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Content

Editorial Note

Interlocutor, an online journal of the Department of English, The Bhawanipur Education Society College, has returned with its second volume. The journal which is published annually, provides an interdisciplinary research platform for critical inquiry and discursive questioning by scholars across the disciplines of liberal arts with a view to initiate academic discourses based on diverse and varied fields of research exploring novel perspectives on theory, praxis, and pedagogies in literary studies.

The 21st century has seen a rapid expansion in the literary trends, namely theoretical and critical praxis propelling forth an explosion in the range of studies through cultural productions such as literature, music and various forms of mass-media. Vincent Leitch in his latest book, *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century* has enlisted a chart on literary theory and criticism. Leitch's chart consists of "94 sub disciplines and fields circling around 12 major topics", which he deems stems directly from the recognisable contemporary schools and movements of theory. His book explores the outburst of new theoretical approaches which has seen a regeneration in theory and its importance in the institutional settings of the present. Many are of the opinion that literary theory as we know it is on the wane but on the contrary, there is a rise in studies, cultural or otherwise. This opens the field for a plethora of new research areas for scholars to work on.

The second issue of *Interlocutor* seeks to reflect the accelerated pace of changing perspectives and forms. It has invited scholars to make submissions which would provide original insights into such areas of theoretical and critical trends ranging from nationalism, subnationalisms, ethnonationalism; critical ecologies; new perspectives on marriage, sexual contract, patriarchy and law; to representations of sexualities and disabilities; the production and circulation of popular culture in the age of new media.

The Hermeneutics of Patriarchal Heterotopias

The subtext of a broken and harrowed marital discord reflecting the 'othering' of women in domestic spaces through Foucauldian heterotopias forms the major argument of Sohini Sen's article *The Hermeneutics of Symbol and the Subtext of a Dilapidated Marriage: A Close Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Short Story "The Bats"*. Relying upon Saussurian structural codes 'signifier' and 'signified' and Richardian 'vehicle' and 'tenor', the article deciphers the symbols and metaphors associated with the metanarrative and the social connotations surrounding the institution of marriage when a woman tries to escape the shackles of an abusive marriage. Through the Foucauldian lens of power and violence, a distorted picture of marriage in Indian society is presented, where a woman prefers to return to an abusive marriage rather than put up with the indignity of being an estranged wife.

'Nature is Nurture', the maxim held in mainstream literary and cultural representations, essentialises and restricts women's identities to their biological role of procreation. Ashapurna Devi's writings defy this conventional feminine reductionism to explore the aspirations, inner desires, psyche and

expectations of its women characters. This subversion of motherhood and its depoliticisation in Devi's short stories is examined through Puja Saha's article *The Fragmented Mother: Subversion of Normative Motherhood in Ashapurna Devi's Short Stories*. Foucauldian heterotopias are prudently redefined as the normative motherhood is strategically subverted in Ashapurna Devi's short stories and her women characters are depicted constantly overturning the 'archetypal mother' trope by renegotiating their domestic positions to establish their individualities as women, alienated from the 'divine mother', echoing the words of Simon de Beauvoir "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". The Freuduian aphorism 'Anatomy is Destiny' is also strategically questioned and destabilised.

Interspersing Mythology with Modernity in Mani Ratnam's Cinema

Filmmaker Mani Ratnam's forte of creatively bringing to the forefront diverse ideas and aspirations in his films needs no introduction. His films are known for weaving together art and commercial elements that garner both critical acclaim and commercial success. The majority of his films have been characterised by wide socio-cultural themes through his discourse on Indian mythology, its recreations and contemporary renderings as such. Veena SP's article *From Mythology to the Modern Age: Exploring the Role of Mythology and Literature in Mani Ratnam's Cinematic Adaptations* explores the dialectics of mythological literary references through songs, dialogues and characterisation in Mani Ