagement with bodily violence and resilience. The 'polished stones' that make up her body are sensual and tactile, but also bear the weight of erosion and endurance. The imagery of crabs playing, waves battering the shore, and a coastline made from her own body underscores how this body is not untouched, it has been acted upon, but it does not surrender. The speaker asserts:

" கரையைைன் உடலனின் றூஆக் கினால் ... "

(உரூட் டிவிடப் பட் டசோழிகளால்) — "If the shore could be made into my body" ("Body Made of Seashells"). This statement enacts a reversal, the landscape submits to the body, rather than the body submitting to the landscape. In Butler's terms, the body here is not just formed through external discourses, but also forms the world around it. The poetic voice refuses victimhood; even as the sea attempts to erase her, she becomes the shore, a fixed, visible, resistant edge. The bodily metaphors become increasingly confrontational, as the poem ends with a denunciation of 'coarse stones' that lack joy or agency, implying that passivity is the true affliction. The given idea aligns profoundly with bell hooks' conception of radical self-love as resistance.

For hooks, loving oneself, particularly for Black or oppressed women, means reclaiming the body from histories of degradation. Revathi's poetry performs this reclamation not through didacticism but through sensuous lyricism, where the body is both adored and defended. Her poetics invite the reader not only to witness but to re-feel the body, its heat, its weight, its erotic potential. This is not a body offered to the male gaze; it is a body for itself, a site of agency, memory, and radical presence.

Through Revathi's poems, the feminine body becomes language, becomes sea, becomes resistance. She does not write from outside her body but from within it, the poem becomes her skin, the metaphor becomes her muscle. This mode of writing, in Anjali Arondekar's terms, constitutes a 'counter-archive,' a literary formation that resists historical silencing not by offering facts but by offering felt experience. Revathi refuses to fit within the archive of Tamil literary decorum; instead, she creates a new terrain where the sensual, the violent, and the lyrical coexist.

In both poems, the imagery of movement, touch, and boundary dissolution suggests that Revathi is not merely writing the body, she is writing as body. Her poetics, infused with the ocean's rhythms and textures, enact a rebellion not only against patriarchal values but also against aesthetic forms that sanitize female experience. Through this insurgent embodiment, Revathi constructs a poetics that performs resistance, and breathes agency into the corporeal.

Poetics of Sukirtharani

Kutti Revathi's poetics emerge from a sensual oceanic interiority, whereas Sukirtharani anchors her resistance in the textures of earth, fire, and blood. Her iconic poem "My Body" is a visceral declaration of Dalit womanhood, portraying the body not as a metaphor for nature, but as nature itself—untamed, eruptive, wounded, and ungovernable. The poem resists such essentialism by collapsing distinctions between subject and environment — the speaker is not merely in nature but becomes it. In doing so, they perform a kind of undoing of the rigid boundary between human and nature, male and female, culture and wilderness. The tiger's bloodied mouth, the sap from trees, and erupting volcanoes are all expressions of embodied performances—not symbolic gestures, but acts that blur the lines between violence and vitality. These

corporeal enactments destabilise the hegemonic binaries that often inform subjecthood, echoing Butler's claim that performative acts can destabilise and reconstitute power.

bell hooks argues that loving the self in a context that devalues certain bodies is an act of radical resistance. The poem, in its lush and unashamed portrayal of physicality, even in its messiness and danger, affirms the body as a sacred site. The line "fruit, tasting richly of ginger / break open their fine skins / and put forth their seeds" is a sensual celebration of creative power, invoking a politics of self-love where natural processes are neither shameful nor hidden(Holmstrom 83). This becomes particularly resonant when read as a metaphor for marginalised identities who claim space through the unapologetic affirmation of their own bodily existence, an act of resistance in a world that often seeks to erase or contain them. The poem's imagery, especially the tiger, volcano, and river, works through a multiplicity of temporalities and geographies. Each element evokes histories of colonization, environmental violence, and indigenous embodiment. Arondekar's intersectional lens helps us read the poem not simply as an environmental ode, but as an entangled space where multiple identities and oppressions coexist and resist. For example, the tiger, often symbolic of power and survival in South Asian contexts, drinks from 'swift water-streams' while still marked by violence, suggesting a simultaneous experience of violence and vitality, marginalization and survival.

Corporeality and Resistance: A Comparative Analysis

The poems of Kutti Revathi, and Sukirtharani, while distinct in voice and imagery, converge around a powerful thematic axis: the reclamation of the female body as a site of resistance. This reclamation is not only literary but also political—challenging dominant narratives about femininity, caste, sexuality, and agency. Their works serve as embodied counter-discourses that rupture hegemonic aesthetics and epistemologies in Tamil literature. Revathi's poetics centers on the oceanic, emphasizing the fluidity of female experience. In "Here is a Poem", the body contains the sea, which in turn becomes a metaphor for emotional and sensual interiority. The sensual images of corals, moonlight, and hair echo a form of poetic desire that celebrates the body's capacity for pleasure and transformation. Sukirtharani's"My Body" positions the female body as

earth, fire, and blood, a terrain marked by violence, resistance, and survival. The Dalit body here is not merely metaphor; it is material, explosive, and ethical. Her volcanoes, rivers, and cliffs are not just symbols but reinscriptions of trauma, anger, and power into the literary field. In both cases, the female body is not a passive vessel but an agentive force, not written upon, but writing itself. This autonomy resonates deeply with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which dismantles the notion of gender as a stable identity. In the poems, the repetition of bodily metaphors, natural imagery, and sensory details serves to destabilize imposed gender roles. The speakers, with their luminous skin and mobile sea-body, volcanic, and blood-drenched landscape perform femininity outside of patriarchal legibility.

Anjali Arondekar's framework of intersectionality urges scholars to move beyond identity categories and attend to the affective and historical dimensions of marginality. Revathi's poetics challenges gender norms and helps her explore sensuality and abstraction with lyrical freedom. Sukirtharani, conversely, is entangled in the material and structural violence of caste. Her embodiment is always shaped by oppression; thus, her resistance is more visceral and antagonistic. But both the poets converge in rejection of purity, a concept foundational to both caste hierarchy and patriarchal control. hooks also insists on self-love as an act of political rebellion. Both poets practice this, Revathi by adorning and asserting the body, Sukirtharani by naming and narrating the body's trauma and resilience.

The materiality of their metaphors also reveals a poetic politics. Revathi's metaphors move like waves, fluid, cyclical, interwoven. Sukirtharani's metaphors are geological, heavy, eruptive, and irreducible. This difference is not merely aesthetic but ideological. Revathi's approach draws attention to the interiority of female experience, whereas Sukirtharani emphasizes its historical exteriority of how bodies are shaped by caste, labor, and pain. Yet, both challenge the politics of silence, and inscribe female agency into Tamil literary modernity.

Conclusion

Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani offer two powerful, distinct yet complementary visions of embodied resistance in contemporary Tamil feminist poetics. Their

works challenge and deconstruct the hegemonic binaries of body and soul, purity and impurity, center, and margin, and feminine and masculine by centering the body not as an object, but as agent, archive, and author. Through their verses, they articulate a politics of presence and insurgency, carving literary space for feminist epistemologies grounded in embodiment, desire, caste, and sensuality.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity helps unpack the way both poets destabilize traditional markers of femininity through repeated, stylized acts of writing the body. bell hooks' vision of self-love as resistance is crucial to understanding the ethical dimensions of these poetries, where love for the self becomes a declaration of survival and defiance. Arondekar's notion of the intersectional and affective archive allows us to view their poems as historical texts, repositories of caste, gender, and emotional memory that exceed normative structures of documentation.

Both poets offer us a poetics where the Dalit feminist self is a speaking subject, whose corporeal presence interrupts, challenges, and redefines the literary canon. In doing so, they transform the poem into an act of resistance. Their work insists that the body is not shameful. It is not excess. It is text, it is resistance, and it is the future of feminist thought in South Asian literature.

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Embodied Narratives: Disability, Gender, and Self-Representation in the Autobiographies of Malini Chib and Preeti Monga

Suman Chaudhary

Abstract

The intersection of disability with gender remains an underexplored area in academic studies, despite these factors shaping lived experiences. Considering the importance of intersectionality of gender and disability, this essay examines the autobiographical narratives of two disabled Indian women writers—Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* and Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses*. Critical feminist disability studies has been employed as a theoretical framework and feminist critical discourse analysis as a research method to analyse the experiences, stereotypes, and negotiating strategies to assert the agency by women with disabilities. The analysis reveals how both writers navigate discrimination in educational institutions, employment, and social relationships through challenging assumptions about disabled women's intellectual, professional, and sexual capacities. The comparative analysis shows how different impairments create different challenges and possibilities of resistance. Chib's international education provides her lenses to critique charity and the medical model of disability. On the other hand, Monga's struggle for economic independence reflects the class intersection with disability. This research contributes to understanding the complex intersections of gender, disability, and self-representation in contemporary Indian women's lives via highlights how autobiographical practices can function as sites of resistance and reclamation.

Keywords: Women with Disabilities; Autobiography; Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis; Critical Feminist Disability Studies; Indian Women Writers

Introduction

Despite the continuous growth of disability studies in India, autobiographical narratives by disabled women remain limited. Autobiographies by Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2011) and Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* (2012) are

two important contributions in this genre. This article analyses how these two autobiographies function as acts of resistance against the intersectional exclusionary practices that position disabled women at the margins of society. Further, this article argues that these autobiographies are not merely a personal testimony but create a space to show their struggle and societal discriminatory practices and pave a path for portraying new possibilities for disabled women's self-representation. Chiba and Monga's narratives question the conventional ideologies that situate disabled women at two extremes, either as objects of pity requiring charity or as inspirational figures (overcoming personal tragedy). Their narratives show how disabled women struggle to access education, navigate with the gaze of pity, and assert sexual agency.

This article is mainly structured in five sections. After the introduction, the second section discusses various arguments made by different critical feminist disability scholars regarding how exclusionary practices shape the identity of disabled women. The third section is a methodological section, which includes the rationale behind selecting feminist critical discourse analysis as the research method for comparative textual analysis. The purpose of this analysis is to analyse how these texts operate as counter-narratives that challenge dominant representations. Further, the fourth section proceeds through four interconnected analyses. The first theme of analysis describes how both the authors challenge medical and charity models of disability by depicting their experiences of making space for themselves. The second theme analyses their experiences of educational and institutional discrimination. The second theme sheds light on how schools and workplaces systematically exclude disabled women through subtle forms of rejection. The third theme includes how economic disparities in relation to the nature of their impairment shape different life trajectories for both of the authors. And the final theme reflects how both authors reclaim sexuality, desire, and motherhood. This directly confronts cultural assumptions that position disabled women outside normative frameworks of intimacy and family.

Through analysis of these two authors' work, this article shows how autobiography becomes a significant tool for disabled women to assert agency. These autobiographies demonstrate how they navigated the intersectional discrimination and complexity of experiences that shaped their personality.

Scholars across disciplines have examined how the politics of the body are always a part of society, where some bodies are subjugated and

discriminated against while others are at the top. One of the renowned philosophers of his time, even Aristotle, classified the women as mutilations of the male body, where the male has been recognised as an active and rational being and the woman is passive and materialistic (Horowitz 185). Similarly, historically disabled bodies have been perceived as cursed, deformed, and deviant from the normal bodies. According to Morris, both the persons with disabilities (PwDs) and women have been put at the margins of the normative curve, representing the negative and unworthy figures in a society (158). Furthermore, critical feminist disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson is one of the key contributors in feminist disability studies, analysing various historical texts in order to depict how both feminist studies and disability studies can benefit from each other and share a similar trajectory. Feminism has broadened our understanding of what it means to be a woman and worked to reduce negative stereotypes about women. Similarly, disability studies has examined what it means to be disabled, with the goal of helping people with disabilities become more fully included in society.

This intersection of disability and gender creates what critical feminist disability scholars such as Garland-Thomson term 'extraordinary bodies' that exist outside the normative social structure of the society, where such bodies challenge the idea of normative bodies in our society and create the space for discourse on fluid ideas of bodies (30). However, these extraordinary bodies pose a threat to pre-decided ideal bodies, placing them at the periphery of the normalcy curve. Furthermore, she argues that disability does not just function as a biological given but as a cultural construction that intersects with gender to create complex matrices of oppression and resistance as well. Garland-Thomson introduces the concept of the 'normate,' which she describes as a social figure through which individuals can position themselves as exemplars of humanity, typically characterised as male, able-bodied, white, heterosexual, and middle-class. Such conceptualisation automatically positions disabled women as being doubly deviant from normative expectations (xii).

In the Indian context, Indian scholars shed light on the intersectionality of being women and disabled in a patriarchal society, where these two interlinked identities become the source of discrimination and subjugation. Stereotypes and biases regarding disabled women may have emerged due to cultural attitudes deeply embedded in religious and mythological frameworks that often pathologise women and disabled bodies (Ghai 107). Central to understanding this marginalisation is what critical feminist disability scholar Jenny Morris terms

double oppression, where patriarchal and ableist ideologies lead to the creation of forms of discrimination that cannot be understood through single-axis analyses (Morris 162). Building on Morris's work, critical feminist disability scholar has further theorised how disabled women experience unique forms of social exclusion that cannot be captured through a single model of oppression (Wendell 52). The intersection of patriarchal structures with ableist ideologies creates what scholars term double jeopardy, where disabled women experience marginalisation based on both gender and disability status.

In the Indian context, this intersectional lens becomes particularly significant for understanding how caste, class, religion, and regional identities interact with disability and gender to shape disabled women's lived experiences and narrative possibilities. Critical feminist disability scholars such as Tobin Siebers provide additional grounding through his theory of 'complex embodiment' by challenging binary constructions of normal and abnormal bodies. He asserts that disability exists as a complex social location where biological factors interact with social and environmental conditions to create varying degrees of ability and limitation (Siebers 25).

However, in recent decades, despite experiencing various hardships and discrimination, globally disabled women have taken various steps and initiatives to make space for themselves in society. They have started to represent themselves through different forms such as art, academia, cinema, life writing, and using autobiographical narratives to challenge their marginalisation and concretise their existence in a patriarchal-ableist society. These autobiographical texts do not just work merely as personal testimonies; instead, they need to be considered a narrative form of activism. In such a form of narrative activism, disabled women employ storytelling as a political tool to resist dominant cultural scripts that position them as objects of pity, inspiration, or medical intervention rather than as complex individuals with agency, desires, and valuable contributions to society. Critical disability life writing scholar G. Thomas Couser demonstrates how autobiographical narratives by disabled people function as sites of self-representation that challenge medical and charity discourses positioning them as objects rather than subjects of knowledge (Couser 12).

This theoretical understanding of autobiographical narratives as sites of resistance aligns with feminist standpoint theory, which recognises that living with disabilities creates unique positions for analysing and criticising social structures. Rather than suggesting a single disabled standpoint, this theory

acknowledges the diversity of disabled women's experiences based on factors like type of disability, access to resources, cultural context, race, and class (Hartsock 283; Collins 270).

Hence, considering autobiography as a tool of social reform and upliftment, especially in the context of India, where women with disabilities presenting themselves through autobiography is still very limited. This article examines two pioneering autobiographical narratives by disabled Indian women: Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2011) and Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* (2012). Chib, who has cerebral palsy, depicts her journey from childhood through adulthood, challenging assumptions about intellectual capacity and physical limitation while asserting her identity as a writer, activist, and sexual being. Monga, who lost her sight at age five, narrates her experiences of navigating educational institutions, professional environments, and personal relationships while challenging societal assumptions about blindness and women's capabilities. Both narratives emerge from urban, educated, middle-class contexts, providing insights into how class privilege and cultural resources enable particular forms of resistance and self-advocacy while also revealing the persistent barriers faced by disabled women across social hierarchies.

This research has employed feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), as developed by Michelle M. Lazar, as a research method to analyse the autobiographies of Malini Chib and Preeti Monga. FCDA provides analytical tools for examining how disabled women's autobiographical narratives function as sites of discursive resistance against double forms of oppression. The rationale behind selecting FCDA as a research method is because it aims to "reveal the complex, subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities" (Lazar 142-143). This methodological framework enables analysis of how Malini Chib and Preeti Monga employ various discursive strategies to challenge normative constructions of both femininity and ability while asserting their agency as disabled women in Indian society.

The article employs a comparative textual analysis approach, examining two autobiographical narratives by disabled Indian women to understand how different types of impairments create diverse modalities of disabled female embodiment and narrative possibility. This comparative framework allows for analysis of both commonalities and differences in how cerebral palsy and visual

impairment intersect with gender to shape women's experiences and self-representation strategies. The research follows what Lazar terms feminist analytical activism, which functions as a form of critical consciousness-raising through research and teaching that theorises and analyses gendered discourse practices (145-146), positioning this article as both academic inquiry and political intervention that contributes to broader conversations about disabled women's rights and representation.

Challenging Charity and Medical Model of Disabilities through Autobiographical Discourse

The application of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* and Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* reveals the effect of the dominant medical and charity model of disability. However, the act of writing their stories by positioning themselves as authoritative narrators of their own experiences challenges what Lazar identifies as "frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions" (142). Further, one of Chib's statements explicitly depicts her criticism of the medical model of disability when she writes that "The doctor who said I would be a permanent vegetable has had to eat his words. I have two master's degrees. I travel, write, and lecture across India and abroad" (193). This excerpt from her autobiography reflects what Couser terms 'narrative prosthesis,' where people use storytelling as one of the tools to challenge the dominant discourse which labels them as objects of medical intervention instead of subjective beings with agency. The use of the metaphor for the doctor 'eating his words' itself challenges the dominant traditional doctor-patient power dynamics, where Chib's story shows the medical expertise as fallible.

Similarly, Monga challenges charity model assumptions through her strategic positioning as an independent entrepreneur. When discussing her past experience, she shares the brutal statement of her husband, who said to her, "Hey you blind bat…. he would yell, 'What do you think of yourself? You should thank your stars. I married you…Don't you all ever forget it" (105). Monga, through her narrative, proved that she is not someone who would live on the pity of others. Instead, she took this as a challenge in 1988 and became a successful entrepreneur and the first visually impaired aerobics instructor in India. The autobiography of Monga shows what Garland-Thomson calls extraordinary bodies that challenge normative assumptions and turn scepticism into motivation (Garland-Thomson 31).

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

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 Tegh 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 Tegh 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 Tegh 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 Tegh 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 Tegh 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 Tegh 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 Tegh 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 andhlibhit*" [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 thatMeera 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

identity has been internalised. These memories shape her self-narration - what Cohn describes as "the articulation of inarticulate states of consciousness" (143-44). Meera recalls, "*class ma panch minit sudhi kali dholi nu koras gavayu*" [A chorus of black and white was sung for five minutes in the class] (Bhatt 12). Later, she wonders, "*Hu mara safed dagh bhuli jau chhu e barabar chhe? Shu mare yaad rakhvu joie ke hu badhathi alag chhu, kaik uni chhu*" [Is it ok that I forget about my white spots? Should I remember that I am different from others, that I am lacking?] (Bhatt 78).

Her diary becomes a space where internalised stigma resurfaces as doubt, shame, and self-interrogation. These reflections reveal how Meera's bodily difference dominates her emotional life and shapes her understanding of desire. The stigma she experienced as a child continues to haunt her adulthood, refracting even her intimate moments. When Vrunda admires her body and imagines sketching her nude, Meera responds, "*chitro black and white ma bananvva padshe*" [Sketch should be made in black and white] (Bhatt 41).

Her reply exposes how vitiligo has become inseparable from her self-image; she cannot imagine being seen outside the binary of her skin. As the diary progresses, Meera gradually understands that she is not Vrunda's desired partner. Vrunda's primary aspiration is motherhood, "*Meera, mara jivan nu ekmatr swapna chhe; ek sundar balak ni maa banvanu*" [Meera, the only dream of my life is to become a mother of a beautiful child] (Bhatt 41).

Although Vrunda is physically present in Meera's life during her stay in the hostel, she becomes emotionally distant, her desires aligned with heteronormative expectations rather than queer intimacy. On 13th January, Meera notes, "*Vrunda mari sathe chalti hati pan satat lagtu hatu e biji duniya ma chhe*" [Vrunda walked beside me but constantly seemed to be in another world] (Bhatt 28). Vrunda's growing connection with Dr Ajit brings her closer to her dream of motherhood and further away from Meera. Her departure to Bombay—ostensibly to visit her sister, but also to meet Dr Ajit—becomes a symbolic exit from Meera's life. Vrunda's choice reflects a turn towards societal validation and reproductive normativity, revealing how Meera's disability and queerness intersect to render her an unchosen partner.

In Vrunda's absence, Meera feels not merely loneliness but a profound

emotional void. Her entry on May 26th captures this desolation through fragmented imagery:

> Bhenkar toting nagnata
> Bakholbharelumaun
> Bhekhadezazumtiekalta
> Pith par vayuvarsadnavaghzarakhnakhuzarda.
> (A terrible and gigantic nakedness / A cavern filled with silence / A loneliness struggling on cliff. / scratches of cloves of striped hyena wind on my back) (Bhatt 96)

The rhetorical question - "*parntu aa Kavita j kem yad aavi?*" [But why is it *this* poem that comes to mind?] (Bhatt 96) reveals how Vrunda's departure has etched itself into Meera's emotional landscape. The poem becomes a metaphor for abandonment, silence, and the sense of unreciprocated desire. The poem evokes the emotional void left in Meera's life after Vrunda's departure. The rhetorical question itself signifies that Vrunda's abandoning had left grazes in Meera's life. In fact, when she gets the news of Vrunda's wedding to Dr Ajit, she is torn between social expectation and personal heartbreak. She writes, "*Janu chhu mare khush thavu joie. Vrunda ne jo yogya sathi mali jaay to ethi uttam shu! Thay chhe ekdam mann bhari ne radi lau, vahavi dau ganthai gayeli badhi lagnio.*" [I know—I should be happy. If Vrunda finds a deserving companion, what could be better than that? And still I feel like just crying my heart out, and washing away all the entangled feelings.] (Bhatt 98). Her words reveal the conflict between a sense of happiness for Vrunda and the pain of losing a beloved. The phrase '*ganthai gayeli lagnio*' underscores her deep feelings for Vrunda. Vrunda's wedding exposes Meera's internalised belief that she is unworthy of being chosen. This sense of unworthiness, highlighted by the phrase 'deserving companion,' intensifies when Ujaas later abandons her. She wonders, "*em pan hoy ke e aa kabarchitra sharir ne sahi sakyo n hoy*" [It might be possible that he is not able to hide this spotted body] (Bhatt 139).

Meera's self-doubt can be understood through Shildrick's theory of anomalous embodiment. Confrontation with a disabled body, Shildrick argues, generates anxiety because it unsettles fantasies of bodily autonomy (Shildrick

222). Here, Meera's disability, her spotted body, becomes not just a source of aesthetic anxiety for others but also a sign of social unintelligibility—her body disrupts heteronormative and able-bodied expectations, rendering her an unacceptable partner in the eyes of society. Here, the novella raises a significant question: Where does Meera's sense of unworthiness come from? Her disability, her queer identity or the intersection of both? As Quayson notes, disability often produces a form of invisibility not through absence but through being framed within stereotypes that efface a person's identity (17). Meera is visible, yet, unacknowledged-looked at but never embraced. In both relationships, she becomes a placeholder rather than a partner. After learning that Vrunda has left for Bombay to marry Dr Ajit, Meera writes, "*Ekla dukh ne to radiney halvu kari sakay, parntu sathosath apman na, asvikarna dankh hoy to! Kamani sahib n hata tyare Vrunda e mane svikari ane jyare Dr Ajit aavya etle?*" [One can ease the weight of solitary sorrow by weeping it out but when humiliation and the sting of rejection accompany it? In the absence of Kamanisir, Vrunda accepted me and when Dr Ajit came?] (Bhatt 101).

Her reflection reveals the deeper wound—not loneliness but humiliation. She asks, "*shu hu ena mate avejinu astitva hati?*" [Was I merely a substitute for her?] (Bhatt 101). The question crystallises her fear that she was never truly desired, only temporarily needed. Her relationship with Ujaas follows a similar trajectory. After their physical intimacy, she writes, "*Mari najar same aa samay balatkar na andharama paltato jato hato ne hu enama maro ujas shodhti rahi*" [This time was dissolving into the darkness of rape, and I kept searching for my light within it] (Bhatt 138). The metaphor of 'darkness of rape' indicates her sense of violation and emotional abandonment. She searches for '*ujaas*' (light) within an experience that leaves her feeling used and erased. Meera titles her experience of an intimate relationship with Ujaas as 'rape.' This resonates with Tom Shakespeare's observation that disabled women are disproportionately vulnerable to sexual coercion and are often perceived as lacking sexual agency or even full womanhood (Shakespeare 11-15).Meera's experience is not only dehumanising but also emblematic of how disabled female sexuality is rendered socially unintelligible. Her diary repeatedly returns to this trauma, revealing the depth of her emotional rupture.

> "*Em pan hoy ke e aa kabarchitra sharir ne sahi sakyo na hoy!...je rite ene mane chhodi, jane avkashma aathadto koi patang! ane jyare Tivariji aavya tyare je rite ene mane mara chappal sathe bathroom ma santava dhakeli!*"
>
> [It might be possible that he could not bear this patchy body! The way he left me—like a kite drifting in the sky! And when Tivariji arrived, he shoved me into the bathroom with my own slippers, as if to hide me!] (Bhatt 139).

The image of being discarded 'like a kite drifting in the sky' captures her sense of abandonment. On Tiwariji's arrival, Ujjas' act of hiding her in the bathroom confirms her social erasure. She writes, "*Ene mara jivan na sundar ne kachdi nakhyu, chuthi nakhyu. Dhodhmar kamnaona dhadhuda niche mara astitvano chhekayelo musaddo bhinjai ne ducho vali gayo chhe*." [He crushed the beauty of my life, rumpled it. Beneath his torrential desire, the treatise of my existence is soaked and smeared.] (Bhatt 133)

The metaphor of her "existence soaked and smeared" under Ujaas' desire reveals how intimacy becomes a site of erasure rather than affirmation. Across her entries, Meera returns to the same refrain: A body desired yet never accepted. Like Vrunda, Ujaas uses Meera to fulfil an emotional as well as physical need but cannot recognise her even as a friend. She asks, "*Enama mane mitra tarike svikarva jetli y himat nahati*?" [Could he not have the courage to accept me as a friend?] (Bhatt 139). Her question exposes the asymmetry of their relationship, where Meera fails to get any reciprocity. Vrunda too, uses Meera to fill an emotional void and abruptly abandons Meera once Dr Ajit enters her life. She not only shifts to the other room without informing Meera but also avoids any kind of communication with her. About this experience, Meera writes, "*Aaje nakki thai gayu ke Vrunda samany parichay no vyavharey rakhva mangti nathi*" [Today, it was decided that Vrunda did not even want to keep the general acquaintance] (Bhatt 84). Vrunda's action confirms how Meera's presence is tolerated only in the absence of more socially acceptable partners. Similarly, Meera describes her sexual encounter with Ujaas as an 'unfortunate accident' which traumatised her. She writes, "*hu takva mate havatiya marti hati ne e marama dhagdhagtu sisu redi rahyo*" [I was struggling to survive and he poured burning lead into me] (Bhatt 138).

Meera's use of metaphor—being filled with molten grief—articulates not just violence of the experience but also highlights the scars it leaves behind. It refers to the physical pain as wellas the emotional state of being sexually sued and then discarded. Her words reveal the trauma and also indicates the impossibility of locating her sexuality within normative range of desire.

In both relationships, Meera is denied what Loeser, Pini, and Crowley term "socially intelligible sexuality" (5). As McRuer and Wilkerson argue, legitimacy requires not only heteronormativity but also conformity to norms of able-bodiedness (8). Vrunda and Ujaas erase Meera's subjectivity by framing her body as an object of pity, utility, or revulsion—never an autonomous agent of desire.

Thus, Meera's disability and queerness intersect to render her simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible within social and intimate relationships. As Quayson notes, disability often produces a mode of visibility that effaces identity rather than affirms it (17). Meera is never permitted as the desired subject. Rather, she becomes a substitute or another in the lives of those she loves. Having understood Meera's fragmented subjectivity through societal denial, it becomes necessary to ask how Gujarati literary criticism has received this text and specifically what's their perspective about the concept of disability.

Critical Silences: Disability and Queer Erasure in Gujarati Literary Discourse

Having examined how Meera's narrative challenges normative constructs of desire and embodiment, this section turns to the critical reception of the novella within Gujarati literary discourse, where disability and queer desire are frequently misread or marginalised. In his article "Bhramnirasjanya Vedna ni Katha," Ramesh Dave writes:

> *Meera ek taraf kodh no abhishap jirve chhe…. janmajat sapdeli vedna e ena chintan ne ujjval karyu chhe. Suchit vedna ane vanchan manan na pariname kelvayeli teni sampgantano Parichay, tene malelo kodh no varso potani aagli pedhi ne n aapva te kevo aakro Sankalp seve chhe temathi male chhe… pote bhogvela abhishap thi pacchini pedhine bachhavva mate matrutva na sukh – santosh no bhoga apvani suchit mano bhumika nari*

> *vedna nu j vardan chhe.* [On the one hand, Meera bears the curse of vitiligo…the pain she is born with has brightened her thought process. Her knowledge developed due to her present pain and introspective reading is introduced by her firm determination of not passing her legacy of vitiligo to the future generation…To save the future generation from the curse she herself endured, her readiness to sacrifice the contentment of motherhood itself is a blessing of suffering and pain.] (Dave 147-48)

Here, Dave describes Meera as bearing '*kodh no abishap*' and frames her vitiligo as a tragic inheritance. He valorises her suffering and interprets her refusal to pursue motherhood as a noble act of self-sacrifice. Here the disability is mentioned[1] as a curse, and the entire approach is to project Meera's vitiligo as the real source of suffering she is passing through. Instead of interrogating the social norms that compel Meera to suppress her desires, he romanticises her self -denial as moral virtue. This framing erases Meera's agency and reinforces ableist expectations of disabled women as self–sacrificing.

In "Meera Yagnik ni diary vishe," Labhshankar Thakar does not engage with disability at all. Even when addressing Meera's queer desire, he dismisses it as irrelevant to critical analysis.

Ahi sajatiy sambandh na prasnago chhe ane vijatiy sambandh ni aghatak ghanta chhe. Pan aavi samagri te aa kruti ni visheshta chhe ane samiksha karti vakhte khas dhyan ma leva jevi babat te tevo maro abhipray nathi." [Here, we have incidents of homosexuality and also the shocking incident of heterosexuality. But this content is the distinctive feature of this work and a matter to pay attention to during critical analysis is definitely not my opinion] (Thakar 157).

His refusal to acknowledge queer intimacy reflects a heteronormative discomfort that sidelines both disability and queerness. Thakar's omission of disability reveals a broader critical tendency to overlook identities that fall outside the normative framework.

In "Samvednani Tikshna Dhar par Chalti Meera Yagnik Ni Dairy," Geeta Naik describes Meera as a princess imprisoned by the 'monster' of vitiligo.

She writes:

> *Kodh namna rakshase ekdandiya mahel ma ked kari lidheli kuvri jevi Meera Yagnik ni Avastha chhe. Kodhgrast deh thijaray chalet nathati, kunthit manodashane pan atikrami jati Meera chahva jevi chhe.* [The condition of Meera Yagnik is like the princess locked up in the solitary palace by the monster called vitiligo. Meera, who does not get affected by this vitiligo affected body, who overcomes this mental paralysis is someone to be loved.] (Naik 160)

This metaphor casts disability as captivity and positions Meera as a heroic figure who 'overcomes' her condition. Naik's metaphor reinforces the trope of disability as tragedy and positions Meera's worth in her ability to transcend her body.

An overview of the critical responses reveals that disability in Gujarati literary discourse is either overlooked entirely or portrayed as a source of suffering and curse. While *Meera Yagnik ni Diary* marks a significant entry point for lesbian relationships in Gujarati literature, disability—particularly in its intersection with sexuality—receives little to no critical engagement. Instead of recognising Meera's embodied resistance to normative ideals, critics either romanticise her suffering or ignore her subjectivity altogether, reflecting a broader tendency within Gujarati literary criticism to sideline complex identity narratives that challenge the conventional framework.

Overall, the essay studies the central contradictions presented in *Meera Yagnik ni Dairy*. While, this novella presents a subversive narrative by foregrounding the emotional interiority and desire of a disabled woman using diary as a form, it simultaneously establishes the same discourse that efface and invalidate her disabled female sexuality. Her relationships reveal how her subjectivity is validated through intimacy yet invalidated through mechanisms of substitution, erasure, and internalised stigma. The contradiction is twofold: the text expresses and denies desire, articulates and undermines agency; and Gujarati criticism reinforces this invalidation by overlooking disability or romanticising suffering. Together, these dynamics underscore the need for a disability- aware, queer – affirming critical framework in Gujarati literature.

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Feminist Writers of New Literatures in English: The Case of Indian Women Writers in English

Gauri Shankar Jha

Abstract

The so-called 'New Literatures in English' are not entirely new; they emerged from the historical processes of colonisation and other powerful global forces shaping the modern world. These literatures developed in former British colonies during and after colonial rule, marked by distinct cultural identities and, at times, a lingering colonial influence. Their roots can be traced to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when English, Irish, and Scottish settlers in regions such as the Caribbean, Canada, and South Africa began producing 'overseas literature.' Over time, these writings transformed world literature, especially from the late fifteenth century onward, by introducing voices from colonised and enslaved communities who articulated their present realities, remembered pasts, and imagined futures—often in the language of the coloniser. Rich in genre and theme, they offer diverse, compelling, and often startling perspectives. This article examines the genesis and evolution of New Literatures in English, their contribution to world literature, and their role in shaping Indian Writing in English. It particularly foregrounds women writers, exploring how they assert their identities, narrate their histories, and envision new possibilities through literary expression.

Keywords: Colonization; Culture; Literature; Postcolonial; Multiculturalism

Introduction

The study of 'New Literatures in English' is concerned with colonial and postcolonial writing which emerged from the British colonies such as: parts of Africa, Australia, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Singapore, etc. It emerged from the process of colonisation and has a history of transforming world literature from the late fifteenth century onwards. It was the extensive influence of the coloniser's tongue, along with their culture and civilization, which compelled the colonised to adopt the foreign tongue and express their feelings and emotions, and, finally, a bulk of literature as a

treasure of their rich experience. The most remarkable argument is the voice of women writers in its enrichment.

Actually speaking, this new literature in English and its newness is available in the so-called overseas literature which appeared in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century when the settlers of English, Irish, Canada or South Africa started their experiment under this new umbrella of literature. Its first form was the outburst of the colonised: the voice of the common mass, that of joy and mirth, pleasure and displeasure, the political upheavals and the social turmoil. Its history speaks of its presence in the 1950s as West African literature, in the 1960s as East African Literature, in the 1970s as indigenous writing in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and in the 1980s as Black and Asian British Literature, and so on. All these literatures were shaped by experience of colonisation and its legacies. Not only that, all these literatures moved beyond the original colonial matrix to remake the forms and functions of English as a global language.

Here, our focus is centered on the women writers from all corners of the world, particularly, the Indian writers writing in English. For all women writers, the subject is the same: their concern is identical and hence their appeal and yearning is common. They raise their voice for their worth, their value as compared to their male counterpart and their social assignment. Both from the East and the West the flow of ideas and opinions pour in: from the West we have names like Jane Austen, Toni Morrison, Annie Ernaux, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, Anne Brontë, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Stephenie Meyer, J. K. Rowling, Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Plath, etc. On the other side, our Indian women writers, though less pronounced, have significant contribution in the making of feminist literature; we may quote the names of Anita Desai, Kamila Shamsie, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Geetanjali Shree, Banu Mushtaq, etc. They have keen observation of all the world around and most of the time they emerge as a rebel and so their writings labelled as protest literature too.

New Literatures in English must be understood as a complex literary formation shaped by intertwined political, cultural, and historical processes across multiple regions of the world. Rather than being confined to colonial, anticolonial, or postcolonial frameworks, they reflect broader transcultural

networks and negotiations of sociocultural diversity within an increasingly globalised world. At their core lies the pervasive impact of colonialism—rooted in plantation slavery, European settlement, and imperial conquest. English, functioning as a global lingua franca and pragmatic denominator, became central to this process. Today, with more than seventy nations adopting English as a primary language of reading and writing, its global spread reveals how colonial legacies, multiculturalism, diaspora, and globalisation collectively shaped Anglophone literature.

The diffusion of this literature occurred primarily through two historical channels: Settler Colonies (Canada, Australia, New Zealand), where English became the national language of predominantly European populations, and Invaded Colonies (India, Nigeria, parts of West Africa), where English was imposed upon indigenous societies. In both contexts, writers composed in an acquired, often alien language, resulting in the erosion of native languages, as seen in South Africa, the West Indies, and among African slaves and Indian indentured labourers. Yet English was not merely imposed; it was appropriated, revitalised, and reinvented by writers such as Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul.

Indian Writing in English exemplifies this dual identity of English as both foreign and imposed. The introduction of English education is often associated with Thomas Babington Macaulay, whose policies aimed to westernise Indian education and produce administrative intermediaries for the colonial state. Initially marked by imitation and translation, Indian Writing in English gained literary maturity with the pioneering trio—Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R. K. Narayan—who indigenised English by embedding Indian philosophy, mythology, social structures, and cultural heritage into their works. They established a paradigm for future generations.

Within this trajectory, feminist voices occupy a crucial analytical space. Alongside dominant male figures like Naipaul and Rushdie, Indian women writers such as Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Indira Goswami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kamala Markandaya, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Shobhaa De articulate concerns of gender inequality, social justice, patriarchal oppression, marital discord, economic dependence, early marriage, and marginalised identity. Some wrote originally in regional languages and were

later translated into English, yet their thematic concerns converge in articulating women's lived realities. Thus, the genesis of New Literatures in English is not merely historical but dialogic—marked by resistance, adaptation, and continuous reinvention.

It is better to have a look at the historical perspective of Indian Writing in English. D. Ramakrishna, in the Preface of *Indian English Prose: An Anthology*, maintains that: "Indian English prose, historically speaking, is older than Indian English poetry. Its beginning may be traced to the pre-Independence days, even before the British introduced English in India." (11)

Account of Jains (1809) of C.V. Boriah was preceded by 'drafts, letters, dispatches, and notes with the British masters in English,' this was followed by Macaulay's '*Minute*' (1835). Even before C. V. Boriah, we have the evidence of another book titled, '*The Travels of DeanMahomet,*' a travel narrative (travelogue) written by Sake Dean Mahomed, published in England in 1794. Most often we quote *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as the first Indian English novel which carries the long suffering of a middle-class Hindu wife. This common social portrayal is followed by works of political themes (*The Prince of Destiny:* The *New Krishna*, 1909, by Sarat Kr Ghosh), of religious life (*The Greatness,* 1925, by B. R. Rajan Iyer), of historical romance (*The Battle of Panipat*, 1884, by Mirza Moorad Alee Beg), etc. The period of 1920 – 1947, termed as the Gandhian Age by M. K. Naik, in his book, *A Historyof Indian English Literature* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1999) which includes *Civil Disobedience Movement* of the thirties produced writers who incorporated the theme of the Gandhian framework. M. K. Naik maintains in his book *Indian English Fiction: A CriticalStudy*:

> A society compelled into self-awareness like this provides a fertile soil for fiction. It was, in fact, during this period that Indian English fiction discovered some of its most significant themes such as the ordeal of the freedom struggle, East - West relationship, the communal problem and the plight of the untouchables, the landless poor, the economically exploited, etc. (15)

The appearance of the trio on the horizon of Indian English novels has been explained by G. N. Devy in his article titled *The Indian English Novel 1980*

– *90: An Overview* as: "Anand as a pontification of social reformist, Raja Rao as the formalist in search of the meaning of illusion, and Narayan as the novelist of life's iron ordinariness" (18).

Besides, the social novel, political novel and historical novel, we have some other types of novels raising their heads in the contemporary soil, such as, the ethnic novel *Twilight in Delhi,* 1940, by Ahmed Ali, autobiographical novel, novels of Partition, and its terrible aftermath, the merger of the princely states into Indian Union, novels based on the wars with Pakistan and China, East West confrontation, the clash between the Western oriented rationalism and the traditional religious faith, experimental novel (G. V. Desani), handling of sex themes accompanied by new frankness (Sasthi Brata, K. V. Trishanku, Saros Cowasjee, Kamala Das, Vikram Kapoor, etc.)

The story of Indian novels is altogether exclusive and all inclusive. As pointed out by Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her book *The Twice Born Fiction*:

> In fact, the full development of the Indian novel as a whole, allowing for certain oversimplification of details, may be divided into three large stages: 1. Historical romance, 2. Social or political realism, 3. Psychological novels showing introspective concern with most individuals." (30)

The influence of the West as colonizer has been immense as a strong center of power in the making of our texts. As Makarand Paranjape writes in *Towards a Poetics of the Indian EnglishNovel*:

> The fact is that influence and power are always multi – directional and not unidirectional. The shaper is also shaped. The colonizer is also colonized. The master is also a slave. And so on. This is the only real dialectic, the dialectic which asserts that the Other is the Self. (31)

The pluralistic cultural environment of India and the conflict between the traditional and the modern invite the conflict of ideologies arising out of the historical contradictions of the post-colonial society. As Irving Howes maintains in his book *Politics and the Novel*: "The conflict is inescapable: the novel tries to confront experiences in its immediacy and closeness, while ideology is by its nature general and inclusive" (20).

However, the fate of English poetry is slightly different, which has been condemned by Gordon Bottomley as 'Matthew Arnold in *sari*', quoted by K. R. Srinivas Iyenger in his book *Indian Writing in English* and the unacceptable suggestion of W. B. Yeats 'to write in one's own languages, since, no man can think/write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue', but for our writers English became one of the many voices of India "as much Indian as others" (Iyenger 3). It is a clear reflection of the East-West dichotomy.

Undeniably true, Indian English poetry is, as admitted by Shiv K. Kumar in one of his lectures at I. I. A. S. Shimla and compiled in book form titled *Contemporary Indian Literature in English*, "...is largely derivative in that it is modelled on that of Romantic poets like Shelley, Keats and Byron." (Kumar 1) But the scenario completely changed after Independence, as Shiv K. Kumar opines further:

> We won not only our political independence but also our cultural freedom as evidenced by a distinct change of attitude in our creative writers – poets, novelists and dramatists…It is this new vision that distinguishes their work from that of their predecessors. The new poets want poetry to be authentic, intensely personal and written in a language shorn in cliches and verbosity. A poem for them, must be a skillfully structured artefact of both image and emotion, thought and feeling. (2)

Subsequently, the elements of irony, East - West cultural encounter, religious orthodoxy, etc. are introduced and we may witness the rise of a number of women poets, delineating the relationship between man and women, age old social practices and prejudices, male chauvinism and the emancipated women compromising with their counterpart.

The treasure of Indian English Drama is a bit poor. Certainly, it has drawn its inspiration from the rich heritage of Sanskrit drama, it banks mostly on the translations of the plays written originally, in some regional language. So, we have playwrights like Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, etc. and from the latest Mahesh Dattani, with a new theme of transgender.

In the recent years, Indian Writing in English has acquired status which entertains the elements of not only the post-colonial status of post modernism

and its abundance of emerging trends and ingredients that is all inclusive. The recurring themes available today are that of identity, exile, displacement (geographical, cultural, social, linguistic, etc.), racial identity and conflicts, migrancy, difference, alienation, rootlessness, belongingness, decolonisation, dimensions of relationships, history and mythology, cultural and national specificity, etc.

Feminist Women Writers of Indian Writings in English

Our concern should not be that of the women writers writing in English only, rather we should try to delve into the writings in several regional languages or Hindi, which were, subsequently, translated into English, for instance, Amrita Pritam, Gitanjali Shree, Banu Mushtaq, Krishna Sobti, Mahasweta Devi, etc.

Actually speaking, the root cause of all these upheavals lies in the erratic concept of gender inequality which proliferates into multiple twigs and labelled otherwise. So, it needs a bit of elaboration. The discourse of gender inequality has been a venerable trend, which keeps on haunting the minds of intellectuals for a pretty long time. We may observe the fact that this is an aberration from the authentic imaginative track and we may take it as a misconstrued wave that has nothing to do with the mission that it professes. Though there are basic differences in the oriental and occidental dimensions, and orientations of this understanding, the fundamental ethics and formulation remain the same, which idealises its basic tenets and disseminate its forbearing constitution bound to erosion and final collapse. Right from Plato up to the present, we have several thinkers and philosophers in the West whereas in the East all the ancient scriptures are full of such outbursts, which vindicate the judicious gender status and condemn its fragile inconsistency. That is why, we have jargons such as 'third world women,' 'native women,' 'gendered subaltern,' 'female individualism,' 'feminist credentials,' 'colonial sexual binaries,' 'intermediate sex,' etc. to recompense such promulgation. The serious interrogation is about our destination, which is ill defined and highly vulnerable attracting political, social and economic onslaught, compelling creative artists to go for an alternative joyous, safe, and sound world.

However, the Indian women writers in English who are known for their gender concern to initiate the movement but fail to deliver the most sought

alternative world; they wish to establish and are left disillusioned and disenchanted; thus, instituting the fact that the very concept of gender inequality has an erroneous founding. The best work to nullify the possibility of an alternative world, away from the existing, is available in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* where the attempt to create an alternative world by the protagonist collapses desperately. And here is a woman with a resolution: "To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake" (Desai 4). Kamla Das's world of poetry unfolds the same story of patriarchal mayhem including sexual mismanagement, yet unexplored. It gives rise to trauma literature and the birth of a writer like Banu Mushtaq and her book of stories *Heart Lamp*. She is a strong progressive writer who voices the suppressed language of Muslim girls and women, fragile and vulnerable, imprisoned in the Muslim community and appears as a mighty rebellion, against the social custodians, in different guises, as husbands, as maulvis, as grandmothers and religious teachers. She questions, not a man but his so-called creator, in the beginning of the story, *Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord*:

> After creating crores and crores of tiny organisms like me over lakhs and lakhs of years, after establishing heaven for our good deeds and hell for our sins, oh lord who sits waiting for us: Prabhu you must be on your way now to enjoy the sweet fragrance of the garden of heaven. Or perhaps you are issuing orders to the angels, who stand there with hands folded, radiant faces glow. I may be a mere tiny fragment of your soul, but I do have the right to make request, don't I? (199)

So goes the stories of Banu Mushtaq, and her book *Heart Lamp*. Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* and *Mai* may be cited as a typical product of such turmoil; the first projecting the family saga of an eighty-year-old woman suffering the trials of trauma of partition and the second about a woman facing the challenges of complexities of relationship in a North Indian family. *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is a revolt against social taboo of caste discrimination that love does not recognise it is reflected here: **"**If he touched her he couldn't talk to her, if he loved her he couldn't leave, if he spoke, he couldn't listen, if he fought, he couldn't win." (250) The dichotomy in relationship is evident here. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*is an attitude of vehemence against

women and the final compromise with destiny. Shashi Despande's *That Long Silence* is the portrayal of a silent woman suffering in a patriarchal society. Instances can be multiplied right from the early days to the present time.

Conclusion

Taking into account the birth and growth of Indian Writing in English and other such new literatures in English in the world, we may infer that the upsurge of such literatures is the outcome of an attempt of decolonisation and a desire to free their writings from the clutches of the British hegemony. Actually speaking, it was taken for granted that English literature stands for moral values, and it is almost synonymous to morality and civilisation. On the other hand, Orientalism created hierarchy between the East and the West having the pseudo impression of the civilised West and the savage East. Obviously, education brought intellectual advancement of the colonised countries and could consolidate power. So, language became a tool of power and literature a manifestation of culture and civilisation. As Raja Rao writes in the *Foreword* of his book *Kanthapura*:

> One has to convey in a language that is not one's own; the spirit that is one's own. ——— It (English) is the language of our intellectual make-up like Sanskrit or Persian was before, but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. —— Time alone will justify it. (v)

Consequently, adoption of English as a medium of expression even before achieving Independence became both a fashion and a compulsion. And it gave rise to several new literatures, enriching the treasure of the World of English literature. It was the beginning of the death of British hegemony, with no specific narrative of its own. It is reflected right from the Renaissance and continues till date that is termed as meta- modernism. And when we come to the world of feminist women writers of Indian Writing in English, we can trace their voice as a tool of outburst, of suppressed bulk of designs and emotions available in almost all works.

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An Anatomy of Silence: Mapping Female Psyche in Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*

Anagha Agnes

Abstract

In literary discourse, the female experience within the medical profession is still seldom explored. Despite the profession itself being fraught with tension, emotional strain, and systemic pressures, the female experience of care and caregiving is far more demanding. This article elucidates the feminine imagination of a female doctor's psyche and affective experience in Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*. Through a close reading of the semi-autobiographical narrative, it decodes the fragmented female psyche and cartography of care. Therefore, drawing attention to the causes of rupture in the female psyche resulting as part of personal trauma, clinical duty, and emotional labour. Applying the methodology of feminist psychoanalysis by Kristeva, affect theory by Sara Ahmed and trauma studies by Herman, the analysis challenges dominant tropes of the emotionally neutral healer. It foregrounds the gendered and psychological costs of caregiving in a postcolonial rural landscape. This article thus positions Nambisan's work as an essential intervention in feminist medical humanities and contemporary Indian literature by women.

Keywords: Affective theory; Feminism; Trauma; Caregiving; Abjection

Medical humanities is an interdisciplinary study that allows the identification and interpretation of medicine through humanistic perspectives in literary fiction. Analysis of female perspectives in storytelling resonates with the broader collective experiences of women in the medical domain. This methodological approach strengthens critical inquiry, articulating discourse on ethics, care, and affect. Kavery Nambisan as a doctor and a writer showcases a distinct voice acquired through professional and personal experiences. She is an Indian medical professional educated in the UK and has worked extensively in rural India. Her novel *The Hills of Angheri* is a semi-autobiographical work, reflecting on aspects of Nambisan's medical journey through the protagonist

Nalli. Nalli is a village girl raised in India who aspires to become a surgeon. From a tender age, Nalli gets curtailed by patriarchal norms and societal expectations. As she periodically asserts herself despite the restrictions imposed, she confronts moments where silence becomes her only response. The novel traces Nalli's journey through medical education in England and her return to India, mapping a geographical trajectory.

Nambisan's novel highlights the silenced structural tensions of caregiving, embodied by a woman navigating personal trauma. This article situates *The Hills of Angheri* at the convergence of feminist medical humanities and postcolonial Indian literature, arguing that Nambisan's textual account delineates the fragmented psyche of a female doctor. Nalli's fractured consciousness progresses through cumulative trauma, the invisible drain of emotional labour, and the haunting moral ambiguities that define her medical profession. Her lived experiences reveal the quiet struggles that get unacknowledged for women negotiating care within hierarchical systems. The act of healing imposes psychic burdens, erasing the self. Therefore, smudging the boundary between resilience and exhaustion.

Julia Kristeva in her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), featured in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory* (Mittman and Hensel, 2018) articulates the theory of abjection. Kristeva establishes her theory in psychoanalytic discourse, in the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. She conceptualises the abject as an entity which violates existing boundaries, transgressing fundamental roles and destabilising systems and structures. She says,it "does not respect borders, positions, rules……disturbs identity, system, order" (37). The abject possesses one attribute of the object and is opposed to the "I." As a defensive measure, boundaries between self and the other get constructed to preserve psychic coherence. Hence, abjection is a process by which the subject negotiates its own stability in familiar and threatening circumstances.

The abject is that which traverses and transgresses; that which endangers a structure and finds itself on the wrong side of the boundary, often giving rise to the prohibitions specified by the taboo. The boundary is in place to safeguard systems and functions and to separate and demarcate different states, such as life and death, and the sacred and the profane (37).

Motifs of bodily fluids, decay, and death exemplify the abject, foregrounding determinants that society deliberately excludes. Reflecting complexities within the life of a female surgeon consistently engaged in abject routine. Also remaining coherent in confronting physical revulsion and emotional boundaries between self and patient. Sara Ahmed's affect theory argues that emotions extend beyond individuals but circulate between bodies. Ahmed's concept of "sticky emotions," serves as space in which feelings adhere to the subject over time. The silence of the subject under radical circumstances acts as a response to oppression (125).

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadaver.

In the novel *The Hills of Angheri*, the "laudable pus" motif manifests a symbolic connotation. 'Laudable Pus' is a malignant infection that is 'praiseworthy' once removed from the body. This grotesque yet poetic definition formulates Nalli's evolving perception of medicine. The profession of her choice is not limited to procedures but is a space of ethical confrontation and epiphanies. The term refers to visceral realities of surgical practice. On close reading, it resonates with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, where bodily fluids, blood, and pus denote the boundary between self and other as well as purity and pollution.

As a woman navigating the male-dominated sphere of medicine, by resisting patriarchal constraints imposed by both professional hierarchies and tradition, she translates as an "abject" figure. In environments where she owns agency, she becomes an outsider disrupting established norms. Nalli's presence as a woman becomes the laudable pus, an infection to be treated and cured. Nalli metamorphosis into an infection more threatening than the malady. The recurring medical imagery functions as a device for symbolic cleansing. Nalli redefines the meaning of caregiving in medical practice. Through Nalli, Nambisan questions societal construction of emotionally neutral doctor, oblivious to the notion of care. The text acts as a counter-narrative to dominant biomedical

discourses, asserting vulnerability and affect imperative to the profession of healing.

Julia Kristeva argues that abjection of the self originates from recognition of a void. In psychoanalytical criticism, theorists like Freud and Lacan reduce the concept of abjection to "object of lack." On the other hand, Kristeva asserts that "abjection" is not a result of lack but it comes from a sense of absence between the subject and the object. In such circumstances, abjection becomes the sole signified of the absence of object. The confrontation of the subject with the created instability becomes the expression of ontological dislocation "nourishment is not an other for me who am only their desire, I expel myself, spit myself out, I abject myself in the same movement by which I claims to be me…. I give birth to me in the violence of sobbing and vomit" (43).

Nalli does not verbalize her heartbreak over Jai or articulate the pain of being estranged from her village. She channels her emotional suffering into her medical practice. Her silence, therefore, is not indicative of passivity but of resilience. The void manifests into a form of resistance grounded in affective agency. Kristeva argues that female characters negotiate identity through repression. Nalli embodies this idea at the time of her father's death as she copes with the loss in silence. Also, when she gets betrayed by Jai, she hides her affection and remains numb. She chooses silence as her nonverbal response in vulnerable situations.

Kavery Nambisan's rendering of Nalli's journey is an anatomy of silence, an exploration of inner turmoil of women in medicine. Traditionally, scholars and institutions have conceptualized medicine as a domain governed by rationality and empirical detachment that privilege expertise, emotional neutrality, and stoicism. Such interpretations marginalise the gendered, affective, and subjective experiences of healthcare workers, particularly women. They translate as forms of invisible silences. Nambisan fictionalised the intensity of being a woman healer in a cultural setting that neither accommodates nor affirms her aspirations. Silence is theorised not as passive muteness but as an affective residue of systemic exclusion. It emerges as a condition produced through repeated encounters. The subtle trauma Nalli endures is lost in absence of a medium of conveyance. Nalli's experiences of ethical compromise are

not narrative detours. They constitute the ignored emotional cartography of female experience in medicine. Silence in the novel emerges not as absence but as an affective structure produced by institutional patriarchy. It accumulates through repeated encounters with gendered authority, shaping Nalli's psyche.

Judith Herman's discourse on trauma argues that periodic traumatic experiences lead to fragmentation of the self. Nalli's distress is not solitary, instead it is an incremental condition tailored by systemic oppression and patriarchy. As a child, Nalli gets subjected to scepticism within her own family. Her grandmother Ajji's cutting remark that "If God wanted you to be a doctor, you would have been a boy," marks the inception of her psychological wounding. "But Ajji did not ask. Worried about Nalli's health, Amma said Nalli should do something less difficult" (10). This moment solidifies the banal, habitual dismissal of female ambition in patriarchal settings. Community rejection and familial disbelief leave persistent voids in her sense of self, exacerbating emotional strain on her aspirations.

The novel subverts dominant tropes of the emotionally dispassionate healer by foregrounding caregiving as a site of profound vulnerability and affective engagement. As Nalli reflects, "Why do we become surgeons at all when we have to die so many deaths in a single life?" (11). This sentiment articulates the strain that comes with medical responsibility. Kavery Nambisan subverts the elevated image of the heroic doctor, an image constructed around masculine ideals of invincibility and control. The vulnerabilities of the female subject facilitate the necessary competence of the profession instead of diminishing facets of the caregiving profession. Her strength lies in the courage to acknowledge weakness, which redefines heroism in terms of emotional honesty. Her journey is a vivid example of epistemic disobedience, a conscious refusal to conform to patriarchal knowledge structures within masculinised spaces.

The Hills of Angheri probes into the nuances of silence, tracing the methods in which female aspirations are redirected. Since childhood, spatial environments have actively shaped Nalli's desires. She "would sit on one of its branches, look at the hills and dream her impossible dreams," reflecting that hope of becoming a doctor is not an abstract impulse but a feeling produced within and is connected to the landscape (11). Through the lens of Ahmed's

affect theory the hills from the novel emerge as a site of belonging. The hills as a space allow the protagonist to escape roles. The repressed dream becomes a vehicle to transport oneself to a prohibited future. Nalli's sense of hope is repeatedly reoriented by a gendered affective economy that associates female fulfilment with marriage rather than professional autonomy. In her conversation with Jai, Nalli's objectives are not loudly rejected but silently gendered. "All for a degree that'll be an ornament around your neck" rejecting education as decorative, realigning value towards material objects (23). Silence operates as a structure within established gender paradigms. Ahmed's argument that happiness is promised through confident normative life choices is indicative in Jai's remarks, "you will soon be someone's wife" (23). Nalli traverses the text as the normative woman whose ambitions are stifled by the constraints of a gendered society.

During her undergraduate education, her discovery of freedom is policed by the self. "There were movies, picnics and flirtations, a change in sensitivity" (79). Nalli's transformation from a closeted female to a liberal modern woman is accompanied by anticipatory restraint. She says, "Jai and family will disapprove of it" (79). Nalli becomes the archetype for self-policing women guilty of pleasures as they provoke external censure. This affective self-surveillance extends into her professional life, where she is repeatedly required to prove competence. She is coerced to suppress confusion, to advocate for patients to see beyond gender. The act of caregiving is feminised, but emotional restraint becomes a professional requirement while authority remains masculinised. It becomes obligatory for Nalli to gain legitimacy from the cyclical process of society.

During her practice in Royal College of Medicine, Nalli refuses to treat a British patient as he says, "I won't let a bloody immigrant treat me" (240). The remark of "bloody immigrant" reduces her professional identity as a doctor to a racial body, demonstrating Fanon's argument that colonial perception precedes competence. As she approaches Dr Hammer, the hospital administration acts as a site of colonised space that has institutionalised racial silence. The insult is normalised within the space, and it is rejected as a trivial matter. The Hospital and its staff demand that the subjugated standardise to a prerequisite level of emotional endurance. Fanonian colonial alienation is further revealed through

Nalli's visceral rejection of England "Damn the weather. The sameness of life annoyed me… I wanted noise and abuse, colour and chaos" (253). Fanonian conviction on lived dislocation converges with Ahmed's insistence asserting that belonging is felt before it is articulated. The Indian emotional register is perceived improper, as it is subordinate to the dominant register. Nalli is left with the sense of estrangement from colonized registers rejecting the naivety of the orient.

Nalli's enduring attachment to Angheri, despite its repeated acts of rejection and humiliation, reflects the adhesive nature of emotional investments. Her return to the village from the UK is an act of reclamation, reasserting her identity and politics of care within the postcolonial framework. The village is not idealised but reimagined as a contested yet reparative space where caregiving, memory, and resistance intersect. In this sense, the spatial politics of *The Hills of Angheri* become deeply entwined with feminist ethics. Landscapes become affective terrains embedded with gendered struggle. Nambisan crafts a literary intervention that bridges the medical, the emotional, and the political, offering a powerful vision of feminist reclamation and postcolonial healing.

Nalli's return to the hills of Coorg is a conscious and deliberate act of caregiving towards her ailing mother, her village, and community. By choosing to serve in a rural setting despite being trained in Western medicine, Nalli asserts her agency and reclaims her rightful role as a caregiver. She performs surgery on Makkan Singh's reproductive organ, a taboo for a woman doctor in the village. Despite initial resistance, he expresses heartfelt gratitude with teary eyes, saying, "I will never forget the seva you have done for me" (338). He folds his hands to form a gesture of namaste. Through such acts, Nalli breaks gender norms and earns recognition as a competent and respected physician. Nalli treats a woman suffering from elephantiasis of the vulva. Though doubtful of appropriate treatment, she performs duty as a caregiver to the village. In Nalli, Kavery Nambisan portrays a character who redefines methods of healing through empathy, humility, and unwavering commitment. Her practice is not an entity of reward but compassion that exceeds the boundaries of recognition. Thus, Nambisan reconfigures the concept of care not as a clinical duty or professional achievement, but as an act shaped by

intersecting histories of caste, class, gender, and memory. The rigid doctor-patient binary collapses into a labyrinth of relational ethics, where vulnerability is mutual and healing becomes a transformative process.

In *The Hills of Angheri*, Kavery Nambisan offers a powerful literary intervention into feminist medical humanities. Theoretical frameworks of Frantz Fanon, Sara Ahmed, and Julia Kristeva trace the trauma, affect, and silence shaping Nalli's fractured psyche. In interviews, Nambisan has mentioned the systemic neglect of rural healthcare, the lack of emotional support for doctors, and the urgent need for compassion in medical training. Professional legitimacy often mediated through gendered and hierarchical power structures. She blends memory and fiction to construct a voice twice marginalised.Through Nalli's narrative, the novel dissects the silence of a young female Indian doctor within patriarchal structures.The discourse of South Asian feminine voices in medical fiction still remains limited. The text gathers value as a sole interpreter of subdued female voices in the field of medicine. Future research possibilities include psychoanalytic readings of feminine medical experience, analyses of Gothicism in healthcare fiction, and studies of postcolonial power structures and systemic discrimination within contemporary Indian English and vernacular literary traditions.

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Between Panels and Representation: Visualizing Gendered Experience through *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back*

Dinisha Nayak and Punyashree Panda

Abstract

Women, as per Helene Cixous, "have been driven away as violently as from their bodies," as from writing (875). While feminist writings, as Cixous refers to as *Écriture féminine,* have been growing since the 1970s, we live in what W.J.T. Mitchell refers to it as the "pictorial turn," wherein humans engage with the visual medium in their everyday functionality (11). It becomes crucial to understand feminist visual representations wherein women exercise their agency to share their distinct embodied experiences through visual iconography. This article analyzes the comics anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* (2015) by Priya Kuriyan, which reflects the intersectionalities of being an Indian woman. The article shall utilize Hillary Chute's perspective on embodied feminist expression in comics from her book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010) to analyze the comics anthology. A comprehension of these narratives would shed light on how Indian women use visual stylistics to visualize their experiences of being women in modern-day India. This article aims to investigate how comics convey experiences of gendered oppression and status of Indian women, as they claim their bodies via the icon to exercise their agency of being.

Keywords: Indian Women; Comics; Visual; Embodiment; Gender

Introduction

Widely referred to as the Nirbhaya case, the case of the gang rape and death of Jyoti Singh, a 22-year-old physiotherapy intern, in a moving bus on 16th December 2012 in Delhi, led to the onset of a significant women's movement in contemporary India. This act of crime ignited wide-scale public protests across India, especially in metropolitan centers such as Delhi, Bangalore,

Kolkata, Chennai, and more. Tina Lapsia, in her study of Singh's death, observes that "rape became a topic of daily conversation in India," which was needed to "reverse the patriarchal, sexist, and troubling views on women, men, and gender roles, and to eradicate the culture of modesty and shame for women" (47).

Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back (2015), a graphic anthology published by the independent feminist publishing house, Zubaan, comprises fourteen short graphic narratives by various Indian female artists that center on a plethora of feminine issues, is a reaction to the Nirbhaya Case. The text is crucial for its visualization of 'daily conversations' on the status of Indian women in post-Nirbhaya India (Lapsia 47). Edited by Priya Kuriyan, Larissa Bertonasco, and Ludmilla Bartscht, the text, as per Nisha Susan, falls under the umbrella term of "feminist visual art" (Kuriyan et al. 2). These embodied visualizations hold meanings, as Thapan states that embodiment is "experienced in our everyday lives as lived and communicative bodies" and can be expressed through bodily senses (3). Hillary Chute (2010) explores the concept of embodied feminine expression through the works of Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi, and Aline Kominsky Crumb, examining the gendered visual renderings of these comic artists. While Chute's discussion is fixated on the aforementioned popular artists, this article employs the theorist's concept of embodied feminine expression and aims to bring into discussion the visual narratives and diversity of embodiment used by Indian female artists in *Drawing the Line*.

Research Paradigm

In the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of gendered language and the development of *Écriture féminine* (feminine writing) emerged among French feminist theorists, including Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. This stream of thought called for a new language of women's writing that "becomes a calculated response to alienation and censorship, an evasion of material threat" (Lanser 11). Cixous contends women's bodies are "driven away as violently" from writing, underscoring the necessity for them to claim presence by putting themselves both in text and also in the world (875). The woman's body has been a site of exploration by prominent thinkers, including Judith Butler,

Elizabeth Grosz, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, among others. Butler states that the body is "a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic," (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 521) which refers to their idea of performativity, where the nature of this performativity and the meaning can be socially contextualized. Further, as Grosz states, women's bodies are not purely neutral or natural, but are "marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them" (x). The representation of these marked bodies and their subjective experiences is captured by the concept of embodiment. Eve Shapiro defines embodiment as "A state of being in which the body is the site of meaning, experience, and expression of individuals in the world" (3). This stress on plurality is also a marker in postcolonial or third world feminism in its emphasis on intersectionalities. As per Mohanty, women of the third world "embody and personify the intersection of sexual, class, and racial ideologies" (72). In the Indian context, where society is governed by familial systems, religions, castes, class, including gender, there is a need to rethink the existing ideas of embodiment.

The Indian woman's body, in the post-British era, has historically been a symbolic site of national identity through the image of Bharat Mata and in Vedic times, through the mythical character of Sita from the *Ramayana*, whereby their bodies are seen as carriers of purity, maternal feelings, and as the embodiment of ideal Indian women. However, this perspective has been subjected to active cultural and religious memorization of female bodies, and has shifted in contemporary India. Thapan states, "Social class, status, and education, among other factors, are significant markers in the construction of the embodied identity of the 'modern' Indian woman" (20).The significance of these markers extends beyond the written word, as Mitchell states, "modern thought has re-oriented itself around visual paradigms," suggesting a growing recognition wherein images shape understanding (9). The idea of feminist embodiment, which has been explored through oral and written feminist narratives, finds expression in the visual language as well, as Chatterjee states, "feminists have opened up a visible and audible space for asserting gender justice and a greater role for women in public life" (382). In the field of comics studies, Chute states that embodiment is inherent to comics "in its processes

of production—in which the hand-drawn mark indexes the body of the maker— helps to instantiate the form, whatever the genre is, as one that is deeply embodied on several different levels" (Chute,"Feminist Graphic Art" 157). Her concept of embodiment introduces a dialogue that addresses the representation of and by women in comics, serving as a crucial lens for this article.

Analytical Framework

This article intends a close reading of the selected visual icons and the textual material of *Drawing the Line*. These icons will be analyzed in the context of embodied feminist expression in comics, as used by Chute in her book *Graphic Women*. McCloud posits, "We see ourselves in everything. We assign identities and emotions where none exist. Moreover, we make the world over in our image" (33). Such that in the comics anthology, the female characters, through their fictionality and the abstraction inherent in their illustrated forms, connect with readers through the materiality of comics. Chute states that the medium of graphic narratives, with its "complex visualizing," suggests that "we need to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility" (3). This process of rethinking, through the illustrations from *Drawing the Line*, shall be done via an author-reader interaction, as Nikkilä and Vuorinne argue that graphic narratives foster the "reader's capacity to imagine the lives of others, but also to invite them to attend to the experiences of others, through affect, embodiment, and reflection" (4). The analysis shall include the reflections of the researcher as an embodied reader who, through "the shuttling back and forth between reading and looking at comics," (Chute, "Feminist Graphic Art" 157) engages with "ways to relate to the Other in terms other than identification" (Szeìp 8).

Comics as Counterspace for Indian Women's Experiences

Compared with goddesses such as Durga and Kali, the divine embodiments of strength and bravery, Samidha Gunjal's "Someday" utilizes the icon of Kali to reflect on its association with Indian women (Kuriyan et al. 147). The story centers around a destructive ending to eve-teasing (public sexual harassment), which the author calls "a daily reality for most women in India" and has been a serious concern and "national problem" in India (Rana 1). The multiplicity of

images drawn emphasizes the materiality of the male gaze on "the girl," an everyday affair in the lives of Indian women (Kuriyan et al. 151). When the girl walks on the street, the female body is stripped of dignity as the reader witnesses that the roundness of watermelons, through a persistent male gaze, is reimagined, with explicit sexual connotation, as a female body part, highlighting the problematic analogy of women and their body parts as objects, underlining the sexualization of the female gender. The men are illustrated with their explicit gestures of waving, pointing, showing tongues, pouting for a kiss, smirking, laughing, and catcalling, through the suggestive onomatopoeia in their respective speech balloons. The poster of *Murder 3* on the background wall, with a silhouette line art of a woman in a licentious position, hints at the sexualization of the female body for entertainment. The men's bodies are comfortable and expansive throughout the page, suggestive of the gendered spatial entitlement in both the page and Indian society. On the other hand, the girl's physical posture, clutching her bag tightly, and the absence of a mouth, suggest a sense of threat and silence and/or lack of voice. The girl's embodied presence reflects the tension between the desire to be unseen and the threat of being seen. This bodily restrictive posture of the girl is also reflected in Kaveri Gopalakrishnan's "Basic Space," that is, the personal bodily space of an individual (119). Gopalakrishnan illustrates an ideal posture (blank/stern face, straight back, stiff arms, battle stance, and bag over chest) and gestures that she adopts to "tell people where [my] space begins," keeping her safe from the men and their side-eyed gazes on her in a local train (121). This bodily regulation is reflected in her visualized interviews with different Indian women. For example, the angry, stern looks in public contrast with the resting eyes, the need to keep safety pins in bangles and dupattas while traveling, or being alert in uncomfortable situations (122). These drawn bodies with subjective corporeality embody a constant struggle for space. Returning to Gunjal's "Someday," the girl's shrinking body reflects her embodied fear, which is centrally placed within the panel transitions, contrasting with the overpowering monstrous morphed men, suggesting a loss of bodily autonomy against the collective embodiment of oppression (152). As metamorphosed men splash the pages suggesting their dominance over the space and mobility of the girl, crepuscular rays erupt through them (153-154). The final explosive splash page depicts distorted bodies of the surreal monsters flying across the page,

and the girl has metamorphosed into *Kali*, with four arms, naked, and sporting a rolling tongue and white eye sockets, yet without any visible weapons. The multiplicity and identical surreal monsters can also be replicative of the clones of *asuraRaktabijas*, defeated by *Kali*. This hand-drawn visual icon of *Kali* embodies resistance grounded in the lived experiences of Indian women, reinstating the necessity and relevance of *Kali* in contemporary India. Reimagined as a feminist symbol, this *Kali*, through the radiating lines and the fragmentation of the assailants, embodies strength, wherein the female body becomes a site of resistance, protest, and myth.

In the case of Gopalakrishnan's narrative, the protagonist's corporeal act of erasing the drawn dotted line and stepping into the borderless space acts as a reclamation of embodied freedom, mobility, and space—a visual and ideological shift from containment to expression (128). Through various vignettes of embodied freedom, her narrative also visualizes an alternative imaginary "world without boundaries" from the interviews, such as spreading legs, going braless, scratching publicly, eating ice cream naked in Delhi, and playing Holi in whites (127). It reflects the heightened visibility of women's bodily gestures, which are typically policed. This comic makes one feel how gender is not internalized but somatically experienced (the heat of summer, the discomfort of bras, the taboo of scratching), all felt through the skin, nerves, posture, and presence. These vignettes reflect the desire for bodily autonomy of various contemporary Indian women and rupturing "repeated stylizations" (such as covering up, crossing legs, being modest) that society expects from them (Butler 43).

Multiplicity in Embodied Acts of Gendered Resistance

Chute asserts, "graphic narratives that bear witness to authors' traumas and those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they reconstruct and repeat in order to counteract" (173). Hemavathy Guha's "Asha, now" depicts such reconstruction. Asha's body is resurrected on the page as vulnerable and violated, naked in the shower and exposed to her brother's and the reader's gaze (Kuriyan et al. 113). Guha illustrates the "not entirely fictional" account of Asha, who undergoes sexual abuse by her brother within the domesticated space of home since childhood (110). As her characters

lack facial features, Asha's experience appears universal, concerning any individual affected by gendered violence. The readers engage with the text through the string of empathy, which has "a key role in interpretation because the body does not simply mirror or share the sensations of other bodies; the body also takes part in making meaning" (Szép 156). The splash page depicts Asha with her eyes shut and her hands covering half of her face, creating a striking visual impact through the embodied act of hiding shame and trauma, visualized in the stillness of the comic (Kuriyan et al. 114). This image gives her traumatic experience visibility, a passage to look at emotions displayed through the closed eyelids and lips as if this closure of the body reflects her state of helplessness, wherein the voice of a victim of incest is unheard or silenced in the name of the family's "honour" (110). In the final page, Asha is shown protecting her daughter from her uncle while the traumatic memories continue to haunt her (118). The flat, monochrome textures of Asha's world and her faceless depictions not only obscure her identity but also emphasize how the body has been materialized as the site of trauma and memory.

While Asha's story was one of endurance, Neelima P Aryan's "The Prey" is a subversion of such a narrative. She uses the icon of an eagle to create an analogy with the man (60-61). The narrative shows the bird's bodily equation with the man through their hyper-magnified eyes and bodily movements of scratching the inner thighs, gazing at the girl, and picking his teeth, creating a sense of discomfort for the reading eyes (59-60). The man's bodily movements mirror the eagle's, creating a marauding association between them. Further, there is a tension in the gaze shared between the bird and the girl, whereby the girl's gaze breaks the material boundary of the panel and is focused on the bird's gaze in the diagonal panel directed towards her (59). The bird's and the looming masculine figure's large, piercing eyes show how the female body is constantly under surveillance, reducing her to prey. However, the narrative subverts the image of the girl as being the prey. The entrapment of the bird, connotating the symbolic entrapment of the man, gives a sense of power and satisfaction seen from the girl's body posture (standing with hands on hips, barefoot, straight in her posture) and facial expression (smirking), as the eagle lies on the ground, gaze still on the girl (64). The girl's embodied posture communicates confidence and refusal. However, the very act of this entrapment

is ironically shunned, as the girl's mother exclaims, "Oh! Girls these days!" encapsulating society's discomfort with female autonomy (64).

The Disobedient Feminine Bodies

Women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony, while asserting the role of bicycling, famously said, "I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else. It gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance" (Marks and Brown). While discussing the act of cycling in the 1890s Victorian period, Rubinstein states, "Cycling brought the sexes together on equal terms more completely than any previous sport or pastime. It also gave women a striking sense of independence and self-reliance" (68). Cycling, being on the wheels, the power of self-driving, is contextualized with the women's struggle for freedom. In the context of India, "…women on bicycles riding along the open highway become one of the most powerfully evocative representations of 'modern' Indian woman-hood" (Srivastava 13). *Drawing the Line* has two embodied representations of freedom via cycling.

Ita Mehrotra's "The Poet Sharmila" is based on her interactions with the Manipuri activist, Irom Sharmila, and reflects on the shared feeling of sisterhood. The author met Sharmila in the prison ward of Imphal Central Prison, where the activist was in her tenth year of fasting. Sharmila's memory of a cycle ride before her hunger strike is a suitable example of embodiment through recalled motion (Kuriyan et al. 103). This vision of movement dramatically contrasts with Sharmila's immobility and captivity in prison, witnessed by Mehrotra. The visualized body cycling is redrawn through the author's imaginary engagement—a silhouette cycling over the terrain of Imphal functions as a memory of bodily autonomy now bracketed by the violence and stasis of political incarceration. Sharmila's autonomy over her body through the hunger strike and the redrawn photo of Manipuri mothers staging a nude protest, with "Indian Army Rape Us" on their banner, further amplifies the body as both protest and proof of violation, an embodied archive of state violence (104). Chute refers that comics, in its production, is an embodied process; however, it also means that the "hand-drawn mark" of the author through the drawing also holds its respective context, which is projected on the page (157). Mehrotra's act of redrawing Sharmila's core memory of cycling reflects her

subjective projection in the activist's journey, visually rendered by the holding hands (Kuriyan et al. 103). In the epilogue, the author illustrates a dream sequence in which Sharmila cycles through the rural landscape; however, Mehrotra also projects herself cycling behind Sharmila (108), reflecting her dream of experiencing freedom and bodily autonomy that she felt restricted from in Delhi (106).

Another visualization of the cycle as an embodiment of women's freedom is portrayed in Soumya Menon's "An Ideal Girl" (37), which not only subverts the educational posters of the Ideal Boy (Aadarsh Balak) circulated in India but also uses visual satire to illustrate the socio-cultural bias towards men in India. Indian women are subjected to patriarchal structures with unequal access to education, income, control over resources, and power in household decision-making (Desai and Temsah 2309). The ideal girl's identity is shown relational to her family members, and behaviorism is predominantly marked by the features of sacrifice, compromise, silence, multitasking, and helplessness (Kuriyan et al. 37- 41). As Thapan asserts,

> the 'new Indian woman' is an ambivalent entity shaped by the social and public domain, which simultaneously portrays her as glamorous, independent, conscious of her embodiment and the many forms of adornment and self-presentation available to her, and yet enshrined in the world of tradition through her adherence to family and national values. (25)

Despite being assigned traditional tasks, the ideal girl was able to balance her job. Her situation mirrors the daily life of Indian women, who are viewed as multitaskers, alternating between public and private spheres.Angela Ferrao's "Ladies, Please Excuse" depicts this daily gendered disparity (Kuriyan et al. 141). Ferrao, through the character Jenny, recounts women's gendered experiences during job interviews, including her own. Jenny's capabilities were reduced to three questions of "CAN YOU? WILL YOU? DO YOU?" which revolves around her marital status, willingness to work late at night, such that she equates the job interviews with the marriage bureau (142-143). Jenny observes women laboring on the street, one of them carrying an infant, raising the question of the division of domestic labor (143). Ferraro's panels resist closure, such that there is no solution that the narrative offers; instead, the

struggle continues from panel to panel, reflecting the ongoing nature of feminine labor and their quest for cerebral equality. Jenny's relaxed position in the final panel as she dreams of herself as the CEO counters the previous panels where she was active, reflective, and negotiating societal gender bias (146). The panel embodies a refusal to exhaustion, imagining oneself beyond current limitations. Through the medium of comics, the author, as Chute in *Comics Form and Narrating Lives* suggests, "resurrects and materializes" the forgetting and silencing of women's experiences in the Indian labor market and retraces these erasures visually (112). While Jenny continues to dream of success, resisting the gendered "effacement" of labor, safety, and aspiration, Menon's ideal girl breaks the silent repetitive subjugation visualized through the repetitive panels, by cycling out of the city as far as possible in the last panel (Chute 173; Kuriyan et al. 42). The line she "decides she has had enough of being the Ideal Girl" pairs with the expansive, open landscape, reflecting the transition from the narrow frames of domesticity into a sense of expansive freedom, from repetition to refusal, and from effacement to redrawing the self (42).

More Than Just the Appearance

Ayyar and Khandare relate the colour discrimination in India to the Aryan supremacist theory and the varna caste system, whereby they assert that "It is evident that varna-caste supremacy not only influenced the past but also influences notions of beauty and femininity in contemporary India. Those who do not fall under these standards of Aryan are deemed ugly and made to face discrimination and condemnation" (86). Harini Kannan's "That's Not Fair" centers around the colour obsession of the female child in a South Indian family. The author draws the interior of the female body not as an unknown space but as a site of resistance and empowerment. With a satirical tone of infantile exaggeration and hyper embodiment, Kannan mocks the absurdity of gender norms. The unborn female fetus actively resists societal colorist prejudice before birth (Kuriyan et al. 8-9). The narrative critiques how women tend to promote the color obsession among girls even before their birth, here through her mother, grandmother, and female acquaintances. Her mother tries out whitening cream on her pregnant belly and worries about her dowry instead of her education (9). Kannan's cartoonishly soft, rounded aesthetic fetus is hyper-

animated and full of expression, motion, and dialogue, and refuses to succumb to invisibility based on being dark skinned; instead, on the final splash panel, the giant "WAAAAAH!!" acts as a graphic scream, marking her refusal to be silent (12). This visualization of the cry becomes both a biological response and a feminist protest.

Bhavana Singh's "Inner Beauty and Melanin," exposes colorism and social discrimination by making melanin, 'Supermel,' a superhero (73). The comic visualizes skin color as an embodied, vocal, and animated subject. It embodies how capitalist beauty products commodify insecurity and reproduce colonial legacies of skin shame. Through the tagline "melanin in 14 Days*," the comic becomes a visual, satirical attack on the societal shame around dark skin and the marketing of feminine beauty standards (69). In the final page of the narrative, Melanin in Infinite Wonder takes center stage, comprising a strikingly detailed, floral mandala-like design that claims the aesthetic strength of the body while embracing the layered complexities of the design (76).

Reshu Singh's "The Photo," visualises a woman's identity beyond marriage. She weaves Bena's narrative around her photo taken for match-making and reflects on how she is beyond the staticity of the photo. Bena stares at the readers, glasses on, tied hair, and says, "But I am more than my photos, far more" (34). This is a direct feminist confrontation of how women's identities are often flattened into mere two-dimensional physical appearances, especially photos used for scrutiny in matchmaking, with scanty room for marking the layered experiences of the female self. Chute asserts that the form of comics is a way "to put the body on the page" (10). Singh illustrates a counter-image of Bena through bodily movements of drawing, fighting, kicking, sleeping, and dreaming (Kuriyan et al. 33-34). The defacement of Bena's photo, taken for matchmaking with drawn glasses, reflects a change in facial expression from passive to aggressive, a smoldering cigarette in her mouth, a single boot crossing the white boundary of the photo, and various scribbles (34). This defacement embodies Bena's refusal to be defined through a still image that fails to capture her, suggesting graphic fluidity wherein identity is not fixed; instead, it is performed and expressed through movement.

Conclusion

The Nirbhaya case sparked advocacy and awareness on gender-based violence by bringing sexist perceptions and female security into the national spotlight. *Drawing the Line* emerges as a creative response to the case, promoting discussion around women's self-expression and functioning as a visual safe space that holds the distinctive struggles of women in contemporary India. This graphic anthology invites readers to participate in the visualized embodiment of India's women's gendered experiences and intersectionalities through subjectivestylistic traits of the drawn bodies. This exploration of the text from the lens of embodiment facilitates an understanding of the externalization of emotional nuances of gendered embodiment and responses to the visual regimes of gendered oppression and inscription of the self, visually.

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Culinary Currency: Negotiating Identity, Intimacy, and Agency in *English Vinglish*, *The Lunchbox*, and *Darlings*

Gaurav Singh

Abstract

Food plays a crucial role in formulating the cultural identity of a given community, gender, ethnicity, among others. Women cooking food in contextual Indian cultural spaces like kitchens, and its subsequent consumption by men is critically represented in Bollywood films. The post-liberal, global capitalist economic policies have redefined the concept of 'new' Indian woman on celluloid promoting a progressive depiction of middle-class housewives owing to the rise of feminist filmmakers. These filmmakers defy the prevalent gendered norms by reimagining and redefining the mainstream Indian woman identity. They represent the 'new' middle-class urban woman as an aspiring individual asserting herself to convey her choices for acquiring the decision-making power. She is depicted transgressing her domiciliary into the public sphere and navigating through sociopolitical spaces; negotiating cultural, economic, and gendered identity (through her culinary currency: gastronomic prowess), acquiring agency, and establishing unconventional intimacies. Subsequently, the traditional familial hierarchy is either dismantled or else re-established on quasi equitable grounds following liberal reformative approaches. In such negotiations, her culinary currency becomes the 'language of love' cohesively binding the family together by either jeopardising or facilitating her self-sufficiency. The essay problematises such sociopolitical discursivities comprising food, identity, intimacy, and agency through the portrayal of Indian middle-class urban housewives in Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* (2012), Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* (2013) and Jasmeet K. Reen's *Darlings* (2022). The theoretical framework draws perspectives from film studies, cultural studies, gender studies, and feminist food studies.

Keywords: Food;Heteropatriarchal; Heterotopia; Kitchen; New Woman

Introduction

India, the largest film-producing country in the world is the epicentre of

Bollywood, located in Mumbai. 'Bollywood' became a popular term to refer to the Hindi-film industry owing to the widespread propagation by the English-language press in the late 1970s (Ganti 12). The cinematic representation of women in celluloid has undergone a drastic transformation post the 1990s, especially in the last decade. The 'new woman' figure now portrayed in Hindi films is not a cultural monolith, but a culmination of modern femininities contrasting the earlier formulaic depictions of the 1990s in response to globalisation and economic liberalisation (Ghosh 197). The films produced after 2010 have commendably represented women characters assertively opposing and nullifying patriarchal ideologies and subverting social orders and conditions (Sengupta and Ganjoo 23). Depicted as an emblem of the 'new India,' she is also simultaneously an addressee of the new heteropatriarchal familial structures that constantly reinvent themselves (Anwer and Arora 6). Bollywood's fascination with the new woman identity has inaugurated many experimental portrayals. One such instance is manifested in the evolving dynamics of representation of Indian housewives on celluloid. Tulasi Srinivas in her seminal article, "'As Mother Made It,'" asserts that "the image of a good mother" is conceptualised as a "nurturing relationship between the mother and the child, where this dyad is a metaphor for relations of caretaking and dependency" (198). She further opines that "feeding the child and provisioning the family are key components of the role of mother and wife" (198). However, Bollywood is now attempting to project the Indian housewife, not necessarily in a paradigmatic fashion confined to the kitchen performing the sole role of a nourisher and a caregiver. She may continue sustaining familial dietary needs through her culinary connections, but would also simultaneously explore external or internal (mental landscape) spaces.

Food has been an intrinsic part of commercial Hindi films since its origin. With the emergence of new Indian women, food's essential gendered associations have been strategically interwoven into the narratives of mainstream Hindi films to reflect modernised portrayals. Food is regarded as a crucial medium of contact between humans, in a constantly evolving society and culture, depending upon regulation and evolution of such connections [thereby instituting familial relationships and intimacies]. It is also the focus of taxonomic and moral thought (Appadurai 495). Apart from establishing connections between men and women, it also promotes gendering, constitution

of hierarchies and power relations (Counihan 2). In the Introduction to *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*, Carol Counihan foregrounds the sexual division of labour: the different roles assumed by women and men in producing, providing, distributing, and consuming food respectively as the prime measure of their individual power. She further emphasises women's gastronomic agency in the context of food production in kitchens (2). The domiciliary authority enhances a woman's identity and dignity furthering her emancipation.

The essay underscores the portrayal of Indian middle-class urban housewives in the films *English Vinglish* (2012*), The Lunchbox* (2013), and *Darlings* (2022) by employing culinary lens. The films have been selected through a purposive sampling method for critical content and discourse analysis. *Darlings* represents a gastronomic discourse surrounding Muslim housewives hailing from a lower social class, whereas the other visual texts depict Hindu middle-class homemakers. The essay maps their culinary aspirations by incorporating perspectives from feminist food studies, cultural studies, and gender studies. The culinary currency of the protagonists encompasses their gastronomic knowledge, and cooking expertise. The essay establishes its usage in negotiation of sociopolitical discursivities of identity, and agency, for forging familiar (familial) and unfamiliar culinary networks of intimacy, friendship, and solidarity. It also delineates how food personified as a major character in the films, enables or disables agency, self-sufficiency, and the decision-making power of its protagonists. Overall, the essay explores the role of culinary currency in either appropriating conventional femininity or in subverting heteropatriarchal hierarchies.

English Vinglish: The Labour of Love

English Vinglish, written and directed by Gauri Shinde, released in 2012. It was a major critical and commercial success. The film is based on Shinde's mother who heralded a pickle business lacking English speaking skills which often subjected her to derision. Late Sridevi played the role of the protagonist, Shashi Godbole, an upper-middle class, ideal Maharashtrian homemaker. The film revolves around Shashi's self-discovery, foregrounding culinary exchanges in a foreign land based on her acquisition of conversational English skills through an English as a Second-Language (ESL) course that she enrols for while in New York.

Food plays a substantive role in defining and redefining Shashi's traditional and cosmopolitan, neoliberal identity in the film, which otherwise centres on linguistic inequities associated with conversational English. According to Mayuk Sen's blog review, "The Language of *Ladoos* in *English Vinglish*" for *Goya*: food takes on the language of currency to become a tongue in which Shashi is incomprehensible by her family. It helps her forge connections, intimacies, and friendships, some familial, other unfamiliar, in the USA (United States of America). The opening scene of the film through a close shot portrays Shashi waking up early in the morning to prepare four kinds of breakfast for four different family members delaying her own coffee drinking ritual (a motif) in the process by prioritising their sustenance (Laskey 149). The sequence also emphasises her undervalued emotional and reproductive labour and care work (Banerji and Desai 30). In return, her husband, Satish (Adil Hussain) and her teenage daughter Sapna (Navika Kotia) collectively gaslight her by mocking her disadvantaged English diction. Shashi manages a small-time venture of making and selling *ladoos*. She smilingly delivers *ladoo* boxes to clients and returns home with joyful earnings.

Appadurai opines in "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia" that the wife cooks and serves, while the husband eats and criticises (501). In one of the proceeding scenes, Satish while consuming the dinner prepared by Shashi at the tablescape authoritatively asks her to relinquish her *ladoo* initiative in a heteropatriarchal fashion, to retain monopoly over her cooking. She retaliates by asserting that she would not abandon her only passion. It marks one of the first instances in the film where Shashi defies patriarchal orders by taking a stand for herself. Shashi's mother-in-law (late Sulabha Deshpande) and her 4 years old son, Sagar (Shivansh Kotia) form her domestic support-systems. Yet, she ends up feeling alienated from the kitchen which becomes a cage, not a theatre as her immediate family members fail to appreciate and acknowledge her culinary labour, a valid form of her self-expression and identity (Sen).

Shashi hesitatingly travels to the USA alone to assist her sister Manu (late Anjali Ram) in making arrangements for her daughter Meera's wedding. Food becomes the prime facilitator of culminating Shashi's anticipated 'new woman' identity as she discreetly enrols for an ESL course through her secret savings procured by selling *ladoos*. In the first class, upon introducing herself

as a cook, she is immediately identified as an 'entrepreneur' by her instructor, signifying an empowering moment. She traverses her heteropatriarchal domesticity into the public sphere befriending the empathetic French chef, Laurent (Mehdi Nebbou), a classmate at her ESL course who harbours romantic feelings for her. However, owing to her deeply internalised morality, Shashi only establishes a rather platonic, yet subtly intimate friendship with him. This unconventional culinary friendship and an unfamiliar intimacy is pivotal for Shashi's emancipation, as it offers her a safe, sustaining space inspiring internal growth. It also rekindles her self-confidence and dignity enabling agency, promoting self-love and self-respect, the reason why she endearingly thanks him at the end of the film. She is overwhelmed on being exposed to his romantic culinary metaphors directed at her in one of the classes and subsequently confesses obliterating how it felt being appreciated. Laurent's behaviour towards Shashi dramatically contradicts that of her family which never acknowledges her culinary prowess and takes her emotional and physical labour for granted (Laskey 148).

Verbal interactions between Shashi and Laurent often comprise an exchange of fears, frustrations, and anger, seamlessly executed in their individual languages (Hindi and French respectively). Neither of them can comprehend either's linguistic grammar, but can decode the associative spiritual meaning of each other's emotionally charged monologues. This is highly ironic as Shashi's family fails to understand her through her language of love – food, but a foreigner empathetically does that, surpassing all sociolinguistic barriers. During one of their conversations, Shashi addresses Laurent as a food expert. The sensible chef in return hails food as an art form, following which Shashi delivers one of the most impactful dialogues of the film: *"Mard khana banaye toh kala hai. Aurat banaye toh uska farz hai!"* [When a man cooks, it becomes art. When a woman cooks, it is her duty!] (*English Vinglish* 01:04:18–24) Shashi's aphoristic utterance echoes the universally gendered hypocrisy of glorification of male chefs and trivialisation of women's domestic culinary labour. Laurent subverts hegemonic masculinity by promptly hailing Shashi as an artist, leaving her overjoyed. This further enhances her dignity, worth, and confidence. Shashi's culinary currency propels an exchange of homemade food with Laurent, assisting her in establishing a platonic gastronomic connection.

Shashi discovers familial gastronomic intimacy and support in her sister, Manu, who acts as a foil to her docile character, subconsciously facilitating her empowerment project. Manu's daughter, Radha (Priya Anand) becomes Shashi's closest confidant perceiving her personhood beyond her culinary prowess. She even champions her awakening through consciousness raising sessions, and helps her attend ESL classes discreetly. Radha is also tolerant to the possibility of Shashi fostering feelings for Laurent. However, Shashi asserts that all she seeks is respect and not love. Shashi's intricate network of unfamiliar intimacies is intrinsically established through food, especially through *ladoos* which also help her forge friendships with her classmates at the ESL course.

The *ladoo* motif plays a significant role in furthering the film's heartwarming climax. Shashi recommends that guests attending Meera's wedding should be offered handmade *ladoos* as *shagun*, a token gift in return. On the wedding day, which also coincides with the final exam of her ESL course, the *ladoos* endearingly prepared by Shashi are damaged in an accident. The long-close shots of *ladoo* pieceson the floor being swept away by the cleaners symbolically portray Shashi's shattered dreams of gaining self-respect and acquiring a cosmopolitan identity. Shashi decides to make *ladoos* again, by forgoing the examination, clearing which would have hailed her as a professional ESL speaker. She cathartically exclaims to Radha that she would not achieve anything by failing in the subject she loved the most (making *ladoos*). The next few highly evocative long-shots pan over a melancholic Shashi silently making *ladoos*, aesthetically highlighting her poignant eyes brimming with sharp agony. Is preparing *ladoos* indeed her favourite subject? Does she exercise absolute culinary agency in taking such a decision or is it a byproduct of indoctrination facilitated by the heteropatriarchal kinship? The answer is undoubtedly the latter, but she does utilise absolute agency by rejecting assistance in making *ladoos*. Conveniently, Shashi succeeds overall, culminating capability and respect in her family as a part of the climactic plot trope adopted by Shinde to serve the audience an anticipated happy ending. All her ESL course classmates and the instructor David (Cory Hibbs) favourably attend the wedding to listen to her powerful climactic English speech, thereby enabling her felicitation with the much-anticipated course clearance certificate.

Following her empowering address, Shashi distributes *ladoos* to all her

friends, expresses gratitude to Laurent, and serves two *ladoos* to Satish (a focussing shot). Shashi's assertive culinary act of offering two *ladoos* (and only one to all, including Laurent) to a vulnerable Satish reaffirms her conjugal love. She renounces Laurent's love and departs to India as an enlightened, confident, cosmopolitan neoliberal feminist, fluent in basic conversational English. This marks her symbolic reinitiation into her heteropatriarchal domesticity with liberal reformations. By rejecting the English newspaper in the absence of a Hindi one on her return flight, she relinquishes her newly acquired agential identity (fostered through culinary connections) to continue serving her family and the nation, reassuming her original subservient position.

Shashi's character exposes Indian cinema's obsession with projecting the woman as a bearer of society's moral conscience and a preserver of [culinary, conjugal, and national] traditions, no matter however modern she becomes in her outlook and perspective (Sengupta and Ganjoo 23). She never abandons her *mangalsutra* and *saree* in New York (Ciolfi 299). Sridevi's Shashi emerges as the "new woman" shaping her ''incipient feminism to a radical cosmopolitan politics of intersectional inclusiveness'' conveyed through her pro-LGBTQIA+ stance as she empathises with David post his breakup with a man (Laskey 153). Her ''capacity to harness old and new becomes domesticated within neoliberal feminism as the conjoining of tradition and moral, but also local and global, modern and married'' (Banerjee and Desai 37-38).

The Lunchbox: Covert Culinary Correspondences

Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* (2013), an independent low-budget venture may be perceived as a culinary text on a woman's pursuit of identity and independence by a male filmmaker. The inclusion of the film as a comparative text amongst those by female filmmakers would delineate the nuances of feminist solidarity through a gastrofeminist lens. The film's narrative explicates the systems of feminine intimacies by foregrounding culinary currency. It achieves that by destabilising and deconstructing a traditional patriarchal social order by deploying culinary imagery (Rahman 2). The film essentially revolves around an intimate platonic relationship that brews between its unhappy protagonists, Ila Singh (Nimrat Kaur) and Saajan Fernandes (late Irrfan Khan) nourished by their covert culinary correspondences through the medium of lunch boxes

that deliver appetising food and personal letters. Saajan, a middle-class Christian widower clerk on the verge of voluntary superannuation, seeks companionship post his wife's death. Whereas Ila, a middle-class Hindu homemaker ensnared in a loveless marriage frantically attempts to rekindle conjugality through her culinary currency. Their paths cross metaphorically in an unconventional occurrence (one in millions), a ''serendipitous error'' (Mannur 38), when the *dabbawalla* ends up delivering the *dabba* intended for Ila's husband to Saajan instead at a different workplace, initiating their epistolary correspondence.

Muzna Rahman advocates in her work "Covert Communications'' how the protagonists mutually feed each other's internal hunger of intimacy and connection "that takes the form of a return to the comforts and pleasures of the domestic scene, a heteronormative nuclear family, rooted in the familiar logic of culturally-mandated food production and consumption" (14). This is evident in the scene where Saajan receives Ila's tiffin for the first time at the dining hall of his administrative, *kafkaesque* office. Lunchtime reflects Saajan's cherished personal temporal space that forms the backdrop of his intimate association with Ila as she navigates through this space with her homecooked food, prepared in her domestic heterotopia: the kitchen. In a social-media driven world, they become ''the care-takers of each other's memories and stories'' by sharing personal anecdotes, life-learnings, traumatic musings, and painful recollections through a series of notes later transforming into ''epistles'' exchanged through the medium of the symbolic lunch boxes (Mannur 38-43). While tracing the links between food, gender and power, Counihan enunciates how women regulate, moderate and control cooking by manipulating the status and meaning systems embodied in food to mediate power relations between the sexes (*Gender and Power* 8). Ila, initially dismayed at the lack of appreciation for her ornately prepared lunch, decides to send Saajan an excessively spicy lunch the following day after he returns her first note exclaiming "Dear Ila, the food was very salty today" (*The Lunchbox* 00:22:29-00:22:32). If only Shashi could also emulate this strategy. Ila exercises her culinary agency and decides to consciously prepare food with love and get it delivered to Saajan after this initial ice-breaking event.

Mrs. Deshpande (Bharati Achrekar), Ila's neighbour, fondly referred to as 'auntie' assists Ila in cooking food for Saajan, evident through her prompt

suggestions and constant supply of ingredients from her kitchen window, thereby enhancing her culinary currency. Through her disembodied presence and ''acousmatic voice'' in the film, she nourishes a culinary camaraderie with Ila (Mannur 41). Auntie is the prime caregiver of her comatose husband. Ila's mother's character (Lillete Dubey) mirrors that of Mrs. Deshpande. Her mother is confined by the arduous task of caring for her ailing husband and is worried about the draining finances involving his treatment. She is so deeply engulfed in the process that she obliterates her natural cravings like that of hunger. She is evidently reminded of hunger only after her husband's death and complains to Ila about the same. This unsettling scene reflects the poignant reality of middle-aged Indian housewives' intense dedication to their husband's well-being that they end up sabotaging their identity, worth, and desires in the cumbersome process. Ila's mother parallels Lousie Mallard in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," where the protagonist, initially distraught with her husband's passing away, later experiences a sense of relief over her freshly acquired independence that subsequently kills her upon the discovery of her husband being alive. Mrs. Deshpande and Ila's mother's characters are visionary in nature, providing cautionary warning to Ila to act and save her future by not restricting herself to the normative identity of a mother, a wife, and a caregiver confined to a heteropatriarchal hierarchical framework.

Ila undergoes a series of transformations throughout the film. She feels empowered in utilising her culinary currency by cooking for Saajan as her ''[gastronomic] labour becomes valued'' (Mannur 40-41). According to Rhea Choudhury's article, "Lunchbox Movie: Ila's Evolution and Material Interactions" in Feminism in India (FII), food also becomes a means of self-expression for Ila [like Shashi] reflecting her myriad emotions and feelings of anxiety, uneasiness, happiness, and sadness by upending the ''violent banality of her everyday life'' (Mannur 37). Due to the flourishing culinary correspondences with Saajan, she even renounces her friendship with Mrs. Deshpande in the pursuit of a newfound intimacy. Subsequently, relying upon her old recipe book, she starts preparing lunch for Saajan without auntie's intervention.

Ila, upon discovering her husband's marital infidelity decides to repudiate her marriage unconventionally, as she contemplates using her savings to emigrate

to Bhutan with her daughter, intrigued by their lower cost of living and 'Gross Domestic Happiness.' She even entertains the idea of an anticipated future with Saajan by attempting to meet him at a restaurant. However, he hesitatingly observes her from a distance without showing up, owing to their evident age gap. Consequently, this newfound gastronomic "affective intimacy" enables the protagonists in abandoning their conventional lonesome existence to undertake an odyssey towards individual self-discovery, self-actualisation, and self-intimacy (Mannur 37).

Ila's kitchen is deliberately presented in an unorganised and cluttered manner reflecting her inner turmoil and claustrophobic marriage. The film relies on the actor-protagonists' body and faces instead of prioritising ''sexualized aesthetics and sensory semiotics of food'' to convey meaning indicating that food is undoubtedly crucial to the narrative but only secondary to their presence (Rahman 18-19). Ila's culinary ''labour is given a space to emerge and is presented in visually lush and thoughtful terms throughout the film'' (Mannur 40). Amidst her domestic chores, Ila is shown sipping tea in a glass instead of a cup enhancing a revised evaluation of a normative culinary discourse. This act may be perceived as her personal respite amidst domestic drudgery, complementing Saajan's occasional smoke breaks at his workplace. Ila is more emancipated and venturesome as she decides to depart from her heteropatriarchal domesticity to start afresh with her daughter as a single mother, aware of the challenges and added responsibilities, unlike Shashi, who returns to her problematic family with a renewed sense of identity, enlightened only to reclaim her former submissive familial role. Batra's directorial gaze is not androcentric and objectivist. It rather represents a layered, responsible, and empathetic portrayal of female characters in the film redefining the dynamics of women's representation on celluloid by men. His portrayal of Ila destabilises Bollywood's canonical androcentrism by not jeopardising gynocentric representations through a prejudiced counter narrative. It instead contributes to the emerging discourse in compliance with a self-reflexive standpoint of the cisgendered male contributor of this essay.

Darlings: Reclaiming Identity through Revenge

Netflix's production, *Darlings* directed by Jasmeet K. Reen, and co-written

by Parveez Shaikh is the most intrepid film under analysis. It is a dark comedy, a ''feminist revenge narrative'' with intergenerational trauma, domestic violence, and a quest for self-identity and self-realisation of a lower middle-class Muslim protagonist Badrunissa Shaikh (Alia Bhatt) and her feisty widowed mother Shamshunissa (Shefali Shah) against the alcoholic abuser Hamza Sheikh (Vijay Verma) (Ajgaonkar 210; Oishee 163). It is not essentially a food film unlike the other two; however, culinary discourse around the kitchen forms an intrinsic component of the film's narrative. Badru, ''a complacent, devoted wife'' is intensely in love with her government employed husband who leaves no opportunity to abuse and oppress her owing to his alcoholism (Oishee 168). In one of the sequences, Badru lovingly prepares Biryani for Hamza for dinner, only to be unassumingly tortured at the dining table in the proceeding scene. She wakes up traumatised the following day to prepare breakfast for Hamza. He cajoles and pleads to win her over, only to replicate the vicious cycle of violence in the evening. The cycle of ''perpetual abuse,'' manipulation and forgiving continues as Badru ignores her mother's pleas of either leaving Hamza or killing him, until one day she ends up having a miscarriage (Oishee 170). This is the turning point of the film which makes her contemplate suicide. In an epiphanic moment, she decides to avenge herself in order to reclaim her lost respectwith no intention to continue residing in the obnoxious heteronormative domiciliary. She extracts revenge on him in similar ways through Shamshu and Zulfi's (Mathew) assistance. Zulfi nurtures a soft corner for Shamshu. Shamshu and Zulfi initiate a food delivery enterprise with Badru's aid, inversing kitchen stereotypes according to the Film Companion review by Rahul Desai. During the ordeal of extracting revenge from Hamza, they simultaneously carry on with their business, comically concealing their revenge mechanisms. At the end, employing deus ex machina, Hamza's character is conveniently killed, leaving behind the mother and daughter independent, to start afresh with a renewed individuality.

Shamshu develops an unconventional culinary intimacy with Zulfi, who is almost half her age. He delivers *dabbas*, procures kitchen utensils and essentials at affordable prices, and helps her acquire more clients. Shamshu and Zulfi's gastronomic intimacy, sensibly portrayed, is political in nature, surpassing the age gap, highlighting mutual respect and compatibility. Initially,

Hamza assumes Badru to be in an illicit relationship with Zulfi, until Zulfi confesses in front of the police that he actually finds *Khaala* (aunt Shamshu) 'cute.' Owing to the frustration of being exposed and falsely framed by the police in the proceeding scene, he bursts forth threatening Shamshu that he would confess about their ongoing revenge project, when Shamshu tactfully kisses him, though out of genuine feelings for him, initiating their culinary romance.

In an unanticipated turn of events, through a flashback sequence, it is revealed how in an act of self-defence, years ago, Shamshu had to kill her husband, a sadistic psychopath and abuser like Hamza, and file a missing person report to protect the infant Badru and herself. She was aided by a butcher to restore normalcy post this traumatic episode. She overprotectively raises Badru, ensuring that she does not encounter a similar fate. However, the inevitable happens. Shamshu believes that all men are like scorpions while women are like frogs. The frog and the scorpion fable serves as a crucial cautionary emblem in the film representing the traits of the protagonists and the antagonist. Badru decides not to kill Hamza on moral grounds and works towards fostering self-respect.

''Every act of eating with others, or alone, is a form of intimacy'' (Mannur 9). Shamshu and Badru's mutual love for cooking and eating, demonstrating their individual and collective culinary currency, facilitates their camaraderie over cookery television shows and frequent culinary experiments. Food empowers them physically, emotionally, and financially. The kitchen as a safe feminine space fosters their consciousness-raising sessions thereby heightening their culinary agency. The upfront mother, while sharing life-learnings, constantly urges Badru to hold Hamza accountable for his violence. She also attempts to persuade her to leave him during their culinary activities: cooking, eating, and purchasing ingredients from the market. Food nourishes the mother-daughter bonding and aids a discourse of solidarity, seasoned through trauma-induced intimacy amongst the survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV).

The kitchen and the table at Badru's home is a ''vital site where normative families reproduce themselves'' (Mannur 11), as it becomes a contested site of propagation and perpetuation of androcentric conjugal violence. Contrastingly, the one at Shamshu's home offers Badru an outlet and a safe

space. They extract revenge from the oppressor only when the legal system fails them. In a desperate attempt to rectify and reform Hamza, Badru initially mixes alcohol de-addiction pills in Mutton Curry reflecting the use of culinary agency through the minuscule culinary power enjoyed by her in the film's beginning. The kitchen, the dining table, and the surrounding areas at Badru's domiciliary post episodic-violence, subsequently metamorphose into agential spaces for Badru and Shamshu facilitating a journey of individual and collective self-transformation. Reen's characterisation effectively ''foregrounds the experiences of economically disadvantaged women from a religious minority in India, who in mainstream representations remain in the periphery as subaltern and marginalized individuals'' (Oishee 166). As an IPV survivor, Shamshu dismantles her toxic heteropatriarchal domiciliary. Badru follows suit and breaks the vicious cycle of intergenerational trauma and abuse. In the last scene of the film, Badru is depicted celebrating her new-found independence and a renewed individuality, as she watches a film alone in the theatre, contrasting the opening sequence where she frantically waits for Hamza outside the theatre. By opting to stay single to assist her mother in her culinary enterprise, it becomes imperative that Badru would attain financial self-sufficiency and thereby renegotiate life on her own terms devoid of androcentric interventions.

Conclusion

Michel Foucault in his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces" introduces heterotopia as society's intrinsic component in every culture and civilisation as existing real places formed in the very founding of society (3). Contextually, the space inhabited by women in the kitchen, culturally a feminine space of othering may be construed through Foucauldian heterotopic lens. Kitchen is a temporal site where discipline and silent injustice is structurally imposed upon its subjects. Shashi's prevailing alienation in the kitchen and the surrounding tablescape, Ila's unsuccessful endeavours at reinstituting culinary conjugality in the kitchen, and Badru's gastronomic performativity and subsequent assault in the kitchen and on the tablescape constitute their individual heterotopias. Shashi negotiates a newer cosmopolitan neoliberal feminine identity transgressing domestic heterotopiato metamorphose it into a non-place through her travels and travails, not necessarily restricting her identity in binaries (Auge 77-78). Through her new woman identity, she advocates a ''radical reassessment of traditional

womanhood'' (Anwer and Arora 7). An empowered Shashi returns to her heteropatriarchal domiciliary overlooking unconventional intimacies, following an emblematic liberalised *bharatiyanari* [Indian woman] trope (Anwer and Arora 6). Ila advances further by sending across cooked food through her heterotopia to a stranger through an unorthodox flow of ''culinary messages'' via the eponymous lunch boxes (Mannur 36). A platonic epistolary romance with Saajan facilitates Ila's agential self-transformation enabling her to envision a future as a single mother with a renewed identity in Bhutan. However, before transgressing her domiciliary, she unsuccessfully seeks a revolutionary and an intimate alliance of equality with Saajan. Whether she resumes her conventional position in the familial framework or subverts it, remains ambiguous, as the film intentionally denies ''the narrative satisfaction of providing [a] definitive closure to their story'' (Mannur 43). Consequently, Badru and Shamshu's upending of their respective heterotopias, and dismissal of emphasised femininity is revolutionary (Connell 183). As an IPV survivor, Badru, inspired by her mother, avenges herself, and reinstates her confidence, identity, and agency, thereby discarding all heteronormative associations to lead a self-partnered, and suggestively, a financially independent life. Her journey is comprehensive, reflecting trauma, and survival; and her awakening, undeniably the most self-sufficient, self-sustaining, and accomplishing.

Subsequently, all three filmmakers astutely portray disturbing sociopolitical issues through an unconventional employment of feminist lens. However, Reen's *Darlings* stands apart, notwithstanding its trivialisation of violence against men and its endorsement as a [counter] solution for violence against women (Oishee 176). The portrayal of feminine domestic violence is otherwise nuanced, and satirical. All three films represent women in their connotative gastronomic heterotopias echoing Barbara Parker's words, "…we embody our relationships with food and our food practices define who we are. Food speaks to the core of our identities and to our relationships with each other and to the world around us" (''Introduction'' 5). Shashi, Shamshu, and Badru successfully monetise their culinary currency and passion, unlike Ila. The final outcome differs majorly, but some liberal reawakening and reformation is unanimously attained by all the protagonists. Anwer and Arora's words, thereby contextualise the new woman dynamics:

> "The new woman's self-fulfilment rests not just in her taming (as yet incomplete) and in the disavowal of her newness, but rather in the gradual shifts in society that might open up new opportunities and forms of romantic, sexual, emotional, and professional self-actualization are as yet inconceivable in the cinematic universe of the film[s]." ("Introduction" *Bollywood's New Woman* 11-12).

While the other films entertain possibilities, *Darlings* nearly realises this radical potential of envisioning an equitable feminist future for Badrunissa and Shamshunissa. However, it does not depict restorative justice for either of the protagonists, digressing from the quotidian reality of the aftermath of the survivors of IPV.

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Forbidden Geographies: Mapping Caste, Class, and Gender in the Film *Nishiddho* (*The Forbidden*)

Muneera KT and Hashmina Habeeb

Abstract

This article examines the spatial politics of caste, class, and gender in *Nishiddho* or *The Forbidden* (2022), directed by Tara Ramanujan, through the concept of 'forbidden geographies' or the spaces that are inaccessible, restricted, or surveilled based on social hierarchies. The film follows Rudra, a Bengali sculptor, and Chaavi, a Tamil midwife and maid, as they navigate urban precarity, labour exploitation, and an inter-caste, inter-class relationship in Kochi. Through spatial analysis, this article argues that *Nishiddho* exposes how caste and class shape spatial access, while gendered restrictions further constrain mobility. Through its portrayal of workplaces, domestic spaces, and the urban landscape, the film highlights how social structures shape belonging, exclusion, and transgression in contemporary Kerala. Ultimately, *Nishiddho* explores the invisibilised architectures of caste and class that govern everyday life, positioning migrant labourers and marginalised subjects at the centre of a contested spatial order.

Keywords: Marginalisation; Forbidden spaces; Migrant labour; Gender

Introduction

The Malayalam film industry has often grappled with questions of caste, class, and spatial marginalisation, yet mainstream cinema frequently erases or dilutes these intersections. By portraying upper-caste men as heroes, cinema attempted to reinforce hegemonic ideologies at the end of the twenty-first century. In these films, characters from the marginalised communities were only sidekicks or criminals. This systemic absence or marginalisation is not accidental; it is the product of structural inequalities in society that cinema both reflects and reproduces. Released in 2022, the film *Nishiddho* or *The Forbidden* features the lives of migrant workers, two in particular, who seldom find a space on the

silver screen. In the light of Kerala's increasing dependence on migrant labour, this community has already gained some visibility in Malayalam cinema. But these portrayals are often limited and stereotypical rather than offering deep, empathetic, or politically engaging narratives. So, Tara has chosen to present a nuanced and sensitive portrayal of the migrant subjectivity in her debut directorial venture.

The movie focuses on Chaavi and Rudra, who have migrated to Cochin from Tamil Nadu and Bengal, respectively. Their experiences highlight how caste and class hierarchies shape urban belonging, labour exploitation, and interpersonal relationships. This article examines the concept of 'forbidden geographies,' referring to spaces that remain inaccessible, surveilled, or restricted due to entrenched social structures. It employs a spatial analysis of *Nishiddho* through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace. Lefebvre's work unpacks how urban spaces reproduce caste and class hierarchies, while Soja's thirdspace framework enables examination of how migrants negotiate spaces that are neither entirely oppressive nor entirely liberatory. The spatial analysis of a film involves examining elements such as locations, movements, relationships, and even the characters' mental states. In this way, one can understand the power dynamics and narrative progression in the film. By analysing the key locations in the film—workplace, home, and cityscape— this article argues that *Nishiddho* highlights the often-overlooked spatial politics of caste and class in contemporary India. This essay also argues that*Nishiddho* reveals how caste and class influence spatial access, while gender further complicates mobility. It highlights the film's role in exposing the lived realities of those who occupy the fringes of urban society. As Kumar Anand writes,

Here, the intersectionality is that sociological approach which suggests and seeks to

> examine how various social and cultural categories of discrimination interact on multiple levels in the making of the systems of power, contributing to systemic inequalities. The intersectionality perspective assumes that the classical systems of oppression in society do not act independent of each other; instead, these forms of oppression correlate,

creating a system of oppression that reflects the"intersection" of multiple forms of discrimination. (1)

The City as a Caste-inflected and Classed Space

The story of *Nishiddho* is set in Cochin, a frequently imagined cosmopolitan hub in Kerala. In the broader urban landscape of Cochin, many migrants whom the state call *atidhi thozhilaalikal* which can be roughly translated as'guest workers'reside. These migrants are highly concentrated on the city's outskirts. Their accommodations are congested and unclean. One of the film's recurring visual motifs is the contrast between upper-caste, middle-class spaces, and the informal, precarious spaces occupied by migrants. For the migrants, the city is a liminal space where labour, caste identity, and gender intersect to produce heterotopic zones of ambiguity, resistance, and transformation. They live in fragmented and unstable spaces, which ensures no security for their lives or rootedness. This instability resonates with Foucault's notion of heterotopias as sites of crisis and deviation, where individuals who deviate from social norms, whether based on gender, caste, or class, are situated. The title *The Forbidden* itself signals a thematic engagement with spatial boundaries and acts of transgression. The broader urban landscape in *Nishiddho* serves as a contested space in which caste- and class-based exclusions are enacted. Public spaces such as markets, temples, and transportation hubs are depicted as sites of both interaction and exclusion. Rudra and Chaavi's movement through the city is marked by surveillance and social policing, reinforcing their marginalised status. Soja's thirdspace framework helps analyse these urban geographies as sites where dominant spatial orders are challenged, yet remain deeply entrenched in social hierarchies (Soja 1996). The film's visual composition, such as narrow alleyways, congested labour sites, and gated communities, visually reinforces the barriers that prevent lower-caste and working-class individuals from fully accessing urban life. In *Nishiddho,* the protagonists exist in a third space that is neither fully included in the urban economy nor completely outside its structures. Their romance unfolds in the interstices of the city, in spaces not fully controlled by caste or capital. Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space provides a foundational framework for analysing how caste and class hierarchies manifest in *Nishiddho*. Lefebvre argues that space is not merely a passive container but is actively produced

through social relations, power structures, and everyday practices (Lefebvre 1991). The film reveals how urban space is fragmented by class and caste-based exclusions, making certain areas accessible only to privileged groups while others remain confined to the margins. There are many instances of marginalisation based on caste and class. Chaavi brings oleander flowers to the local flower vendor, who sells garlands for Puja. But when she touches the jasmine flower, he says, "Oh! No! Don't touch it, it will wilt! It's for the temple" (*Nishiddho* 25:30-25:32). Discrimination against the lower castes is deeply ingrained in Indian culture. Although untouchability was outlawed, many people continue to face oppression and marginalisation due to their lower status. And if it is a woman, she is doubly marginalised. In another scene, when Rudra's cousin Phani sits on a ladies' seat in a bus, the lady in the same seat looks at him with disgust and says, "Stinks! No bath!" (*Nishiddho* 31:51). Phani says that, no matter how much we take a bath, we're going to stink because of the relentless work they have been doing. In another scene, Usha's father expresses his disdain toward migrant workers, even as his own son works in one of the Gulf countries. Many such instances show that Kerala, despite its progressive social movements, remains deeply structured by caste in its housing, labour, and mobility patterns. *Nishiddho* subtly reveals how caste operates within the city through its depiction of spatial restrictions on both Rudra and Chaavi. Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace (1996) expands on Lefebvre's ideas by emphasising the dynamic and contested nature of spatiality. Thirdspace is a space in which dominant social orders are both reinforced and challenged. In *Nishiddho*, Rudra and Chaavi's interactions across workplace, home, and public spaces illustrate this contested spatiality, as they attempt to navigate and subvert spatial restrictions imposed by their caste and class positions. Both of the central characters speak different languages. Over time, a quiet bond develops between Rudra and Chaavi. Their interaction begins with silence, awkwardness, and subtle observation. They start sharing meals, offering gestures of kindness, and engaging in brief conversations. They create a language which is a mixture of Malayalam and Bengali. They meet in secluded or nonconventional spaces. Their conversations evolve through the narrow alleys of urban garbage dumps and isolated railway tracks. Thus, in *Nishiddho*, the characters create a third space that transcends spatial boundaries, thereby

establishing a new sense of belonging. Though there are hints of attraction, the film never pushes their relationship into conventional romantic territory. Instead, the relationship is marked by mutual understanding and a sense of companionship forged through shared experiences of alienation and labour.

Domestic Spaces: Caste and Class Hierarchies

Domestic environments in *Nishiddho* further illustrate how spatial access is regulated by caste and class. Chaavi, as a Tamil domestic worker, enters upper-caste homes but remains a transient presence, unable to claim ownership or agency within these spaces. The film's depiction of her living quarters, often isolated and poorly maintained, contrasts sharply with the well-kept homes of her employers, emphasising the structural inequalities embedded in domestic spaces. Another vital point is that neither Chaavi nor Rudra has an ideal family. Chaavi lives with an old lady whom she calls *paatti* which means grandmother. She was rescued and adopted by this *paatti* and her late husband. Rudra's parents have died. So, they belong to the 'other space' constructed by society.

Workspaces: Labour Exploitation and Spatial Access

Rudra's introduction talks about how the lives of migrant workers are valued in Kerala. Workers migrate here for employment and to earn income, and they have taken over almost all sectors. Rudra argues that they do more work for low wages and neither have unions nor engage in strikes. Many accidents occur in these workplaces, and the authorities often fail to provide adequate support to the workers or their families. Rudra, a Bengali Sculptor, is confined to a workspace that reinforces his outsider status, both socially and spatially. An implicit caste bias characterises his presence in the art world, as his labour is valued for its utility rather than for creative agency. Similarly, Chaavi's work as a midwife and domestic worker places her within intimate yet subordinate spaces, reflecting how caste and class dictate access to different urban environments. The director also contrasts Rudra, who migrated to Kerala to make ends meet, and Usha's husband, who is enjoying his life in a foreign country without returning to his hometown. The workplace in *Nishiddho* serves as a microcosm of Kerala's labour economy, where caste and class determine not only wages but also physical movement and visibility within the city.

Gendered Spatiality: The Female Migrant Experience

Gender further complicates the spatial politics of *Nishiddho*. Chaavi's restricted mobility and economic dependence reflect how caste and class intersect with patriarchal norms to limit women's agency. Domestic work, often feminised and caste-marked, situates her within spaces that demand her labour but deny her social recognition. The film's narrative highlights how gendered spatial restrictions operate in conjunction with caste and class to maintain existing power structures, rendering transgression both difficult and perilous. Chaavi works as a female pundit, which is again a marginalised job for women. "Women have been barred from this profession because they are considered 'impure' to perform religious rituals and rites during pujas, weddings, funerals and thread ceremonies" (Chatterji 90). Even Rudra is somewhat sceptical of her when he first meets her in connection with his uncle's funeral. Because he has only seen male priests in Bengal. He approves it only because he cannot keep the body in the morgue for another day by giving a thousand rupees.

Chaavi was adopted by an elderly couple when her biological parents attempted to kill her at the moment she was born. Despite the passage of time, the society she lives in still prefers a male child over a female child. A woman is blamed if she bears only girl children, not the husband, whose sperm is solely responsible for the Y chromosome in bearing the male child (Haq 174). It underscores the brutal persistence of gender-based discrimination in Indian society. A woman who cannot have children is also looked down upon. Chaavi yearns to be a mother, although she is unable to have children. When Chaavi takes out the preserved umbilical cord, smells it, and holds it with such tenderness, it encapsulates so much of her silent emotional world: longing, loss, and an aching sense of displacement from motherhood. In such a cultural context that devalues women and their worth, the very presence and survival of a female becomes an act of defiance. Durga Puja, a grand celebration of the feminine divine in India, especially in Bengal, honours Goddess Durga as a powerful, independent force who triumphs over evil. Yet, this cultural glorification starkly contrasts with the lived realities of most Indian women, who continue to face systemic oppression, gender-based violence, and social inequality. While the goddess is revered as a warrior and protector, real women

are often confined to rigid gender roles, denied autonomy, and subjected to expectations of purity and sacrifice. This paradox is powerfully visualised by the director through the juxtaposition of two striking images: the idol of Goddess Durga being immersed in the Ganga, a ritualistic conclusion to the festival, and Chaavi emerging from a temple pond. While the goddess returns to the cosmic waters, symbolising the cyclical nature of divinity and rebirth, Chaavi's rising from the water suggests a reclaiming of agency and a symbolic rebirth of the female subject who has long been marginalised.

Conclusion

Nishiddho was produced under the Kerala State Film Development Corporation's initiative to support female directors. Tara is among the first filmmakers to receive funding under this scheme. In a society where women are discriminated against and oppressed for their gender, her presence behind the camera is a political statement. And by *Nishiddho,* Tara has proved her creative agency as a filmmaker. The embodied subjectivity, ambiguity and her sensitive treatment make her directorial debut a cinematic rebellion. She refuses to conform to patriarchal storytelling conventions by employing long takes, spatial metaphors, and minimal dialogue. In her film, the often-silenced people are given a voice to express themselves and to liberate themselves from the margins. Thus, in a way, *Nishiddho* becomes a rare Malayalam film that asserts how space and caste construct identity. It does not claim to reflect reality neutrally but instead constructs a space where gender, caste, and class collide. Through its portrayal of migrant labour, workplace hierarchies, and forbidden intimacy, the film critiques the hidden architectures of caste and class in Kerala's urban landscape. Dislocated from their native places, migrants exist as a marginalised and precarious class within their own country, denied both fundamental rights and spaces for creative self-expression. Tara critically interrogates the reductive practice of homogenising migrant workers under labels such as 'Madrasi' or 'Bengali,' exposing how regional stereotyping erases their complex identities and lived realities.

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The Jewel Box as Legacy: Feminist Revisions of Tagore in Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho*

Sangeeta S.

Abstract

This article examines the symbolic and narrative significance of jewellery in the representation of women's agency and identity in *Goynar Baksho* directed by Aparna Sen in comparison with *Monihara* by Rabindranath Tagore. Although both texts foreground jewellery as a central motif, their treatment reflects divergent understandings of femininity, autonomy, and material possession shaped by their distinct historical and cultural contexts. In "Monihara," jewellery functions as a symbol of psychological displacement and possessive anxiety within a patriarchal marriage, culminating in the tragic containment of female desire. By contrast, *Goynar Baksho* reclaims the jewel box as a site of intergenerational memory, economic agency, and feminist resistance. Through a comparative framework, this article traces the transformation of adornment from an emblem of entrapment to a medium of empowerment, while also engaging questions of class, inheritance, and postcolonial displacement. The article argues that Sen's adaptation does not merely modernize Tagore's narrative but critically reworks its symbolic economy, extending his concerns into a contemporary feminist discourse that foregrounds solidarity, historical consciousness, and women's evolving relationship to material culture.

Keywords: "Monihara"; *Goynar Baksho*; Rabindranath Tagore; Aparna Sen; Female Agency

Introduction

Tagore's interpretation of female agency in works like "Monihara" and others often portrays women as individuals striving for self-discovery and challenging societal norms, even within the constraints of a patriarchal society. While not always explicitly feminist, his characters frequently display a capacity for

independent thought, action, and a desire for fulfillment beyond prescribed roles. In most South Asian societies, jewellery has long had deeper meanings associated with money, control, tradition, and identity. It is frequently perceived as an accessory of feminine beauty. Jewellery is a powerful symbol that is often used in literary and cinematic narratives to either reinforce patriarchal ideas of femininity or to subversively reinterpret them. Using Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013) and Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Monihara" (1891), this article examines their dual meaning. Although jewellery serves as a prominent narrative device in both pieces, its feminist implications and thematic trajectories differ significantly.

In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, jewellery functions as a symbol of social passage and gender transition. As Orlando transforms from male to female, the character's relationship to clothing and adornment evolves as well, reflecting how jewellery becomes both a constraint and a means of navigating social expectations. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the absence of jewellery—particularly earrings or gold—signals the characters' dispossession during slavery. In this context, the lack of personal adornment becomes a marker of dehumanisation, while the recovery or wearing of jewellery can symbolise the reclaiming of agency and dignity. Tagore's "Monihara," presents jewellery as a symbol of psychological fixation, alienation, and ultimately, a woman's tragic end within a patriarchal structure. In "Monihara," the character Monimalika embodies both the allure and the destructive potential of unchecked desire and attachment. She represents a woman grappling with the consequences of her actions and her inability to find fulfillment within the confines of her world. Her story can be interpreted as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unbridled desire and the complexities of female agency in a patriarchal society. Sen's *Goynar Baksho*, a feminist adaptation rooted in postcolonial and contemporary sensibilities, reclaims the jewel box as a site of intergenerational resistance and empowerment. Through a comparative lens, this study examines how these texts interrogate the intersections of gender, class, and memory, and how the shifting symbolic meaning of jewellery—from a token of entrapment to an emblem of liberation—narrates the evolving status of women across time.

Jewellery as Psychological Substitution in "Monihara"

Tagore's "Monihara," is a gothic tale narrated through a frame story, centering on Monimala, a woman whose obsession with jewellery supersedes all emotional and social bonds. In a colonial Bengali zamindar household, Monimala's life revolves around her jewels—a motif that Tagore uses to depict her spiritual barrenness and emotional fragility. Her husband, Phanibhushan, a benevolent figure, indulges her desires, unaware that the jewels have become a substitute for the emotional void she inhabits. The story's portrayal of jewellery aligns with patriarchal anxieties about female agency and materialism. Monimala's obsession is not depicted as an assertion of identity, but as a pathological dependency. Her alienation is compounded by the absence of children, further stigmatizing her as a failed woman within societal norms. As literary critic, Rimli Bhattacharya notes, "Monimala's fixation on the jewels stems from her lack of autonomy and the void of fulfillment within the constraints of her gendered existence" (Bhattacharya 212). Tagore crafts Monimala's demise as a cautionary tale: when threatened with the loss of her jewels during a financial downturn, she absconds with them, only to die mysteriously, her ghost returning to haunt the house. The spectral return of Monimala foregrounds the uncanny nature of possession—not merely of objects but of a woman's selfhood by societal expectations. Her ghost clinging to the jewels signifies a woman entrapped beyond death by the very things meant to ornament her life. Moreover, in diasporic contexts, jewellery often becomes a means of cultural survival and transmission. Immigrant women, especially from South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, frequently carry heirloom ornaments with them when migrating. These pieces function as both emotional anchors and financial safeguards. For many, jewellery is not simply an accessory but a portable archive of memory, culture, and resilience. It is passed down with stories, rituals, and values, reinforcing lineage, and feminine continuity. As Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it, "Jewellery, in such cases, becomes a narrative object—telling stories not just of beauty, but of belonging, loss, and endurance" (88). In academic feminist theory, jewellery also raises questions about bodily autonomy and self-expression. Judith Butler's theory of performativity suggests that gender is constructed through repeated acts. Adornment, including the wearing of jewellery, can be seen as part of this performative act—a way

through which women present and negotiate their identities. However, when chosen freely, such performativity does not reinforce oppression but instead becomes a tool of self-articulation. A woman choosing to wear a nose ring or gold bangles may be asserting ethnic identity, feminine pride, or personal memory—not necessarily conforming to societal expectations. It is important, however, to distinguish between symbolic agency and actual empowerment. While jewellery may serve as a metaphor for autonomy, it cannot substitute for legal rights, bodily freedom, or structural change. The risk lies in romanticizing the symbolism while ignoring the material conditions of women's lives.

Tagore's narrative frame—told through layers of hearsay—creates epistemic distance from Monimala's interiority. We never access her fully articulated consciousness. This absence is crucial. Her attachment to jewels is narrated as pathology rather than strategy. The structural silencing of her voice mirrors the social silencing of women's dissatisfaction within marriage. Importantly, Tagore does not offer redemption or empowerment through the character. Phanibhushan is charged with the crime of allowing Monimala too much agency and spoiling her with jewellery, yearning for love he doesn't receive, making his wife bear the burden of their unhappy association through marriage. However, on further inspection, one notices that this may not entirely be the case. From the moment we see the female protagonist, she is distracted, lost in thought, and looking out through a window at the outside world. There are several instances between the spouses that range from affection to flirtation but never beyond that. At every hint of her husband getting uncomfortably close, Monimala shrinks back, often hiding discomfort at her husband's physical touch under the garb of being coy. There is deep disregard for her consent, concerns, or desires, even though their marriage has entered its tenth year. The narrative aestheticises her decline, yet embedded within it is a critique of marital entitlement. Phanibhushan expects love in exchange for provision—an expectation that reflects a broader patriarchal contract. The cinematic adaptation of "Monihara" within Ray's anthology film *Teen Kanya* adds another layer. Ray's post-independence framing critiques feudal marriage more explicitly, aligning subtly with Nehruvian visions of reform. His reinterpretation exposes the fragility of patriarchal companionship rather than simply condemning female

desire. The spectral return intensifies this critique. The ghost does not merely haunt the house; she haunts the ideology of possession. Monimala clings to jewels beyond death because they were the only domain she could claim as exclusively hers. Thus, jewellery in Tagore's story becomes a paradox: it is both the only property she controls and the very instrument of her narrative condemnation.

Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho*: Reclaiming the Feminine Legacy

Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013), a Bengali-language film based on Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's short story of the same name, offers a powerful feminist reinterpretation of traditional familial narratives through the symbolic lens of a jewel box. Set across three historical periods—the 1940s during the Partition of Bengal, the 1960s, and the early 1970s—the film chronicles the lives of three generations of women connected through their relationship with a box of ancestral jewellery. At the center of the story is Pishima, a sharp-witted, widowed matriarch whose ghost continues to haunt the jewel box after her death, guiding her timid niece-in-law Somalata toward self-reliance and resistance. Blending elements of satire, the supernatural, and social critique, Sen's adaptation subverts the traditional association of jewellery with vanity and materialism, transforming it into a metaphor for legacy, autonomy, and intergenerational female solidarity. As a filmmaker and writer deeply committed to gender issues, Aparna Sen infuses *Goynar Baksho* with a postcolonial feminist sensibility that reclaims material culture as a space of memory, power, and transformation for women. Unlike Monimala's tragic attachment to her jewels, Pishima's relationship with the jewel box is strategic and protective. The jewels are not merely adornments but symbols of resistance. As a child widow who was denied agency and subjected to rigid social norms, Pishima clings to the box as her only source of power. She guards it fiercely in life and death, ensuring that it benefits future generations of women rather than the male heirs or in-laws.

Aparna Sen's cinematic adaptation of *GoynarBakso* with the plot of a widow's ghost and her jewellery box interpreted itself as a tale of yearning and woe, of unfulfilled desires, and perhaps most prominently, of perennial victimhood. Sen's film stages jewellery as both a repository of trauma and a

conduit of empowerment. Through the spectral Pishima's interventions, Somalata gains courage, stands up to patriarchal impositions, and uses the jewels for acts of social subversion—helping a relative in love, starting a saree business, and supporting the Bangladesh Liberation War. The jewel box thus becomes an intergenerational link through which feminine wisdom, strength, and subversion are passed down. As Priya Kapoor observes, "Sen reimagines the heirloom not as a cursed possession but as a bequest of resistance—a reparation for generations of silenced women" (137). The film deftly moves beyond mere critique to an active reclamation, portraying female solidarity.

Both "Monihara," and *Goynar Baksho* engage deeply with the theme of adornment, but their symbolic registers are starkly different. In "Monihara," jewellery is isolating, obsessive, and destructive—a marker of a woman's inability to transcend material trappings.Objects, like the jewels in "Monihara," are extremely crucial in critical analyses of narratives of desire. "Things and the preoccupation with them," as Meenakshi Mukherjee indicates, point at greater complexities within characters and the stories themselves. But as this reading of the story and its approach to the narrative reveals, there is much more to the story than the cautionary tale of a woman's uncanny affection for objects.The horror is contextualised further by the deeper questions it poses tied to society and the sociopolitical environment within which the film was made and distributed. In contrast, *Goynar Baksho* transforms the same motif into a tool for agency and legacy. The class dimension also deserves attention. Monimala belongs to an elite zamindar class, where jewellery is abundant but devoid of meaning beyond vanity. Her life, insulated by privilege, becomes hollow. Somalata and Pishima, though also from a bhadralok family, face financial constraints and gendered oppression, and their relationship with the jewels is grounded in survival and justice rather than aesthetics. Further, the temporal shift between the two works—nineteenth-century colonial Bengal and postcolonial, post-Partition India—inflects their feminist visions. Tagore, despite his progressive ideas, writes within a framework where women's suffering is sublimated into spiritual pathos. Sen, operating in a different feminist and political landscape, gives her characters the tools to alter their circumstances. By refusing to portray women solely as tragic sufferers, Sen challenges the cultural expectation that female depth must be tied to suffering. The comic

mode allows for experimentation, risk, and rebellion. This tonal shift is not cosmetic—it redefines what feminist representation can look like. Agency does not always appear solemn; it can be mischievous, loud, and unapologetic.

The Partition trauma, which uprooted millions, is a pivotal backdrop in *Goynar Baksho*. Pishima's family loses their ancestral land in East Bengal, and the jewels become the only tangible link to that lost world. In this sense, the box becomes not only a feminist symbol but a postcolonial relic—carrying memories of displacement, violence, and survival. Moreover, Sen's use of comedy and satire as narrative strategies contrast with Tagore's tragic and moralistic tone. Pishima is hilarious, foul-mouthed, and unrepentant—a far cry from Monimala's haunted passivity. By giving her female characters humour and voice, Sen subverts the tragic female archetype and opens space for a new kind of heroine. Sen's *Goynar Baksho* also intersects with issues of economic autonomy. When Somalata uses the jewels to start a business, she reconfigures the traditionally private, domestic role of women into a public, entrepreneurial one. This act directly counters the notion of women as passive recipients of wealth; they become producers, investors, and decision-makers. One of the most striking contributions of *Goynar Baksho* is its portrayal of intergenerational feminist dialogue. Pishima, Somalata, and eventually the next generation of women—including Boshon, Somalata's daughter—each relate differently to the jewel box. What begins as hoarding transforms into giving, and finally, into letting go. When the final jewels are donated to support the war, the act signifies a culmination of feminist evolution—from possession to liberation. This progression critiques Tagore's static portrayal in "Monihara" where Monimala remains trapped in a cycle of yearning and loss. Sen's characters evolve, question, and grow. Where Monimalika remains trapped in symbolic stasis, Pishima evolves posthumously. The supernatural becomes an instrument of reclamation rather than punishment. They are not defined solely by their relationships with men but by their moral choices, solidarity, and courage. As Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, "The postcolonial feminist must engage not only with inherited patriarchy but also with inherited texts" (89). Sen's film exemplifies this engagement—it critiques, reclaims, and extends Tagore's legacy by re-visioning the jewel box as a dynamic site of female transformation.

Conclusion

Through the comparative study of "Monihara," and *Goynar Baksho*, this article has demonstrated how a single motif—jewellery—can carry vastly different meanings across contexts.The most significant structural difference between the two works lies in movement. In "Monihara," jewellery moves toward accumulation and fixation. In *Goynar Baksho*, jewellery moves toward redistribution and release. Monimalika dies clinging. Somalata lives by letting go. This contrast disrupts cyclical tragedy and introduces linear feminist progression. The jewel box in Sen's film is not an endpoint but a transitional object. Its value lies in circulation, not hoarding. Thus, the evolution of the motif parallels the evolution of feminist consciousness—from possession as compensation to redistribution as empowerment.

In Tagore's work, it embodies psychological entrapment and spiritual decay, reinforcing the tragedy of female disempowerment in a patriarchal world. Tagore subtly exposes how patriarchal systems can appear affectionate while erasing consent. Monimalika's discomfort is never directly articulated, but it is repeatedly implied. Her interior unrest gestures toward a woman whose emotional needs are neither recognised nor validated. This complicates the reading of jewellery as mere vanity. If jewels are the only tangible asset she possesses, then her attachment signals a desire for autonomy within constraint. The tragedy, therefore, is not simply material obsession—it is the absence of alternative modes of self-assertion. Tagore's initial interrogation of the arranged marriage system, "and the entrapment and enslavement of women as wives" is expounded upon more viscerally. Although caring "husbands provide shelter, security and sustenance" (Mondal, 2015), the women live in loveless marriages and, in some instances, like Moni's, are driven to extremes to fill the void of their lonesome existence.

In Sen's feminist reimagining, the jewel box becomes a legacy of resistance, a site of memory, and a catalyst for empowerment. Sen does not merely modernise Tagore's tale; she transforms its core. Her *Goynar Baksho* is not just an adaptation but a dialogue—a reclamation of history through humour, agency, and solidarity. By turning adornment into assertion, and inheritance into empowerment, Sen offers a compelling feminist revision that speaks to the past and the future.

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Behind Closed Doors: A Feminist Re-reading of Class and Sexuality in Indian Anthology Cinema

Sadia Afreen

Abstract

This article examines the segments directed by Zoya Akhtar in *Lust Stories* (2018) and Konkona Sen Sharma in *Lust Stories 2* (2023), two anthology films,exploring their parallel portrayals of desire, class dynamics, and power relations through employer-maid narratives. Both directors challenge hegemonic constructions of femininity by centering female desire while navigating intersections of gender, class, and sexuality in contemporary India. Akhtar's segment revolves around housemaid Sudha and her employer Ajit, exposing how rigid social hierarchies redefine identity, desire, and agency across gender and class divides. Sharma's "The Mirror" focuses on maid Seema's sexual relationship with her husband, secretly watched by her employer Ishita, where the power dynamic shifts when Seema discovers she is being watched but deliberately continues.

The article investigates how these narratives subvert Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze by positioning female desire as subject rather than object. Employing Foucault's theory of sexuality and Butler's gender performativity, the study analyzes how women negotiate their sexual agency within hierarchical constraints. By analyzing the intersection of these theories, this article reveals a paradox: the sexual agency granted to working-class women is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the very class structures that produce it.

Keywords: Female identity; Sexual agency; Gender; Class; Performativity

Introduction

While mainstream Indian movies for a long period of time continued to perpetuate male-centered narratives, only objectifying women, *Lust Stories* and *Lust Stories 2* came as a breath of fresh air, centering women and granting them independent identities and sexual agency. As the name suggests, the

movie centers around the sexual identity and desire of different people from varied backgrounds. Both *Lust Stories* and *Lust Stories 2* were released on the popular OTT platform, Netflix, in 2018 and 2023, respectively. Both the movies are anthology films directed by renowned Bollywood directors centering on the themes of love, sex, and desire. This article focuses on Zoya Akhtar's segment from *Lust Stories* and Konkona Sen Sharma's segment, "The Mirror" from *Lust Stories 2*.

Even though mainstream Indian cinema has always reinforced patriarchal structures, positioning women as secondary characters who exist only in relation to male characters, functioning solely as objects of desire, the directors of these two segments have subverted this narrative by questioning hegemonic constructions of femininity, and by portraying female protagonists, withsexual autonomy. Both segments center on female identity and desire while navigating the intersections of gender, class, and sexuality in contemporary India.

The article investigates how these narratives subvert Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze by positioning women and female desire as subject rather than object. Furthermore, employing Foucault's theory of sexuality, it analyzes how power dynamics and class differences actually enable rather than prevent sexual agency. In addition, drawing on Butler's theory ofgender performativity, the analysis examines how both female protagonists disrupt traditional gender roles and create possibilities for alternative gender identities through the repeated assertion of their sexual desires. It further analyzes how the mise-en-scène in both films—particularly through framing, lighting, and spatial composition—positions the viewer in alignment with the working-class protagonists' perspective.

Critically, the intersection of these theoretical frameworks exposes a fundamental paradox: the sexual agency granted to working-class women is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the very class structures that produce it. The article further examines how this paradox operates through cinema itself—the anthology format and OTT platform distribution that both enable progressive content and restrict its access to elite audiences. This article thus predominantly analyzes how women negotiate autonomy and identity within hierarchical constraints. Both directors construct representations of female sexuality that simultaneously challenge and acknowledge existing power

dynamics, contributing to evolving discourses on gender and class in contemporary Indian cinema.

The Two Segments from *Lust Stories and Lust Stories 2*

Zoya Akhtar's segment from *Lust Stories* appears second in the anthology and centers around the higher middle-class Ajit and the lower-class Sudha's relationship. Ajit is the employer, while Sudha is the maid of Ajit's house. The movie opens with their passionate sexual encounter, establishing their sexual relationship, and as the movie unfolds, it explores the themes of class disparity and power dynamics. The movie's plot shifts dramatically when Sudha almost immediately starts her maid duties after the sexual encounter. The detailed diligence with which Akhtar has portrayed Sudha's character is commendable. A typical working-class maid, Sudha, immediately after her sexual encounter, is seen wearing her worn-out clothes and squatting and moping the floor—a deliberatemise-en-scène choice that highlights her class identity. She prepares Ajit's breakfast, serves him his coffee, and does the rest of the chores like a typical house-help. Apart from the shower scene, in which they playfully call each other "a dirty bitch" and "a naked dog," reinforcing their sexuality, there are no other scenes in the film where they romantically engage with each other (*Lust Stories* 00:36:33–00:36:39). Ajit denies Sudha a public recognition of their relationship, reinforcing his class superiority. Yet, the movie centers around Sudha's emotions and desires, while Ajit's character becomes the secondary one. When Ajit's parents come to his house to fix his wedding, Sudha's role as a maid becomes exclusively prominent. They see her carrying their luggage, preparing their food, cleaning the toilet, and doing their laundry. Akhtar's focus on Sudha washing Ajit's underwear, him lifting his legs while she sweeps the floor, and his ordering her to keep the teacup aside to avoid touching each other creates a visual boundary between them, establishing the limitations of their intimacy—and Sudha's silent acceptance of that reality. The segment is particularly powerful because it portrays Sudha's sexual and emotional negotiation. Chakraborty, in her article "Empowered Women and SVOD Platforms in India: An Analysis of Lust Stories," comments, "Akhtar's portrayal of a working-class woman's right to transgress class barriers deserves commendation" (84).

Konkona Sen Sharma's segment of *Lust Stories 2*, titled "The Mirror," is also a story of a working-class maid, Seema, and her upper-class graphic designer employer, Ishita, who lives all alone in a luxurious apartment. Seema, who is an efficient maid, takes good care of Ishita's house. However, one afternoon when Ishita leaves work early and returns home, she walks in on Seema and her husband having a sexual encounter on her bed. Dismayed by the entire situation, Ishita runs out of the house and waits for them to finish and leave. Later, she returns to the house, changes her bedsheet, and tries to masturbate but ends up crying. This shows, even though quite rich, Ishita is extremely lonely and has an emotional and sexual void in her life. The next day, Ishita again reaches home early while Seema and her husband are again engaged in their sexual encounter. Ishita realizes this is a regular arrangement and decides to hide and watch them through a mirror that is placed in a way that gives her just the perfect reflection of what is happening in her bedroom. Realizing she enjoys being a voyeur, Ishita now regularly leaves work early, sits quietlyin her house, and loosens her garments to touch herself while watching them through the mirror. Ishita's sexual void seems to be fulfilled to a certain extent, as she is seen masturbating successfully. However, one day when Ishita quietly gets ready to watch them, Seema spots her but decides to continue with her sexual counter. Doubtful whether she still has her job or not, Seema decides to skip it the next day, when Ishita calls her and tells her to come to her place immediately. Since Ishita doesn't confront Seema, the latter understands that Ishita does not have a problem with the situation and continues her workenthusiastically. Confident about not being confronted, Seema continues her sexual encounter and lets Ishita watch them secretly. The way Ishita realizes that she enjoys being a voyeur, Seema also realizes that she enjoys being watched. Both of them seem to derive pleasure from this arrangement without confronting each other. However, one afternoon, Ishita sees a lizard and screams, accidentally revealing herself. Forced to confront each other, Ishita now takes advantage of her employer privilege and her social class to accuse Seema of misusing her house. Even though a maid, Seema has a strong voice and boldly protests against Ishita's accusations when she is blamed. She mentions she is having sex with her husband, which is legal, and not doing anything unacceptable like Ishita, who derives pleasure by watching others. When Ishita calls Seema "disgusting," Seema gets resentful

and tells Ishita that she is so worthless that she needs Seema even to satisfy her sexual drive (*Lust Stories 2* 00:50:28–00:50:30).

Things get ugly between the employer-maid duo, and while Ishita fires Seema and threatens to ruin her reputation in the society, Seema threatens Ishita back, saying she will do the same. The following days, both the women are seen to be unsatisfied, and as Ishita keeps changing her maid, Seema too keeps changing her job—both realizing that they were perfect for each other. A few days later, both of them cross paths and apologize to each other, each sympathizing with the other's situation. Ishita hands over the keys to Seema, and Seema ultimately agrees to rejoin. In the final scene of the movie, as the clock strikes 3, the lift goes up, indicating that both Seema and Ishita might have gone back to their old arrangement.

Visual Elements and Emotional Alignment: The Role of Mise-en-scène

The directors' choice of mise-en-scène in both films is highly significant, as it is not just used to ornament the setting but rather to create emotional affinity with the audience. Akhtar's portrayal of Sudha with her worn out, dull clothes, her old pair of slippers, her typical working-class gesture of wrapping her dupatta around her waist or pulling up her pajamas before squatting to mop the floor—reinforces her identity as a working-class woman. She is also denied any central space in the film, and always appears at the margins of the frame like kitchen corners and doorways. Ajit, the upper-middle-class man, with his ironed shirt and laptop, in contrast appearat the centreof the framemarking his social hierarchy. Yet the camera's repeated focus on Sudha's face, her silent heartbreak and her sad smiles become prominent in the narrative and the audience aligns with her emotional world, instead of Ajit's class position.

In Sharma's segment the audience's emotions are divided between both Ishita and Seema. The most remarkable mise-en-scène in Sharma's segment is the placement of the mirror on the wall of the common area, which directly reflects the bed in the bedroom. By this meticulous placement, Sharma turns the bedroom into a stage, where Seema and her husband perform while Ishita continues to be their audience, creating the identities of a performer and a voyeur respectively. As the title suggests, the mirror isn't just a prop or an aesthetic detail but a vital cinematic device because it captures the desires of

both women. Even though Seema's use of Ishita's bedroom to have sex goes against work ethics, the camera's focus on the lack of space in Seema's own house, renders an emotional angle to the situation, and the viewers understand the reason behind Seema's actions. Again, the camera's close-up shots of Ishita's face, her eyes heavy with longing, make the audience feel for her despite her class privilege, and the audience feels ready to forgive her voyeuristic attitude, especially after Seema's deliberate choice to continue having sex knowingly. Unlike Akhtar, Sharma doesn't focus heavily on labour or clothes, rather uses the spatial arrangement to portray the helplessness of both the women. However, the audience's emotional alignment shifts toward Seema once Ishita uses her class privilege to insult and sack her.

From Object to Subject: Challenging Mulvey's Visual Pleasure Theory

Laura Mulvey's remarkable essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," established a foundational framework in understanding how conventional cinema reinforces patriarchal ideologies by portraying men as the subject while women are represented only as objects of visual pleasure. Mulvey argues that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" where cinema is used as a tool of patriarchy, fulfilling the desires of a male gaze (19). Mulvey further argues that within this patriarchal structure, "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" and therefore is not positioned as an object of visual pleasure (20). Consequently, the spectator engages in "direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy)" (21). This underpins the concept of objectification and sexualization of women in mainstream films, positioning them as objects without any agency of their own. Mulvey states, "In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously to be 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" (19). Although Mulvey's original thesis centered on the idea of classical Hollywood cinema, its implication can be extended in mainstream Bollywood films as well, since films in general have traditionally displayed women mainly "as erotic objects of desire for the characters within the screen story and as erotic objects of desire for the spectator within the auditorium" (19).

However, both Akhtar and Sharma's narratives challenge the idea of women existing solely as passive images "to be looked at" by portraying them instead as active agents who negotiate for and reclaim their emotional and sexual autonomy (19). Both the segments focus on the desire of the female protagonists, who drive the plot of the films, consciously excluding dominant male characters and the typical male gaze, which usually controls the narrative in mainstream cinema. In both segments, it is the women who look, desire, and take action—challenging and subverting Mulvey's notion of women as passive objects of male pleasure. Instead, the films reinforce female autonomy by asserting women's sexual agency and redefining desire from a distinctly female perspective.

This dynamic becomes evident in Akhtar's segment when the narrative turns toward his impending marriage to Aparna, a girl from his class. During this period, Ajit happily participates with his family while banishing Sudha from his intimate space. Even though Sudha is sidelined in the story, she remains the protagonist because it is her emotional turmoil that is focused on in the movie. When Ajit's mother orders Sudha to prepare tea for his would-be in-laws, the camera focuses on her emotional turmoil—the pain in her eyes as she learns about the wedding date, her shaky hands with the tea tray as she anticipates seeing Ajit and Aparna together—making her the subject who drives the narrative and reinforces her subjectivity. The final scene of the movie is particularly effective in capturing Sudha's extreme emotional turmoil, as the next-door maid unknowingly comments on her seemingly "good day," prompting Sudha to sigh, smile, and nod—ironically confirming the opposite (*Lust Stories* 00:52:47–00:52:50). Even though Mulvey argues that women's "visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line" or "to freeze the flow of actions" Sudha's character, however, solely escalates the narrative (19).

Sharma's segment pushes this subversion further by removing the male figure altogether. With both the employer and the maid being women, Sharma constructs a space where female desire exists entirely outside the male gaze, fundamentally destabilizing Mulvey's framework.Since Seema lives in a small house, where she does not have any privacy, she chooses to have her regular sexual encounters with her husband in her employer Ishita's empty house.

Like Sudha, Seema doesn't hesitate to express her sexual desire despite being doubly marginalized by gender and class, establishing her sexual agency through her passionate relationship with her husband—portrayed through beach dates and late-night intimate conversations. As seen earlier, despite being socially superior, Ishita lacks the emotional and sexual fulfillment that Seema has — her breakdown after watching Seema's sexual encounter makes this clear.Sharma thus complicates class hierarchy by empowering working-class Seema more than upper-class Ishita. Ishita gains sexual agency through voyeurism, and when both women sigh "ah" with pleasure at climax in the same frame, their sexual agency across class boundaries is powerfully affirmed (*Lust Stories 2* 00:42:33–00:42:39).

Sharma's segment, however, gets complicated once Seema learns that she is being watched and yet chooses to continue her sexual encounters with her husband at Ishita's house. Until Seema was unaware of Ishita's watching, Ishita gained pleasure through something similar to what Mulvey would term a male gaze. However, the observation of a woman subverts Mulvey's male gaze, establishing a female gaze instead. Even though Seema is objectified through Ishita's gaze, the movie moves forward, centering the women's desire and pleasure, making it completely female-centered.

Nevertheless, this narrative gets further complicated through multiple layers of scopophilia. Ishita's voyeuristic observation of Seema mirrors the audience's voyeuristic consumption of cinema, where scopophilia, or secret watching, provides pleasure. But when Seema becomes aware of being watched and starts to derive pleasure from it, the power dynamic instantly shifts. Seema transforms from Mulvey's passive "to-be-looked-at"object into an active participant who derives power from performance, reestablishing her sexual agency (19). At this point, Sharma blurs the class difference between these two women by giving power and agency to a lower-class woman over an upper-class one. Sharma's brilliancy lies in this customized setting where both the women continue to satisfy their respective sexual needs without disrupting each other's world. The narrative takes a dramatic turn when they accidentally confront each other leading to accusations and mutual dismissal. Female sexuality is further recognized when Seema's husband realizes that both women knew about the arrangement, while only he remained unaware. In a moment

of utter shock, he protests, "She knew everything. You knew everything. What about me? Shouldn't you have told me?" (*Lust Stories 2* 00:58:59–00:59:10). Sharma not only subverts the male-dominated plot here but also completely castrates the male agency by making him a mere object of pleasure for both Seema and Ishita. In the end, when both women reconcile and Ishita asks Seema why she continued despite knowing she was watched, Seema unhesitatingly replies, "Because I used to enjoy it too" (*Lust Stories 2* 01:02:43–01:02:48). Both the women smile, nod, and realize each other's sexuality, providing sexual agency to each other through their respective acceptances.

The Foucauldian Framework: Power, Class, and the Collision of Alliance and Sexuality in Domestic Spaces

Michel Foucault's analysis in *The History of Sexuality* fundamentally challenges our understanding of how sexuality operates within power structures**.** Foucault rejects the repressive hypothesis, arguing instead that power actively produces sexuality rather than simply prohibiting it, **"**Where there is desire, the power relation is already present" (81). Foucault defines power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate" (92). Characterizing the ubiquitousness factor of power and how it constantly emerges in everyday interactions, he writes, "The omnipresence of power… not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything… but because it is produced from one moment to the next… in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). The employer controls when, where, and how sexuality can be expressed, showing how power organizes rather than suppresses desire.Thus, utilizing the Foucauldian framework, this article argues that it is not despite the class difference in the employer-maid dynamic but because of it that sexual relationships emerge between them.

In Akhtar's segment, it is the power imbalance between Sudha and Ajit that creates the circumstances for their sexual relationship. Ajit, being established in society, exercises his power to initiate and control the relationship, while Sudha's agency remains limited—she never demands public recognition and maintains the employer-maid dynamic in public. Sudha's immediate return

to her domestic duties after the sexual encounter reaffirms her social position. The bed-to-floor shift visually reasserts class hierarchy between them, revealing how desire operates within rather than outside existing power relations. Ajit maintains sexual intimacy privately while enforcing social distance publicly because his class position gives him this power.

Similarly, Sharma's "The Mirror" illustrates how class relations actively generate sexual possibilities withinthe employer-maid dynamic. When Ishita accidentally sees Seema and her husband having a sexual encounter in her house, she doesn't dismiss them. Rather, she watches them secretly and derives sexual pleasure from it. Ishita uses her class position to watch rather than dismiss them, exercising power over her own space. However, when Seema, fully aware that she is being watched, continues to "perform" her sexuality, she exercises her power and makes a deliberate choice, despite having the option to stop. Although both women enjoy this arrangement, Seema's power remains limited,as the arrangement continues only as long as Ishita permits it. When both the maid and the employer confront each other due to accidentally being caught, Ishita not only denies that she used to watch them but also insults and dismisses Seema. This shows Ishita has the power to control the maid's sexual limitations through her social hierarchy, which allows her to permit and dismiss the arrangement at her own will.

Ajit and Ishita's sexual access exists through their economic relationships, not apart from them. This class difference complicates the hierarchical structures in which both the employers' and the maids' agency is negotiated—and often constrained—by the very systems of power that make those relationships possible. This ultimately demonstrates that power shapes sexual possibilities not by merely prohibiting them, but by structuring the conditions in which they emerge.

Both Zoya Akhtar and Konkona Sharma further challenge the conventions of mainstream cinema by exploring the sexual agency of women in their respective segments through Foucault's concepts of the deployment of alliance and sexuality. Foucault distinguishes between the "deployment of alliance"—traditional regulation of sexuality through "a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions" and the "deployment of sexuality," which emphasizes "the sensations of the

body, the quality of pleasures, and the nature of impressions"outside traditional family structures (106). The deployment of alliance operates through "rules defining the permitted and the forbidden," while the deployment of sexuality operates through "mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power" (106). This article argues that both the directors show how contemporary Indian women navigate between the accepted social norms (deployment of alliance) and their individual desire (deployment of sexuality) to find a sexual agency of their own.

In both narratives, the employers—Ajit and Ishita—maintain conventional hierarchies publicly, reflecting the deployment of alliance through adherence to social roles. Ajit ensures Sudha's invisibility in social contexts, while Ishita maintains her superior position publicly. The maids' deployment of alliance operates through them being aware of their social boundaries. While Sudha accepts the class difference publicly,Seema's sexual relationship, occurs within marriage and in the domestic space that represents proper family structure, reinforcing the deployment of alliance.

Conversely, the deployment of sexuality is exercised when Sudha and Seema prioritize their personal desires over social norms. Sudha's involvement with Ajit is based on erotic desire rather than reproduction or alliance-building, while Seema's deliberate choice to continue her sexual engagement despite knowing she is watched exemplifies the deployment of sexuality in action. Sharma's segment further empowers Ishita's sexual agency through her voyeuristic observation, driven solely by her own desire. Through navigating between the deployment of alliance and the deployment of sexuality, all three women—Sudha, Seema, and Ishita—establish sexual agency without necessarily disrupting societal norms.

Performing Alternative Femininity: Butler's Theory of Subversive Gender Performance in Working-Class Women

Butler's theory of performativity in her remarkable essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,"provides an essential paradigm inunderstanding how both Zoya Akhtar and Konkona Sharma challenged the concept of conventional femininity and gave sexual agency to their protagonists. Butler's theory of performativity

argues that gender is not an innate, fixed, or essentialidentity that we are born with, but instead,is a constructed "identity institutedthrough a stylized repetition of acts"that are culturally and socially regulated (519). Gender, according to Butler**,** does not express a pre-existing identity but instead brings that identity into being "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time"creating an illusion of a stable gender identity (523). With time, these "performances" get normalized, and, as Butler argues, gender becomes "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment that the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, comes to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (520).

Sudha and Seema, being working-class maids, are expected to perform the act of being silent, invisible, and asexual. However**,** they are neither naïve nor powerless. Both the women willfully and passionately engage in their sexual encounters and subvert the concept of accepted female sexuality, where women are expected to be passive and asexual. Ajit and Sudha's sexual encounter is shown only once in the film, but it's clear it wasn't a one-time thing. Rather, the ease with which they engage with each other establishes the idea that they have repeatedly and regularly been involved. Seema's intense sexual encounters are also shown to occur regularly, as indicated by the repeated scenes and the changing dates on the calendar, which mark the passage of each day. This performative repetitionof sexual involvement subverts their assigned identity and creates what Butler would argue to be "the possibility of a different sort of repeating" which would promote "in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (520**)**.

What is significant in Sudha's portrayal is that she does not demand public recognition or romantic involvement from Ajit. Instead, Sudha embodies a femininity that prioritizes desire over emotional dependence, demanding acknowledgment of her desires and identity, even if only in private. Again, Ishita's voyeurism doesn't make Seema shy or submissive. Instead, Seema transforms herself from an object of observation to an active performer who derives pleasure from being watched**.**

As Butler argues, "Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure" (531**)**. Both the women thus

construct an alternative gender reality—one where they assert their agency and challenge the passive, desexualized role traditionally assigned to them.

Theoretical Intersections: The Paradox of Marginalized Female Agency

While the previously mentioned theories individually contribute to the framework for understanding the sexual agency of women across class boundaries, it is at the intersection of these theories that the paradox of marginalized women's agency is revealed. When read through the lens of class difference, these three theories together expose how Sudha and Seema's agency is present yet constrained by the very factors that give them that agency. Analyzed from a Foucauldian lens, it is the class difference that creates the sexual possibilities, but at the same time it is the very difference in their class that also marginalizes them. Butler reveals how the repeated performativity that identifies them as working-class women is the same performative mechanism that makes them desirable subjects, and even though these films subvert Mulvey's argument of women being the objects of the narrative, it is through the understanding of Mulvey's lens that we realize the visual reality of these women's objectification within patriarchal class structures. The narrative makes them the subject, but the patriarchal reality within the narrative objectifies them.

As discussed in the Foucault section, it is not "despite"the class difference but "because of it"that the employer–maid dynamic enables these sexual relationships, which in turn grants sexual agency to both Sudha and Seema. Yet, paradoxically, the same power structure that enables their agency simultaneously constrains it — denying Sudha public recognition and cutting off Seema's agency the moment their arrangement is disturbed.

As already analyzed in Butler's section, the paradox in Seema and Sudha's identity takes place through their repetitive performance — the same repetitive acts that construct their sexual agency also reinforce their working-class identity, publicly reducing them to silent, invisible maids while privately recognizing them as desiring women. Their agency is thus real but conditional, existing only within the boundaries their class permits.

This article has established that both directors subvert Mulvey's objectification theory by centering these women in their narratives. Within

every other frame, we see Sudha and Seema's desire for pleasure along with their emotional turmoil, which drives the narrative. Yet, through this visual language of both the films, the reality of working-class maids in a patriarchal society is also revealed. With her worn-out clothes and bucket, and mopping the floor without any social recognition, Sudha is treated merely like an object in the background, even though she is the one who is central to the plot. In Seema's case, she is objectified through Ishita's eyes, who takes advantage of her own class privilege and secretly watches Seema. Even though Seema is empowered through her deliberate choice of being watched, this particular moment in the film also reveals her position in a patriarchal society. Women like Seema will be gazed upon, enjoyed, and objectified irrespective of what they want—and finally dismissed when their use is over or disturbed. The paradox of these women's identity being the narrative's subjects but patriarchy's objects is thus revealed through Mulvey's analysis.

Isolated reading of these three theories, even though it highlights their respective analyses in this article, does not capture the full complexity of marginalized women's agency. The intersectional reading, however, provides a clear understanding of the paradoxical nature of sexual agency for working-class women. Individual readings argued that both films provided sexual agency to the working-class maids, but the intersection reading reveals that the sexual agency that is gained is not only paradoxical but also liminal and functions conditionally.

Problematizing the Cinematic Angle: Format, Platform, and Representational Limits

In mainstream Indian cinema, working-class maids have always appeared as either comic reliefs or moral contrasts to upper-class heroines. But Akhtar and Sharma, by making Sudha and Seema the protagonists in their narratives, created a new cinematic category—that of the desiring working-class woman—which did not exist before. In other words, both directors legitimatized the existence of working-class maids as protagonists in cinematic narratives. However, this newly produced category still functions through existing social hierarchies, which determines the format, the release platform, and the audience.

Thus, even though a new category is formed through empowering working-class maids, it is still structured by old power relations.

The fact that both the filmsappear in the anthology format, extending up to 25-30 minutes, raises questions about whether these progressive narratives would be possible as mainstream full-length films, outside the anthology format. The release platform being OTT, Netflix to be specific, and not theatrical distribution, clearly determines the urban, English-fluent, upper-middle-class as the audience of these films, effectively denying access to working-class people in general. The irony is quite evident: the OTT platform operates as a class-segregated space where progressive narratives circulate among elites while remaining inaccessible to the very subjects they employ in their houses and represent in their films. One thus questions whether these films really challenge social hierarchies or whether they simply feed into privileged viewers' progressive content consumption—offering cultural validation without material transformation.

Conclusion

Even though most mainstream Indian films "just end up replicating a damsel-in-distress stereotype of Indian women," OTT platforms in India have begun to shift this representation(Sen 203).Chakraborty observes that, "A common and recurrent image that is often visible in various original web series and films released on SVOD platforms in India is that of a modern, empowered Indian woman. She appears to be independent, self-confident, and sexually liberated" (82).Yet representations of modern, empowered working-class women remain paradoxical—their sexual agency enabled and limited by the same class hierarchies. The films' release format and distribution mechanisms further deepen this paradox by denying working-class women access to content centered on their own experiences.

Released on the OTT platform Netflix, both Akhtar and Sharma thus challenge the patriarchal structures of mainstream Indian cinema by creating films that are women-centered. Sudha and Seema, despite their marginalized positions, defy societal expectations by prioritizing their desires, thereby claiming a space for female sexuality that is neither passive nor shameful. These narratives destabilize the patriarchal gaze and reimagine the politics of looking, acting,

and desiring from a female perspective—offering a significant yet constrained intervention in contemporary debates on gender, class, and sexuality in Indian cinema.

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In Search of Women's Collective: The Interplay between Individuality and Solidarity in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*

Garima

Abstract

The themes of sexuality and censorship have been perennial ones among feminists and progressive groups in the Indian context. It has its impression on cinema as well. This article is an attempt to closely examine the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), directed by Alankrita Shrivastava. The film revolves around four women: Leela, Shireen Aslam, Rihaana Abidi, and Usha Parmar (*Buaji*). The filmic-text unpacks the everyday struggles of these characters situated across diverse strata (class, caste, and religion). The article argues how the cinematic technique of Rosie's voiceover overlays these fragmented narrations into a search for a collective. Moreover, this particular voiceover technique throughout the narration elucidates the repressed sexual desires of women characters while juxtaposing it with the uncertainty of the situation as the narration culminates and hence consequently avoids their identification by the male gaze. Interestingly, it also led to the issue of censorship during the film's release. In a similar vein, this constant juxtaposing between their unrestrained desires and patriarchal daily lives underlines the interplay between individuality and collective. Hence, the article underscores how the solidarity among these women stands out as a paramount condition for the making of any such collective.

Keywords: Collective; Solidarity; Agency; Sexuality; Individuality

Introduction

The global field of feminist film studies has been broadly grouped into three major aspects: women as filmmakers, women on the screen, and women spectators. The issue of the representation of women has been one of many sites for debate and disagreement among feminists and progressive groups,

whether concerning beauty pageants, media, fashion, advertising industries, or pornography. On the one hand, some feminists attacked the 'commodification of women' in such industries and believed that such representations of women reinforced the patriarchal structure through commodifying the women's body, and in addition to this, it has a potential to induce men to violence and rape. This group of feminists believed that such representation of women reduced them merely to a 'commodity.' On the other hand, other feminists argued that such representations of women should be approached not as acts of women's subjugation but through the framework of freedom of expression.

It is evident that Bollywood, in the last few years, is providing more space to women'squestions, their anxieties, their fears, their choices and desires. In the neoliberal era, a significant facet of feminist discourse emphasizes on the female's independent identity and individuality. This prominent shift highlights the ongoing struggle of these women characters to seek their own independent identity or individuality. They portray characters undergoing a transformative journey, learning to assert their agency while challenging established societal norms related to marriage, such as Rani in *Queen* (Vikas Bahl, 2014), Tara in *Shuddh Desi Romance* (Maneesh Sharma, 2013). Such films exemplify women's autonomy, focus on their self-discovery and exploration of unconventional romantic choices. Moreover,they search for their individuality, face both physical and psychological exploitation in a patriarchal society (Mehak Deo in *Phobia*, Pavan Kirpalani, 2016; Kumari Pinky in *Udta Punjab*; Abhishek Chaubey, 2016). In their quest for independent identity, they also speak out against their sexual exploitation within the family (Veera Tripathi in *Highway*, Imtiaz Ali, 2014). It is explicit that the struggle for and desire to attain an independent identity is the core theme on which these films are premised. The question of individuality or independent identity is deeply connected to the question of marriage, sexuality, and work and at the same time, these themes are inter-related.

This article conducts a detailed study of the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* as it foregrounds the politics of sexuality and its connection to the other two themes. Simultaneously, it explores how the film depicts bonding among women that goes beyond class, caste, religion, and other social identities

and hence, illustrates the interplay between individuality and solidarity among women.

How does the film depict women's sexual agency in respect to its characters? What does the cinematic technique of voiceover amount to, and how does it become a ground for interplay between individuality and collectivity? How does the film underscore women's sexuality as a site for liberation as well as oppression in today's time? How is solidarity a paramount precondition for the realization of liberation against patriarchal oppression?

This article demands a rigorous understanding of both gender studies and film studies in order to justify some of the fundamental concerns related to film as a visual medium and concerns related to gender. In this regard, first, discourse analysis as a method, seems more apt to understand the politics of sexuality, as it can open up a space for us to analyze the extra-cinematic elements such as promotional and distribution strategies, controversy around the film's release, interviews with filmmakers and actors, etc. Secondly, we will employ textual analysis as a method to engage critically with the film-text through sequence and script breakdown. By adopting these methods, the article aims to uncover the latent dimensions of patriarchal and feminist assertions embedded within the film's narrative.

Let us begin with the most renowned essay in Feminist Film Studies, namely, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"[1] by Laura Mulvey, published in 1975. In her work, she incorporates a psychoanalytical approach to theorize the image of women in classical Hollywood narrative structure[2]. She quoted cult director of Hollywood, Budd Boetticher:

> What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concerns he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (Mulvey 488)

She argues that the woman in the classical Hollywood narrative structure merely exists as a sexualized body. It is through the main male protagonist's perspective that the spectators enter into the narration. The hero is the active controller of the look, whereas the heroine is the bearer of the gaze of male protagonists

and of spectators (irrespective of their actual gender). Woman, on screen, symbolizes the castration threat by the absence of a penis. She herself does not have any importance but only works as the signifier to the penis. The image of the woman destabilizes the narrative and merely exists as a visual pleasure. Heroines in these films seem 'individual' (or, one can say, a property of the family) before meeting the hero but after meeting him, she ultimately becomes his. She has no individuality. In contrast to this, Film historian Miriam Hansen raises a few substantial questions in her article "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship" published in 1986. Hansen incorporates Mary Ann Doane's distinction to make her point. Doane clearly opens up at least three illustrations in which identification operates in the spectator's vision. Firstly, there can be identification with the representation of a person (character/ process), which can take place when there are possibilities of the female spectator as the transvestite (changing their dress, crossdressing). Secondly, she talks about "recognition of particular objects, persons, or actions as such (stars, narrative, images)" (Hansen 269). In this case, there will be a possibility for the female spectator to have a passive narcissistic identification with the female star as an erotic object which has been created by the industry. Thirdly, "identification with the 'look' with oneself as the condition of perception" (Hansen 269). Mulvey, in a way, stressed on the 'masculinisation' of the gaze of spectators irrespective of their actual sex. Hansen questions this kind of analysis, drawing from 'women-oriented films' of the 1940s. Do all the 'masculine' genres take away the agency of the female spectator? Does the genre like action foster a more narcissistic identification with the female character as compared to other genres such as the musical or romantic comedy? These fundamental questions shaped the discourse within the feminist film studies and remained pertinent in the context of Hindi cinema too. With regard to Hindi cinema, the question of women is related to themes such as nationalism, sexuality, censorship, culture, and other related themes. Our attempt would be to highlight the primary debates in Hindi cinema that majorly focus on the representation of women.

M. Madhava Prasad discusses the image of women and its relation with nationalism and sexuality in 1970s films in his chapter "Guardians of the View: The Prohibition of the Private."[7] His work gives us one way of showing how

film analysis connects with the questions of the state and the ideology of the Indian family to make arguments about the representation of women's sexuality on screen. He commences with a report from 1969 that claims the prohibition of kissing scenes in films was based on an 'unwritten rule.' There were no set rules for showing lovemaking scenes on screen. There appeared to be a 'ban' on kissing scenes linked with the nationalist culture. It was seen as an alien to Indian culture, regardless of where the film was shot. Kissing scenes were deemed a Western concept. It was thought that there would be unity among filmmakers to eliminate the 'ban.' However, some prominent film personalities opposed the kissing sequences in the films. The heroines also tried to maintain their purity and chastity by refraining from kissing on screen. While providing examples from several films of how kissing was kept out of sight in the cinema, Prasad raises several questions about what was problematic about showing the kiss on screen. Why could other forms of sexual display be passed without any difficulty by the censor? He brings forward the contradiction between the kissing scenes (which is an unwritten ban) and the idea of a sexualized female body in the dance numbers. How is it that the female body has been a spectacle for the public and is not part of private representation? This is because, firstly, the voyeuristic song and dance sequence has conventionally been considered as part of public discourse/representation. Secondly, these have been worked out as Mulvey pointed out in terms of visual pleasure. Sexualized female bodies in the dance numbers are not censored as they exist in a public zone. With the passage of time, the family system has moved to the nuclear family, and the plot of the films has shifted to the couple. Nonetheless, kissing scenes between the couple have been deemed as a private act, and so it should not be shown to the audience which occupies the normative position of society, and hence supportive of the feudal structure of Indian society. Prasad's analysis, therefore, questions the representation of sexuality in the context of his notion of the feudal family, where it is prohibited to represent the private. In today's neoliberal and globalizing context; one is, therefore, tempted to ask whether the feudal family and its prohibitions are a thing of the past in contemporary Bollywood. Why, in present-day cinema, kissing and sexual relations between couples have become so common? How are ideas of national identity still attached to the representation of women on screen? Does the 'new woman' of today's time have the responsibility to maintain the kind of honor of Indian customs?

These were the questions that can be important to discuss further; however, this article will focus on *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and how it had to face censorship initially. Why was it treated differently? We will discuss these questions further in this work.

In the above context, Ranjani Mazumdar differentiates between the heroine and the vamp discussed in a chapter on *Desiring Women* from her book *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, published in 2007. The image of vamp has symbolized a Western intrusion into Indian films with her hypersexual and illicit personality as compared to the heroine who represents 'Indian' women. On the one hand, the image of the heroine signifies purity, chastity, or 'Indianness' and in contrast to it, the vamp figure exists to break relationships, occupies the outside space such as the night club, dances provocatively, is sexually active, and hence, gains a distinct identity from the Indian women. The distinction between the vamp and heroine dominated Bombay cinema till the 1980s. However, during the era of globalization, this binary disrupted when the heroines began to perform these item numbers and opened up a new space for desire and sexual discourse, for instance, Madhuri Dixit performed an item number in Subhash Ghai's *Khalnayak* (1993).

The above literature foregrounds how the distinction between the heroine and item girl was disrupted and almost diminished in the post-liberalization period and the women's sexuality was one of the primary aspects to distinguish between the two. Now, let us come to the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* that does not create any kind of dichotomy, moreover, it subverts the notion of sexuality with respect to women.

The Autonomy of Erotica Against the Violence of Censorship

Lipstick Under My Burkha is a notable film that marks a critical moment in discussions around women and sexuality in Indian cinema. The film delves into the lives of four women navigating their desires and identities in a patriarchal society.It was produced by Prakash Jha and JB Angels. ALT Balaji, Balaji Motion Pictures, and Star Synergy Entertainment distributed it. It received significant attention at the global level, screened at several film festivals, and received awards such as the Oxfam Award for Best Film on Gender Equality at the Mumbai Film Festival in October 2016, and among others. However, it

was officially released in India on 21st July, 2017, amidst significant controversy. Initially, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) refused to issue the certificate. It stated, "The story is lady oriented, their fantasy above life. There are continuous sexual scenes, abusive words, audio pornography and a bit sensitive touch about one particular section of society, hence, film refused under guidelines 1 (a), 2 (vii), 2 (ix), 2 (x), 2 (xi), 2 (xii) and 3 (i)[2]." It is worth noting that the accusation of audio pornography, and the depiction of fantasy above life could be linked to Rosie's voiceover as *lipstick waale sapne* (lipstick-coloured dreams). While discussing the film, Abhija Ghosh outlines the metaphorical usage of burkha and lipstick in the title as she writes:

> The burkha, at once identifiable as the stereotyped mark of gendered conventions and traditions of a religious community, becomes a leitmotif in the film and draws women across religions under its metaphoric and material fold. On one hand, the film uses it, almost cheekily, as an incredible mode of social mobility, personal aspirations and **reversal of the male gaze**. The lipstick on the other hand remains **a code for erotica and fantasy**. For the women in Lipstick, their bodies are neither limited by their sexual lives nor can they be shamed for their desires. Instead, they are driven by many kinds of desires and aspire for many forms of freedom. (332, emphasis added)

It would be significant to delineate how lipstick as a code for erotica and fantasy makes the reversal of the male gaze possible, while placing the voiceover as a particular technique overlaying *lipstick wale sapne* throughout the film. Therefore, it seems crucial to inquire into the unsettling effects of this technique in the filmic-text. The contestations between Pahlaj Nihalani, the chairperson of CBFC, and Alankrita Srivastava is a symptomatic description of entrenched patriarchy, thanks to this unsettling effect. Nihalani stated that the film served as propaganda to grab attention. In this tussle, the director strongly asserted, "it's feminist film with a strong female voice which challenges patriarchy. I think that's why they don't want to certify it. As a filmmaker, I stand by the story and will fight for it till the end[3]."

Feminists, more generally, and those who have been closely engaged with analyzing specific films have addressed the issue of censorship from different

perspectives over an extended period. An early site of debate related to 'the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act' was implemented in 1986. It came into existence after considerable demand from a section of the women's movement. Many feminists had been insisting on some regulation over the 'indecent' representation of women. The objective of this law was "to prevent the depiction of the figure of a woman in a manner which is derogatory to women or denigrating women which is likely to corrupt public morality" (Agnes 138). Additionally, in her introduction to the book *Gender and Censorship*, Brinda Bose sees a close link between censorship and the state's interventionist policies. She argues that it is the female body that has been so critical in acts of state censorship of sexuality, since the female body is the site of honour as well as the shame for the nation. This has taken on heightened visibility with the current agendas of that time to protect the image of the Hindu women. They created the image of Indian women to preserve sexual purity, which symbolizes the mythical image of what India is. On the other hand, the Indian women's movement must rethink who the Indian woman is. Documentary filmmaker and film theorist Shohini Ghosh believes that feminists and minorities will gain rather than lose if they demand more diverse representation and more discussion, rather than remaining silent or seeking ban. At the same time, she made a point that one must understand the difference between sexual explicitness and sexism in debates over censorship, since, it is sexism rather than sexual explicitness that is the source of harm. So, we need to keep this difference and discussion in mind while examining the autonomy of *lipstick wale sapne* as explicit (censored) desires of these characters. While revealing contradictions between desire and reality, the film portrays censored desire from the very beginning. Shrivastava, in this way, endeavours to represent what is prohibited, censored, and ignored in society. Censorship became a perennial theme for feminists in India, especially after liberalisation. S. Ghosh discusses several controversies over advertisements, films, and songs. There was a particular controversy that occurred in the year of 1993 over the song "*Choli ke peeche kya hai* [what is behind the blouse]*?*" from the film *Khalnayak* [Villain], where she sees a convergence between right wing and certain feminist groups over the song's obscenity, including an inability to distinguish between different versions of the song in question. On this, Ghosh writes, "The protesters demanded censorship not of the version that actually

depicted violence against women but one that represented sexual agency on their part" (Ghosh 261). However, with the intensification of liberalisation, the question of sexual agency has mutated to what amounts to my body, my choice, depicted in a 2-minute-long Vogue video featuring Deepika Padukone. Namrata Rele Sathe, in her recent book *The Neoliberal Self in Bollywood: Cinema, Popular Culture and Identity,* unpacks the ideology of choice deeply embedded in neoliberal feminist subjectivity (2). While unraveling the class character of #VogueEmpower India Campaign, she writes:

> Vogue India envisages emancipation as reflected in its own audience: upper class women who can afford to buy an English-language magazine that costs INR 150 (approximately USD 2.50) per month. I will not be too hasty in dismissing the Vogue Empower advertisement as it raises pertinent questions with regard to a woman's freedom and engages in the politics of sexuality, but the ideas expressed in the video are embedded with the economic context of neoliberalism. (2)

One needs to keep this neoliberal context in mind while discussing the controversy around *Lipstick Under My Burkha*; nevertheless, it is pertinent to underline that the film tries to delve into diverse levels of social stratification across class, caste, and religion. Additionally, by keeping Burkha in the very forefront, the film has invited notorious attention from the Muslim community as Bhopal's All India Muslim Tyohar Committee (AIMTC) issued a notice to boycott the film and claimed that this film hurts the religious sentiments of the community by presenting the *burkha* in a bad light[4]. The president of AIMTC said, "How narrow can a person think? Those who have scripted and directed this movie have insulted our religious sentiments. AIMTC's Mumbai unit have already initiated a legal action on the matter. The protest will be taken to highest possible level[5]." Despite the controversy surrounding the film, the media largely supported it and underlined its 'women-oriented' elements within the framework of neoliberal feminist subjectivity as we discussed above. They found it absurd that the film was denied certification on the grounds of being 'too women-oriented' and for showing women as sexually active. It garnered significant attention from the media and public, who supported the film on various social media platforms as a carrier of neoliberal socialization. Eventually,

it was released with an 'A' certificate by the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal (FCAT), albeit with a few cuts. Prominent investors such as Prakash Jha and Ekta Kapoor got involved in the film and further contributed to its eventual release.

Solidarity Among Fragmented Individualities: Women Across Social Stratification

In her long essay *Fire*: *A Queer Film Classic* (2010), Shohini Ghosh notes that the representation of female bonding has been excluded from popular Indian cinema, unlike male bonding. Films like *Razia Sultan* (1983), *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Humjoli* (1970), *Mandi* (1983), etc., could represent female bonding, but only to a limited extent, due to the centrality of the male protagonist in the narrative structure, even within the courtesan's films. Ruth Vanita, extensively, records the world of the courtesan in Bombay cinema[6] in *Dancing with the Nation: Courtesans in Bombay Cinema* (2017). She writes, "Films do not depict courtesan's relationship with one another in detail, even though in real life these were usually their longest, most stable relationship" (Vanita 39). Vanita also argues that the bonding among women is less idealized or usually remains invisible. Adding to this, Ghosh explores how *Fire* provided an eye to appreciate the homosocial or homosexual relationship in popular cinema, allowing one to "see without looking." Films like *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Masti* (2004), *Men Not Allowed* (2006), *Dostana* (2008), etc., in which homosocial or homosexual relationships appear, usually present an ambivalent or homophobic attitude towards homosexuality. Without going into the in-depth study of these films, the central point for Ghosh is that female bonding in the Hindi cinema became more visible in popular Hindi cinema post *Fire*. There are various films today that explore female bonding such as *Parched* (Leela Yadav, 2015), *Angry Indian Goddesses* (Pan Nalin, 2015), *Veere Di Wedding* (Shashanka Ghosh, 201) etc. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is one among them that explores gender dynamics across social stratification: religion, class, caste, and so on. Nonetheless, a kind of friendship can be observed among the characters regardless of their socio-cultural identities. They are not marked as women who carry a 'good' or 'bad' character. They are just women, and to fulfill their dreams, even though this may be contradictory

to their families, these women support each other without any excuses or need for reasons.

Image: 1

Image: 2

Image: 3

Image: 4

Image: 5

Image: 6

As an audience (Image 1 to 6), we first see these women sitting together on a rooftop, an open space where Leela runs her beauty parlor. The peculiarity of this space is that it is the common space for these women to share their experiences, not merely their happiness or their sorrows, but also their sexual lives, which otherwise remain hidden. Here, it is essential to examine the social relationships between these women. *Buaji* is sitting and secretly reading an erotic book. Leela's mother is giving *Buaji* a leg massage and praising her decision, saying that even God Ram himself could not have thought of a better groom for her daughter, Leela. Then another unknown girl sitting with them adds that even Leela does not have to go too far after marriage, since her home will be nearby. Anyone can go whenever they feel like getting waxed or other services done at the parlor.This instance conveys women's desire to go out and not confine themselves to the four walls of the house. On the other hand, there is Rihaana, who is among these women, but rarely engages with others and remains silent in a corner.


Image: 7


Image: 8


Image: 9

The film portrays a unity among these women from different social strata. *Buaji* maintained unity among these families. The image 7 above depicts *Buaji* who has created a 'family' in which neighbors are considered 'equal' within the family, irrespective of their class, caste, or religious differences. The women of these houses share a bond where they hide each other's secrets and share each other's pain. For instance, *Buaji* and Leela know that Shireen has been working as a saleswoman, going door-to-door to sell her products, and that she has not even told her husband. In another instance, when the shopkeeper taunts *Buaji*, while she is buying a swimming suit, Shireen helps her buy one. Leela drops Rihaana off for her late-night party and also prepares *Buaji* for the Diwali party by coloring her hair black, applying wax, and so on. In addition to these narrativized instances, this is the story of the dream, *lipstick wale sapne*, which, with its eroticized fantasy embedded within their bitter realities. With this, the film seemingly suggests that the key to fulfil their dreams is fettered in the very social constraints that they are part of. No need to say though, that Rosie's voiceover unsettles these social constraints by deploying 'censored desires.' In the filmic-text, this becomes a cinematic technique that constellates fragmented experiences of women across diverse arenas within their conflictual reality. This amounts to strong homosocial relationships in the film which have been missing from Indian cinema for so long. One can say, following Shohini Ghosh's insight, that these homo-social relations, particularly among women, have become a prominent trend in recent cinema, especially post-*Fire*. Interestingly, this has not been a concern in earlier cinema, including in alternative cinema (though these are exceptions as well like *Mirch Masala*), as Shamita Das Dasgupta mentioned it in "Feminist Consciousness in Woman-Centered Hindi Films" published in the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1996. Dasgupta pointed out that Hindi cinema has been a victim of androcentricism, in which

women either have to compromise with the structure or die within that structure. In contrast to this, Shrivastava leaves the characters and hence, spectators unsettled by the short-circuiting of desire (Rosie's voiceover) with the bitter reality of *Buaji*, whois thrown out of her household. This could be marked as the decisive conjuncture of solidarity among fragmented individualities. There was a little room for exploring individuality or the independent identity of women during the period discussed by Dasgupta. Nonetheless, it is a contemporary cinematic expression that is providing more space for the independent identity or individuality of women. Moreover, the women characters in the film under consideration seek independent identity or individuality irrespective of their socio-economic location. With this, the question of agency becomes pertinent here, which can be further explored in the following section.

The Sexual Explicitness in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*: A Question of Sexual Agency

Shohini Ghosh mobilizes sexual explicitness against sexism as we have seen in the earlier section. The peculiarity of this explicitness lies in its autonomy against any relationality imposed on women's sexuality by ideological rationality. Whether it is patriarchy, capitalism, or nationalism. This explicitness in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* becomes the central theme, which led to controversy surrounding its release. It faced opposition for showing sexuality, quite unlike the other film, for instance, *Queen* where the character of Rani kisses a French guy to show that Indians are not lagging behind even in kisses and on the other hand, she dreamed of losing her virginity after marriage with her lover. It depicted a monogamous marriage structure. It even incorporated sexuality through reinforcing a form of femininity that could glorify the nation (*Queen*, 1:58:41-2:01:15). On the other hand, the most controversial aspect about *Lipstick Under My Burkha* was the question of women's sexuality, which gave it massive publicity as well. The filmmakers also asserted the sexuality aspect on various platforms, which is even depicted through the poster of the film, where we can see a middle finger to patriarchal society. This seems to indicate a new moment where sexuality can be popular, unlike the controversy seen in earlier cinema. This film is primarily centered on four women: Leela, Shireen Aslam, Rihaana Abidi, and Usha Parmar (*Buaji*). Unlike the disciplined character of Rani (*Queen)*, the female protagonists here openly explore their

sexuality at different ages. The pertinence of this film lies in its depiction of sexuality as an act for the liberation of a woman, but simultaneously, it is also a point of exploitation and oppression. This corresponds to the final sequence of short-circuiting of voice-over with a visual depiction of four downtrodden but seemingly determined women for their dreams.

Leela works as a beautician, runs her own beauty parlor and is financially independent. She stays with her mother on rent at *Buaji*'s house. She has a Muslim boyfriend, Arshad (played by Vikrant Massey), with whom she openly engages in a sexual relationship, unlike *Queen*'s Rani who has not even kissed her fiancée before marriage. Nevertheless, Leela has been forced to marryManoj (played by Vaibhav Tatwawaadi), who can provide her with financial security, unlike her boyfriend, who does not have his own house. The groom has been chosen by her mother. Leela's mother works as a model for the artist. The condition of Leela's family is evident in one of the film's crucial sequences in which Leela's mother is sitting nude and posing for the artist. There is one discussion between Leela and her mother when Leela reaches her mother's workplace to refuse the marriage.

> Leela: *Kal gusse mein jyada bolg ayi. Amma mujhe shaadi nahi karni hai.* [I said too much in anger last night. Amma, I do not want to get married].
>
> Leela's mother: *toh uss Mussale ki rakhel banna hai? Ya meri tarah? 17 saal se yahi baithi hu. Sardi, garmi, mahina lage tab bhi.* [So, you want to have an extra marital affair with that Muslim man, or you want to be like me, who has been sitting here for 17 years when it is extremely cold, hot, and even during periods].
>
> Leela: *Toh chhod de na. Main sambhal lungi.* [So, leave it, I will take care of everything].
>
> Leela's mother:*Tera nashedi baap kitna karzch hod kar mara tha pata hai tujhe?* [Do you know how much your drunkard father borrowed before his death?]
>
> Leela: *Amma main business karungi, main paise kamaungi,*

> *main ghar chalungi…* [Amma, I will do business, earn money, I will run the home…]
>
> Leela's mother: *Kitna bhi kamayegi, ghar toh nahi kharid sakti na? Manoj mere liye ghar kharid raha hai.* [Whatever you will earn, but can't buy a house. Manoj is purchasing a house for me]. (53:03-54:33)

The aforementioned sequence shows that Leela has been forced by her mother to marry a man who can afford her a house and can provide a luxurious life in which she will not have to work after marriage. Leela, and even her mother, would not be able to afford such a house in their entire lives because of the debts left by her father. Her mother had to pose nude in front of artists for her livelihood for many years. In this circumstance, Leela's marriage can provide a better life for Leela and her mother. Her mother also refers to Leela's lover, Arshad, who can only have an extra-marital affair with Leela instead of marrying her because of the difference in religion.

In another sequence of about one minute, Leela enters a poorly lit space. She lies down near someone and starts kissing (1:24:39-1:25:38). Then we hear Arshad's voice, asking how she got there. Leela assertively says that she is going to get married, wouldn't he stop this? Will he let it go like this? She then takes him to the washroom. It is absolutely unclear in the film what kind of space this was, since it does not look like Arshad's home, but rather some sort of shared space with a large number of men sleeping there alongside Arshad. Leela does not care about those men; she kisses Arshad desperately and insists that he go to the washroom with her. Then we see Leela and Arshad are sexually involved with each other. Leela tells Arshad that she has booked tickets for Delhi for both of them (1:26:19-1:28:09). Arshad angrily asks, "Why don't you go with your fiancée?" She answers that she does not want to stay there. She wants to go to Delhi with him (Arshad). Arshad replies that he is fed up with all this. Apart from this, Leela constantly insists that Arshad have sex with her. Arshad gets angry and says that she wants only sex and nothing else. Should he call those four boys inside to have sex with her? Leela slaps him for this, and he angrily tells her to get out. So here, doesn't Leela's insist on having sex disrupts the dominant sexual gaze of the patriarchal society that considers women as just passive sexual subjects? The eroticised landscape of

Lipstick Under My Burkha makes it possible by focusing on the act of looking (onto Arshad) by Leela within a dimly lit up space surrounded by a number of men. With this cinematic intervention, Shrivastava provides a critical space to spectators where one can identify with the assertive gaze of Leela and hence, negates the manipulative male gaze. From Hansen's perspective, we can definitely call it the reciprocity of gaze against male gaze. This is precisely the point where we can notice how there was a consensual sexual relationship between Leela and Arshad. Simultaneously, we need to think about how the sexual agency of the woman can turn into oppression at any point of time. A disrespectful abuse by Arshad is a short-circuiting of the bitter reality of male gaze with the assertive sexual agency of Leela. Therefore, sexual agency of a woman cannot be the sole vehicle for empowerment or liberation because of the subordinate position of women. There is a complex relation between sexual agency and sexual exploitation in the case of women. Similarities can be observed in the other characters too. Shireen Aslam is a mother of three sons and secretly works as a saleswoman. Her husband stays in Saudi Arabia most of the timefor business and returns for a few days. It appears that the relationshipbetween Shireen and her husband is mainly limited to forceful intercourse. At one point of time, during their intercourse , Shireen asks if she could get money a little early this time, but her husband says that she should not interfere in the matter of money (20:20-56). In between, Shireen says she is feeling pain but her husband asks why she did not get it before. Is it only after coming from Saudi Arabia that she is getting pain? At another point of time, Shireen visits a doctor who advises her to use a condom otherwise it would be risky for her life. Shireen replies that her husband forgets everything when he is emotional. There is a scene where her husband raped her as punishment for secretly doing a job, for speaking in front of her husband, for questioning his agency or authority in the house. Likewise, there is the interesting case of *Buaji*, Usha Parmar, who plays the role of a widow, after losing her husband in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Director Alankriti Shrivastava, on one hand, depicts an older woman indulging in phone sex/ masturbating with a younger man, a theme on which there has been a long silence in cinema. Shrivastava also shows how a woman has to pay back for such an act when *Buaji* was thrown out of the house by her nephew, Ram. Rihaana Abidi, another Muslim woman, is a college going girl who dreams of becoming a

singer like Miley Cyrus. She starts interacting with her college friend, Dhruv. Eventually, Dhruv leaves her when the police come to arrest Rihaana for stealing from the mall. This is the point when Dhruv says he does not recognize her, and Rihaana's college mate tells her how she (her friend) got pregnant. In the case of Rihaana, she found out that Dhruv had dumped the girl after making her pregnant, and this could happen to her as well. So, in the case of all the characters, we see that their desire for a sexual relationship with their lover or husband makes them conscious of being the inferior sex. While they definitely can enjoy their sexual agency through hiding themselves from the family or society, sexual agency, in the case of women, does not just lead to pleasure or liberation, but can result in oppression or suppression for them.

Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* places the audience in a critical position as the film appears to be a feminist film, a claim that the director has also made. The instances described above suggest that these women tried to explore or practice their sexual agency, and they were able to do so to some extent, but, at the same time, had to confront their subordinate position as women. Shireen's situation is depicted somewhat differently. We do not know what her sexual desires might be, but she is reduced to a suppressed partner in her sexual relations with her husband. She had to undergo multiple abortions. Usha was thrown out of the house, and Rihaana was stopped from attending college and forced to marry. These women tried to explore their sexuality but had to encounter the social consequences. They were humiliated for practicing it. It shows how, in the case of women, sexuality can be a point to liberate them, but also an act of exploitation and oppression. Here, it would be significant to bring Silvia Federici's penetrating gaze, which unravels sexuality in terms of work in 1975's essay "Why Sexuality is Work." She explicitly mentions that sexuality is repressed in older women, and according to her, this repression is a function through which the women's sexuality has been controlled socially. She writes:

> … the main reason why we cannot enjoy the pleasure that sexuality may provide is that for women sex is work. Giving pleasure to man is an essential part of what is expected of every woman.
>
> Sexual freedom does not help. Certainly, it is important that we

> are not stoned to death if we are "unfaithful," or if it is found that we are not 'virgins.' But "sexual liberation" has intensified our work. In the past, we were just expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double workday, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing. For women the right to have sex is the duty to have sex and to enjoy it (something which is not expected of most jobs), which is why there have been so many investigations, in recent years, concerning which parts of our body—whether the vagina or the clitoris—are more sexually productive.
>
> But whether in its liberalized or its more repressive form, our sexuality is still under control. The law, medicine, and our economic dependence on men, all guarantee that, although the rules are loosened, spontaneity is ruled out of our sexual life. Sexual repression within the family is a function of that control. (25)

Apart from the issue of sexuality, this film is the story of working women such as Shireen Aslaam, Leela, and Rihaana. In the neoliberal era, the market is open. It can provide numerous opportunities for women to explore and develop their independent identities, leading to a constant desire to explore more, as seen in the case of these characters. On the one hand, these women's desires, and aspirations have often been suppressed in the name of being a wife, mother, and so on. Shireen Aslam wants to work in the sales and marketing sector to earn better. Leela desires to go to Delhi with her lover Arshad to start a business, and Rihaana, who stitches Burkha in her father's *Burkha* shop, dreams of becoming a singer.

In the context of religion, it is worth highlighting that, on the one hand, the Burkha, as a metaphor of constraints, seemingly restricts women characters, whereas later in the last half an hour, we see a special day for Rosie's dream on the occasion of Diwali. Hence, one can deduce it is not only *burkha* which restricts the desiring body of women but also socially determined festivity, which attempts to repress and thereby organize their joyousness according to the dominant order of patriarchy. All the religious practices are equally involved in this as one can see how Shrivastava has drawn Muslim male characters,

whether it be Rihaana's father or Shireen Aslam's husband. Both have been depicted in very conservative and even oppressive ways. At Rihaana's home, the audience can see that it was Rihaana's father's decision to send her to college. However, the film neglects the day-to-day contradiction between Rihaana and her parents. Moreover, the film depicts Rihaana as someone who sees liberation in wearing jeans as she shouts the slogan *Jeans ka hakk jeene ka hakk* [the right to wear jeans, is the right to live life]. The film could be read as portraying the *Burkha* as symbolizing oppression, whereas wearing jeans and applying lipstick become acts of liberation. One needs to keep in mind that the lipstick- symbolizing erotic fantasy, as Rosie's voiceover suggests, remains confined under the *Burkha*. Hence, the potential of liberation through censored desire (of voiceover) is under the dictates of patriarchal oppression, which can be realized only with the solidarity and hence, with the search for collective. On the extreme, Shireen Aslam's husband, who spends most of his time in Saudi Arabia, seems to consider women as his sexual object and has more than one marriage, which does not break the stereotype or bring something new for the audience about the representation of the Muslim community on screen. Rather, it shows entrenched patriarchy in the Muslim community. On the other hand, Srivastava critically engages with the Diwali festival as well when *Buaji* was thrown out. The entire city has been lit up with candles, *diyas*, and lights. Everyone is going to visit the fair. On the contrary, on the same day, Rihaana's father prohibited her from attending college, and her mother was ordered to find a boy for her. Shireen has been raped by her husband and Leela, whose marriage has almost broken because of her sexual relationship with another man, is confused. Moreover, there is a sequence when *Buaji*, as a motherly figure for the entire society, has been thrown out of the house by Ram (Usha's brother's son) and the other family members. This is a pertinent sequence around 4 minutes long in which she is collecting her belongings and suddenly falls (1:42:52-1:46:57). The space has been lit up with *diyas*. Everyonehas become merely a spectator of this moment. In the background, we can also hear the sound of crackers and celebration. Diwali, as a festival, is celebrated in the Hindu family system to commemorate the day Lord *Rama* returned home. According to Hindu mythology, *Sita* had to appear

for Agni Pariksha to prove her purity. Against this backdrop, Alankrita Shrivastava seems to be asserting women's sexuality through her different characters. Contrary to the usual endings of the films, it does not provide a solution to the circumstances but takes the audience into a more critical, even tragic situation. Perhaps she also intends to portray the situation of today's women through Usha and other characters, as well as the consequences they might have to bear, even in the present times. Women have been preferred as sex objects but not as active sexual partners. Nevertheless, the film does not end on a tragic note. In the finalsequence, even though Shrivastava presents this in a very romanticized manner, all these four women sit together and start focusing on the story of Rosie and her *Lipstick wale sapne* (1:46:58-1:50:00). They finally light up cigarettes and laugh. This is how the film ends. Overall, the film seems to underline the sexual aspect of the four women characters. Nonetheless, the question arises whether this film limits itself to the assertion of women's sexuality? Could this then be the very limitation of the film?

Conclusion

It is surprising that we hardly witness any direct attempt by these women to assert their rights by questioning the patriarchal tendencies of the family structure, which they are part of. However, we certainly see their conversation on how women have been suppressed in society. Beyond these narrativized instances and conversations, the filmic-text is pervaded with Rosie's erotic fantasy. Though the film focuses on the lives of these women, the character of Rosie with her eroticized desire allegorically connects these fragmented narrations into a cinematic poetry. It is a sharp contrast with these women who identify themselves with the fictional character of Rosie and her erotica but at the same time, also acknowledge the inconsistency between Rosie's dream and their life. Can we call this simultaneous identification and acknowledgement by these women an example of sisterhood among them? How does the spectator identify with the identification of these characters with the erotica of *lipstick wale sapne*? What does this double identification amount to? It seems pertinent to underline here that some prominent cinematic depictions in this direction render this bonding as sisterhood (Ahmad et al.; Thakur). Nonetheless, this article, while questioning this presupposed

sisterhood, unpacks solidarity among these women characters. Undoubtedly, it envisages an incipient collective. *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* succinctly underscores the potential of women's collectives towards their end. However, the end is unclear in the latter. The film is entirely silent on whether it is the end of their pain or else worse is yet to come. It entails a provocative ending; however, it is unclear what provokes in them and the spectator? Is it an impulsive provocation or a critical one? What sort of realization is this, where women find themselves in a room together, with their limited participation in decision-making and an uncertain future? Doesn't this render it as numbness instead of provocation? The entire situation melts down as Rihaana Abidi says, "*yeh stories hi sab gadbad kar deti hai, jhoot bolti hai ki humari lives bhi Rosie jaisi ho sakti hai*" [these stories are the ones that create problems and lie that our lives can also be like Rosie's life]. Then *Buaji* replied, "*Jhoot bolti hai par sapne dekhne ki himmat bhi deti hai*" [it lies but gives courage to dream]. However, the narration, in the background, proceeds with a description of Rosie's life, claiming that now she would not do anything in secret but would take the challenge herself. Moreover, that is how Rosie finds the key to her life with herself only. With the uncertain future, Shrivastava seemingly opts for an open ending which unsettles us as spectators. We are left puzzled about their tomorrow and here, precisely, double identification works as we are identifying with these four characters who are uncertain about their tomorrow. Nevertheless, they are looking at themselves through the gaze of Rosie and thereby negating the externalized male gaze. Our encounter as spectators with the looks of these characters via Rosie's gaze within the visualization of a lit cigarette and their laughter, opens the narration from its very inside while rejecting all possible futures residing here.[8] This is what the incipient collective of here and now is premised upon, solidarity among them, which would bring a new light into their lives. Undoubtedly, the solidarity among these women is a liberation for Srivastava. One can say that the film's feminism is achieved by bringing the women together, possibly to fight a different kind of oppression. Hence, the aforementioned discussion of the films presents, in a way, the interplay between individuality and solidarity among the women characters, and points towards the women's collective across different social identities.

End Notes

1 Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film and Theory*, Robert Stam and Toby Miller (ed.) Blackwell Publishers, 2000, pp. 483-494.

2. David Bordwell's text *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures* is based on the idea that a psychologically motivated individual desires to attain some goals and hence enters into a conflict. The plot of the film determines the time or duration within which he must accomplish a particular task/goal. A deadline is also measured by a calendar, a clock or any timing machine. Usually, the film's ending sequence depicts the hero challenging the villain to save the heroine within 24 hours. The classical Syuzhet/plot divides into a double causal structure or plot lines: on the one hand, he engages in a heterosexual romance and on the contrary, he desires to achieve some goals or to conquer some conflict. Eventually, both these dual conflicts coincide at the time of climax. Finally, the character attains his targets and finally enjoys a romantic relationship with his lover.

3. Lohana, Avinash, "CBFC refuses to certify Prakash Jha's Film 'Lipstick Under my Burkha." *Mumbai Mirror*, 23 Feb., 2017, https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/cbfc-refuses-to-certify-prakash-jhas-film-lipstick-under-my-burkha/articleshow/57302257.cms.

4. TNN. "Muslim body boycotts 'Lipstick,' warns crew & cast." *The Times of India*, Bennett Coleman & Co. Ltd. 26 Feb, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/muslim-body-boycotts-lipstick-warns-crew-cast/articleshow/57351203.cms

5. "More trouble for Prakash Jha's Lipstick Under My Burkha: Muslim body boycotts film, threatens cast and crew," *InUTH*, 26 Feb., 2017, https://www.inuth.com/entertainment/bollywood/more-trouble-for-prakash-jhas-lipstick-under-my-burkha-muslim-body-boycotts-film-threatens-cast-and-crew/

6. Vanita uses the term *Bombay cinema* instead of *Bollywood*. See *Introduction* of her book.

7. This could be connected to Madhava Prasad's thesis of undeclared ban on kissing scenes in the cinema of 1970's for preserving Indian values, whereas with the neoliberal shift in the function of ideology, the act of kiss is mobilized under the service of nationalism as depicted in *Queen.* In the former, the ideology functions by hiding the act whereas in later it functions precisely by showing it.

8. "Finally, four women laughed and lit up cigarettes. Here, we need to think about the politics of what the cigarette symbolizes. Moreover, what is the politics of it? This is the point that smoking equals liberation." (Anupama Chopra)

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Voices of Resistance: A Feminist Reading of Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar in Indian Classical Music

Moumita Biswas

Abstract

This article presents a feminist reading of the lives and legacies of two significant artists in Indian classical music, Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar. They navigated complex social structures shaped by courtesan traditions, the recording industry, and a society that celebrated and stigmatised women performers. Gauhar Jaan, one of India's earliest recording artists, challenged Victorian morality and colonial scrutiny. She controlled her voice, public image, and modes of self-representation, reconfiguring possibilities for female agency in modern musical culture. Begum Akhtar, revered as the *Mallika-e-Ghazal*, transformed personal loss and institutional exclusion into a powerful musical idiom. She reclaimed the *ghazal* as a space for feminine emotion, dissent, and intellectual seriousness. The article highlights the intersections of gender, class, performance, and art. It argues that music functioned for both artists as a livelihood and as a radical mode of self-assertion within a patriarchal social structure. It also critically engages with colonial modernity, nationalist discourses, and early recording technologies to show how women artists were variously remembered, erased, or romanticised in the historiography of Indian classical music.

Keywords: Women performers in South Asia; *Tawaif* (Courtesan Tradition); Intersectionality; Colonial Modernity

Introduction

The contributions of women to Indian classical music have long been marginalized within dominant cultural narratives, which tend to prioritize male virtuosity and the transmission of musical knowledge through the revered *guru-shishya* (teacher-student) lineages. These narratives often ignore the crucial roles that women, particularly those from the courtesan tradition, have played in shaping the musical landscape. This article seeks to explore the lives and

legacies of two iconic female performers, Gauhar Jaan (1873–1930) and Begum Akhtar (1914–1974) who, despite the deeply gendered and socially stratified contexts of colonial and postcolonial India, became central figures in Indian classical music. By exploring their careers through a feminist and intersectional lens, this article argues that these women were not merely passive subjects of societal norms but actively engaged in cultural resistance and self-fashioning, thereby reshaping the roles of women in the public sphere of music.

The courtesan, or *tawaif* tradition, often romanticized as the *kotha* (courtesan house) culture played a foundational role in the development of Hindustani classical music. Courtesans were more than mere entertainers; they were skilled musicians, poets, dancers, and connoisseurs of art and culture. Their role was complex, as they were not only entertainers for the elite but also guardians of the rich cultural traditions that formed the bedrock of classical music. Genres such as *thumri*, *dadra,* and *ghazal*, which would later come to define Indian classical music, found their roots within the courtesan tradition. These musical forms were inherently emotional, centered on themes of love, longing, and devotion, often expressed through intricate lyrics and delicate melodic structures. However, despite their immense cultural contributions, courtesans faced severe stigmatization, especially as colonial moral discourses and emerging nationalist ethos began to reshape societal values. The colonial administration's moralistic stance on sexuality and respectability, combined with the nationalist ideal of a 'pure' domestic woman, led to the gradual erasure of the courtesan's contributions from the cultural fabric of India. Courtesans, once seen as symbols of both artistic and erotic power, became associated with moral corruption (Sampath 254). The nationalist movement, while aiming to reclaim India's cultural heritage, often aligned itself with bourgeois ideals that championed the figure of the domesticated woman, thereby relegating the courtesan to the margins of social and cultural life. This ideological shift effectively silenced the voices of women who had historically been central to the creation and transmission of Indian classical music.

Among these silenced voices, Gauhar Jaan stands out as one of the first Indian women to break through the barriers of both gender and class. Born into a Christian Anglo-Indian family, she rose to prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and became one of the first performers to be

recorded by the Gramophone Company in 1902. Her recordings were a significant event in the history of Indian music, as they marked a technological and cultural convergence between the traditional art of Hindustani music and the emerging modern world. Gauhar Jaan's engagement with recording technology signified both defiance against the stigmas surrounding her identity as a courtesan and her ability to adapt to colonial modernity. In an era where women were often excluded from public musical performance, Gauhar Jaan's success helped challenge the prevailing norms that sought to limit women to private, domestic spheres. While Gauhar Jaan's legacy was shaped by the colonial context of her time, Begum Akhtar, who rose to prominence in the twentieth century, inherited and redefined this tradition in a postcolonial world. Begum Akhtar, often referred to as the 'Queen of *Ghazals*,' had a musical career that spanned several decades. Like GauharJaan, her background in the courtesan tradition deeply influenced her musical expression. However, by the time Begum Akhtar emerged on the public stage, India was navigating the complexities of independence, partition, and the transformation of its cultural identity. As a female artist in a male-dominated world, Akhtar's association with the emotional and 'feminine' genres like *thumri*, *dadra*, and *ghazal* made her an unconventional figure in the broader musicological canon, which still held male virtuosity in higher esteem. In many ways, both women's careers reflect a broader shift in the musical landscape of colonial and postcolonial India. The courtesan tradition, once central to the development of Indian classical music, was gradually displaced by a more institutionalized and patriarchal music system in the post-colonial era. This shift not only marginalized women but also undermined the cultural legitimacy of the genres that women like Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar had so skillfully cultivated. Despite this, both women persisted in carving out their place within the cultural fabric of India, reconstituting what it meant to be a female artist. The significance of their contributions goes beyond their musical talent. By navigating the intersection of colonial and nationalist politics, gendered expectations, and cultural transformation, both Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar enacted a form of self-fashioning that allowed them to transcend the limitations placed on their identities. In their music, they not only performed traditional compositions but also reinterpreted and reshaped them, investing them with personal meaning and defying the boundaries of genre and gender. The erasure of the courtesan's

role in the development of Hindustani music, particularly in the postcolonial era, has had long-lasting effects. It is important to reexamine the contributions of these women through the lens of cultural history and feminist scholarship.

Gauhar Jaan: Self-Fashioning and the Public Sphere

Gauhar Jaan's career represents a powerful instance of feminist self-assertion within the complex sociocultural landscape of colonial India. As one of the first female artists to record her voice on the gramophone, she was not just a performer but also a self-aware creator who actively shaped her public persona. The declaration, "*My name is Gauhar Jaan*," which begins her famous early gramophone recordings, is a powerful statement of identity and authorship. It encapsulates the reclamation of her public image, a declaration of ownership over her artistic output at a time when women's participation in public cultural life was often heavily policed (Sampath 147). The advent of recording technology marked a transformation in how music was consumed and distributed, and for Gauhar, it provided an opportunity to transcend the physical and geographical limitations imposed on female performers. Early gramophone recordings, as Amanda Weidman notes, played a crucial role in expanding the scope of musical circulation, particularly for women's voices, which had traditionally been confined to the private spaces of elite courts or salons. By recording her music, Gauhar Jaan made her voice accessible to a much larger audience, breaking through the gendered spatial boundaries that had previously limited women's public performances. The ability to circulate her voice on a mass scale allowed her to participate in shaping the musical culture of the time, creating a legacy that resonated far beyond the elite urban centers where her live performances were primarily heard (Weidman 116). Gauhar's commercial success was not just due to her musical talents but also to her strategic use of technology and her public image. The visual representation of her on early record labels, often depicted in elaborate, opulent attire, is emblematic of her mastery over both the sonic and visual elements of performance. These images, combined with her exceptional musical abilities, created a public persona that was both commanding and feminine, resisting traditional gender norms that sought to restrict women to the private sphere. As her recordings circulated, Gauhar became a figure who symbolized both cultural sophistication and

economic agency, carving out a space for women in the male-dominated world of public performance. Gauhar Jaan remains one of the most prolific and versatile musicians of early twentieth-century India, and is competent in genres such as *Khayal* and *Dadra*. These genres were considered to be masculine and more technical in nature. Among her most significant compositions are "*Ras Ke Bhare Tore Nain*," "*Mere Man Liyo Cheen*," "*Baasuri baaj rahi dhun madhur*" etc. (Sampath 376). These compositions exemplify her command over *sringara* rasa, *bol*-oriented expressivity, rhythmic precision, and her pioneering adaptation of courtesan aesthetics to the temporal discipline of the gramophone. Collectively, her recordings constitute a vital sonic archive, preserving multiple generations of Hindustani musical knowledge. In a society where women who performed in public were often viewed with suspicion or moral disdain, Gauhar's success was groundbreaking. She not only performed publicly but also insisted on receiving adequate compensation for her work, a move that positioned her as one of the highest-paid performers of her time (Sampath xvii). It can be argued that Gauhar Jaan's insistence on controlling her career and negotiating her financial terms was a radical act of economic and symbolic resistance. She effectively rejected the traditional notion that women should be passive recipients of male patronage, instead demanding agency over her financial and artistic endeavors. This was significant in the broader context of colonial India, where the cultural and economic landscapes were shaped by both British colonial rule and entrenched patriarchal structures.

Gauhar Jaan's life and legacy ultimately compel a rethinking of how technology, gender, and cultural labour intersect within the history of Indian classical music. The gramophone enabled her to claim authorship, circulate her voice beyond elite and gender-segregated spaces, and assert economic agency at a moment when women's public performance was subject to intense moral regulation. As Amanda Weidman argues, early recording technologies fundamentally altered the terms on which women's voices entered the public sphere, expanding visibility while simultaneously subjecting performers to new forms of abstraction and scrutiny (Weidman 74). Gauhar Jaan's career exemplifies both the possibilities and limits of this transformation. Despite extraordinary fame, commercial success, and artistic authority, her final years—marked by ill health, financial depletion, and social isolation—expose the

structural precarity of women performers whose labour generated immense cultural value without guaranteeing long-term security (Sampath xvii). From a feminist courtesan-studies perspective, this contradiction reveals how the *tawaif's* voice could be archived, celebrated, and endlessly reproduced, even as her body and material well-being remained vulnerable to patriarchal, legal, and familial dispossession. Yet Gauhar Jaan's enduring sonic archive—spanning more than twenty languages and multiple classical and semi-classical genres—continues to disrupt narratives that marginalize courtesan contributions to musical modernity. Her career, thus, stands as a foundational precedent for contemporary women artists who strategically use media technologies to assert self-representation, creative control, and economic independence. In preserving both brilliance and loss, Gauhar Jaan's recordings demand to be read not only as musical heritage but as feminist cultural texts that expose the uneven costs of women's entry into modern public culture.

Reconstitution of the *Ghazal*: Feminine Subjectivity in Voice

Begum Akhtar, born Akhtaribai Faizabadi in 1914 in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh, is a significant figure of Hindustani classical music. Emerging from the culturally dense milieu of early twentieth-century North India, her life and career bridged the courtesan tradition and the consolidation of modern Indian music. Trained under eminent *ustad*s such as Ustad Imdad Khan and Ata Mohammed Khan, she attained exceptional mastery over the *ghazal*, *thumri*, and *dadra*, eventually earning the honorific *Mallika-e-Ghazal* (Qureshi, "In Search of" 97). Her artistic trajectory unfolded amid profound political and social transformations, including the nationalist movement and the reconfiguration of women's roles in public culture. Despite operating within a deeply patriarchal musical economy and facing the moral stigma attached to women performers, Begum Akhtar's artistry reconstituted the *ghazal* as a space of feminine subjectivity, emotional authority, and aesthetic agency. Begum Akhtar's engagement with *thumri* and *ghazal* illustrates the gradual transformation of a courtesan-inflected expressive idiom into a modern concert aesthetic. Peter Manuel's analysis of her *thumri* "*Koyeliya Mat Kar Pukar*" is particularly illuminating. The text, "Don't cry out, cuckoo, your call is like a dagger in my heart," draws upon the *Meghadûta* trope associated with Kalidasa, wherein natural elements function as messengers of longing and separation (Manuel,

Thumri 12-13). Begum Akhtar intensifies this classical conceit not through dramatic excess but through melodic restraint and affective compression. Her vocal delivery privileges emotional concentration over ornamentation, allowing grief to register as an inward, sustained experience. Similarly, in the *dadra* "*Ae Papiha Idhar Main Bhi*," translated as "Oh cuckoo, I too am here," her decision to render the *antara*[1] or the final stanza in free rhythm without tabla accompaniment foregrounds the flexibility of Urdu lyricism and momentarily suspends rhythmic discipline. This aesthetic choice underscores her prioritization of textual affect over *tala*-driven[2] virtuosity.

One of the formative moments in Akhtar's career was the 1934 Bihar earthquake relief concert, where her performance received public acknowledgment from Sarojini Naidu, encouraging her to pursue rigorous musical training. In the early 1930s, her association with the East India Film Company in Calcutta expanded her cultural reach and economic standing. Appearing in films such as *Ek Din Ki Badshahat* (1933), *Nal Damayanti* (1933), *Ameena* (1934), and *Mumtaz Begum* (1934), she achieved parallel careers in cinema and classical music (Mukherjee 45). Marriage in 1945 to Ishtiaq Ahmed Abbasi marked a decisive rupture in her career. Renamed Begum Akhtari, she withdrew from public performance for several years—a silence that exacted a severe toll on her health and emotional well-being. Her return to music in 1949, through broadcasts at All India Radio in Lucknow, was marked by intense emotional release, underscoring the extent to which performance was inseparable from her sense of self. Subsequent selective engagements with film music, including collaborations with Madan Mohan, and her cameo appearance in Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* (1958), positioned her within a regime of cultural respectability, where the *ghazal* circulated as high art rather than courtesan entertainment. A close listening to *ghazals* such as "*Ae Mohabbat Tere Anjaam Pe Rona Aaya*" translated as "Oh love, tears come upon seeing your end" and "*Kuchh To Duniya Ki Inayaat Ne Dil Tod Diya"* translated as "Some of the world's kindnesses have broken my heart" reveals Begum Akhtar's distinctive approach to poetic articulation. She treats each *sher*[3] as an autonomous emotional unit, frequently inserting strategic pauses that heighten semantic and affective resonance. Rather than deploying exquisite *taans*, she relies on subtle *meends*[4], elongated vowels, and controlled

vibrato to foreground poetic meaning (Ranade 112-14). The slow, deliberate unfolding of melody invites the listener into an intimate psychological space, transforming the *ghazal*[5] into a confessional mode of listening.

From a gendered perspective, Begum Akhtar's *ghazals* articulate a feminized subjectivity that is reflective rather than demonstrative. While the *ghazal* tradition historically voiced desire through a predominantly masculine lyrical 'I,' her performances re-inscribe this subject position through a woman's embodied experience of love, abandonment, and social constraint. Feminist musicologists have noted that her singing internalizes emotion rather than projecting it outward through spectacle, producing what Amanda Weidman terms a form of "voiced interiority" characteristic of twentieth-century female classical performers (180-82). This inwardness marks a decisive shift from the courtesan's direct address to patrons toward a concert-oriented aesthetic of restraint and respectability. Technologically, Begum Akhtar's recordings for All India Radio and commercial labels were instrumental in standardizing a slow-tempo, text-centric *ghazal* style that became normative for later generations. The microphone amplified nuances of breath, timbre, and pause, enabling an affective vulnerability that would have been difficult to sustain in pre-amplified performance contexts. In this sense, her *ghazals* exemplify how recording technology facilitated new forms of emotional intimacy while simultaneously reinforcing ideals of feminine decorum and controlled expressiveness (Weidman 257). The *ghazal*, with its Persian and Arabic roots, had historically articulated love, longing, and loss largely through masculine poetic voices, relegating women's desire to the margins of cultural expression. Begum Akhtar's interpretations profoundly altered this dynamic. Drawing upon her position as a woman navigating public performance, her *ghazals* became complex articulations of feminine emotional landscapes rather than passive reproductions of romantic sorrow (Qureshi, "In Search of" 121). In this reconstitution, her artistry resonates with Judith Butler's notion of performativity, wherein identity is enacted through repeated gestures, including artistic expression (173). Her voice, thus, emerges as an embodied form of resistance, challenging exclusionary musical traditions by asserting a distinctly feminine emotive authority. Her temporary withdrawal from public performance after marriage reflects nationalist ideals that sought to relocate women within domestic space, a process Partha Chatterjee identifies in his formulation of the "new

woman" under colonial modernity (130). Yet Begum Akhtar's return to the stage constituted a quiet but powerful act of defiance. By reasserting her presence, she disrupted the normative trajectory that demanded women's retreat from public cultural life, reclaiming autonomy as both artist and subject (Qureshi, "In Search of" 128). Begum Akhtar's legacy thus extends beyond musical excellence. By transforming the *ghazal* into a vessel for feminine subjectivity, she expanded its emotional and social possibilities, creating a space where women's voices both literal and metaphorical, could be heard (Qureshi 112). Her reconstitution of the *ghazal* stands as a feminist cultural intervention, blending aesthetic discipline with an insistence on women's expressive agency. As bell hooks reminds us, "the margin is a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (207). For Begum Akhtar, the *ghazal* became precisely such a margin, yet resonant space where silenced female voices could reclaim emotional, artistic, and social presence within twentieth-century Indian musical culture.

Colonial Modernity and the Gendered Reception of Music

The advent of colonial modernity profoundly reshaped the patronage structures and institutional contexts of Indian classical music, bringing with it both opportunities and constraints for women performers. Prior to colonialism, music in India had been deeply embedded within courtly and temple traditions, where female performers, especially courtesans, played a significant role in preserving and transmitting oral and performative traditions. However, with the decline of princely courts during the British colonial period and the rise of more public forms of patronage such as public concerts, gramophone records, and radio broadcasts, female performers had to navigate an increasingly complex field of visibility and surveillance (Qureshi, "In Search of" 104). In the colonial period, orientalist discourse and colonial ethnography often exoticized and eroticized the female performer, positioning her as a symbol of an idealized yet morally dubious past (Qureshi 109). The colonial gaze, imbued with Victorian notions of respectability, frequently conflated women's artistic agency with their status as courtesans, thus rendering their musical contributions less legitimate. Figures like Gauhar Jaan were caught in this paradox; while her musical talent was widely celebrated, colonial writings often sought to tie her artistic identity to the stereotype of the courtesan, portraying her as a figure

whose artistic and intellectual agency was overshadowed by her perceived sexuality and social status (Qureshi, "Female Agency" 319). Similarly, Begum Akhtar, another towering figure in Indian classical music, faced romanticized portrayals in which her personal struggles and marginalization were often overlooked. Colonial and nationalist narratives tended to obscure the structural exclusions that women like Akhtar faced, both as courtesans and as women in a male-dominated industry. These portrayals were often marked by a melancholic aesthetic, where Akhtar's voice was celebrated for its emotional depth; but the complexities of her identity, particularly her status as a marginalized woman were minimized. This tendency to romanticize and commodify female voices is also evident in the early Indian music industry, where women's contributions were commodified for their market value, yet their historical significance was often neglected. As Manuel argues, the commodification of female voices in the recording industry helped popularize them but simultaneously excluded them from the historiographies of Indian classical music. These female performers, though immensely popular in their time, were often relegated to the margins of musical discourse, their artistry obscured by a combination of colonial, patriarchal, and nationalist agendas (Manuel 161). The nationalist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries further contributed to the marginalization of women in Indian classical music by pushing for the institutionalization and standardization of music. Figures like Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande sought to systematize *ragas* and *talas* and establish a unified theory of Indian classical music based on textual traditions and classical schools. This process of institutionalization, however, often favored male performers and the *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-student tradition), which was deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures. The narratives surrounding these traditions idealized the male *guru* as the central figure of musical transmission, while sidelining the important role of women, particularly those from the courtesan and lower-class backgrounds, who had historically played a central role in the preservation and performance of classical music (Subramanian 55). Both Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar, despite their considerable contributions to the field, were largely excluded from the emerging institutional canon of Indian classical music that was being formalized during this period. They were erased from the 'official' history of classical music, even though their popularity, expertise, and significant contributions to the

genre were undisputed. The focus on male performers, and the sanitized representation of classical music within nationalist ideologies, rendered their legacies invisible in official narratives of Indian music. Bhatkhande's work, which sought to systematize and 'purify' the tradition, ignored the oral traditions of courtesans, preferring to institutionalize a male-dominated canon that emphasized textual knowledge and orthodox transmission (Subramanian 56).

Thus, the nationalist discourse not only denied women like Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar a place in the institutionalized canon, but it also sanitized the diverse and often complex ways in which Indian classical music had been passed down, particularly through the courtesan tradition. The commodification of music through modern technologies such as gramophone records and radio did offer these women a platform, but it also reinforced their marginalized status by commodifying their talents rather than recognizing them as intellectual or artistic agents in their own right. Male musicians and the *guru-shishya* tradition were elevated to a position of authenticity, while the courtesan tradition, along with the women who occupied it, was relegated to the margins of respectability and institutional history (Manuel 161).

Memory, Erasure, and the Gender Politics of Historiography

The legacy of Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar remains paradoxical; they are simultaneously celebrated and marginalised within the historiography of Indian classical music. While their voices echo across time, on recordings, radio, and popular media, their presence in formal musicological texts, institutional curricula, or canonical discourses of Hindustani classical music is strikingly limited. This erasure reflects what feminist scholar Lata Mani terms the "gendered politics of retrieval," where women's histories are selectively archived to conform to dominant cultural narratives (Mani 157). The lives of Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar are frequently revisited through romanticised biographies or nostalgic documentaries that emphasise aesthetic charm over structural critique. For instance, Gauhar Jaan's flamboyant persona, her horse-drawn carriages, silk sarees, and cosmopolitan flair, often overshadows her musical contributions as one of the earliest artists to embrace recording technology in colonial India (Sampath 45). Her pioneering role in adapting Hindustani music for the three-minute format required by gramophone records

is a significant innovation, yet is rarely analysed in serious musicological terms (Weidman 47). Likewise, Begum Akhtar, celebrated as *Mallika-e-Ghazal*, is often cast as a melancholic diva whose voice embodies "timeless" emotion (Qureshi "In Search of" 41-50). However, this mystification glosses over her caste/religious background, struggles with institutional patriarchy, her institutionalisation for mental health issues, and the moral scrutiny she endured as a performer associated with the *tawaif* tradition (Kothari 274-290). As Urvashi Butalia notes, the construction of women's histories in South Asia often follows a pattern of "partial remembrance," which displaces the political agency of women by recasting them as tragic or exceptional figures (12-15). The selective recuperation of Gauhar and Akhtar in popular memory exemplifies this pattern, whereby their radical engagements, with performance, gendered space, and public modernity are domesticated into palatable icons. Their subversive acts of self-fashioning, public performance, and refusal to retreat into domesticity are rarely foregrounded in formal histories of Indian music. Instead, their stories are often recuperated within a patriarchal framework that commodifies their voice while obscuring their dissent. The absence of these women from conservatory curriculum and scholarly anthologies on Indian classical music is not incidental but symptomatic of the structural exclusions that define the canon. As Anjali Arondekar argues, archival silence around marginalised subjects especially women, courtesans, and queer figures do not denote absence but a refusal of legitimacy by dominant epistemologies (3-5). In this light, the memory of Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar must be read not only as historical fact but also as a contested site where gender, caste, and modernity collide.

Conclusion

Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar occupy a unique and paradoxical space in Indian classical music as women whose artistic brilliance not only enabled their survival in patriarchal cultural milieus but also allowed them to shape the very aesthetic and sonic contours of modern Hindustani music. Both figures emerged from the tradition of courtesan performers, a space historically rich in artistic refinement but simultaneously marked by socio-moral stigma. As performers of *thumri*, *dadra*, and *ghazal* genres often feminised and marginalised within classical hierarchies they negotiated the complex terrain of

visibility, voice, and value in a society that prized their artistry while policing their bodies and social legitimacy (Qureshi "Female Agency" 319). A feminist reading of their trajectories reveals not only the gendered dynamics of performance but also the intersections of caste, class, and colonial modernity that shaped the conditions of cultural production. Gauhar Jaan, born to an Armenian-British mother and an Indian father, strategically reinvented herself as an Indo-Muslim *tawaif* to align with the dominant aesthetic and social expectations of North Indian courtly culture. Her recording of over six hundred songs on gramophone from 1902 onwards announcing "My name is Gauhar Jaan" at the end of each marked a critical moment in the technologisation and commodification of music in colonial India, with a woman at the forefront of this transformation (Farrell 36). This act was not merely performative but also declarative, an assertion of authorship, identity, and presence in an emerging public sphere that was dismissive about female autonomy. Begum Akhtar emerged from a milieu where the courtesan tradition intersected with the rising nationalist imagination of womanhood. Her musical career, which spanned *mehfils*, radio, cinema, and national concerts, reflected the tensions of postcolonial respectability politics. Even as she gained national recognition, being awarded the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, her life remained enmeshed in questions of propriety and emotional vulnerability, often romanticised through narratives of melancholy and longing (Qureshi, "In Search of" 128). Her embodiment of the tragic *malika-e-ghazal* persona often obscured the political labor of survival, negotiation, and mastery that underpinned her career.

These artists' stories illuminate how women in the performing arts carved out autonomous spaces of agency in a context where normative femininity was defined through silence, domesticity, and invisibility. Feminist scholar Susan McClary has argued that musical performance by women often unsettles dominant auditory regimes posing a challenge not only to aesthetic conventions but also to socio-political hierarchies of who can speak and be heard (35). In this sense, the voices of Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar function as counter-archives or aural testimonies that resist historical erasure and gendered silencing. Women musicians have often been written out of musicological canons, their contributions dismissed as "light" or peripheral compared to the supposedly masculine gravitas of *khayal* or *dhrupad* traditions (McClary 40). The

institutionalisation of Indian classical music through *sabhas*, conservatories, and All India Radio frequently codified respectability by excluding courtesan-trained performers or shaping them within palatable biographical tropes. Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar are remembered, but often through a lens of nostalgia, romanticism, or exceptionalism, rather than critical engagement with the structural exclusions they negotiated. As feminist historian Antoinette Burton reminds us, archives are not neutral repositories but are shaped by power, omission, and ideological work (4). The marginalisation of women like Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar in dominant narratives of classical music reflects broader patriarchal modes of memory production. It is also to expand our understanding of what constitutes 'classical' music, foregrounding the hybrid, affective, and performative practices that these women embodied. In placing Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar at the centre of analysis, we are urged to listen not only to their songs but to the histories, silences, and resonances embedded within them. Their lives compel us to ask, whose voices are preserved in the canon, and whose are deemed too unstable, emotional, or deviant to count as history.

End Notes

1. *Antara*, the second stanza or verse in Hindustani compositions like *dadra*, contrasts the initial *sthayi* by exploring upper-octave melody for emotional expansion. Ashok Da. Ranade, "Traditions of Indian Music," Indian Heritage, ed. Vasanti Mujumdar, Indian Council of Social Welfare, 1981, pp. 12-13.

2. *Tala*-driven virtuosity refers to rhythmic virtuosity governed by tala, the cyclical metric framework in Hindustani music (e.g., *teental's* 16 beats), which structures repetitive beats (matras) punctuated by claps *(tali*) and waves *(khali*) to showcase tabla precision. Manuel examines tala's flexible application in semi-classical forms like thumri and ghazal, where stress patterns often supersede strict *matra* counts. Peter Manuel, "The Concept of Tala in Semi-Classical Music," Sahapedia, www.sahapedia.org/the-concept-of-tala-semi-classical-music-peter-manuel. Accessed 3 Jan. 2026

3. *Sher* (lit. "lion" in Persian/Urdu; pl. *shers or ash'ar)* denotes the rhymed couplet in a *ghazal*, a self-contained poetic unit blending wit, love, and philosophy that stands alone yet links thematically in performance. Manuel analyzes the *sher* as central to *ghazal's* evolution from Mughal recitation to modern Hindustani vocal form, pp. 9–13. Peter Manuel, "*Thumri*, *Ghazal*, and Modernity in Hindustani Music Culture," CUNY Academic Works, academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs/1320. Accessed 3 Jan. 2026.

4. *Taans* denote fast, intricate note cascades showcasing vocal agility in *khayal; meends* (glides from one note to another, covering intermediate microtones/shrutis) evoke deep emotional continuity. Manuel notes meend's essential role in *thumri/ghazal* expression over discrete pitches. Peter Manuel, "*Thumri, Ghazal*, and Modernity in Hindustani Music Culture," CUNY Academic Works, academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs/1320, pp. 6–8

5. *Ghazal*, a poetic form of rhymed couplets *(sher)* on love and mysticism, adapts in Hindustani music as a semi-classical genre prioritizing emotional intimacy over strict form. Peter Manuel explores its evolution from poetic recitation to confessional vocal expression, pp. 4–12. Peter Manuel, Thumri, *Ghazal*, and Modernity in Hindustani Music Culture, CUNY Academic Works, academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs/1320. Accessed 3 Jan. 2026.

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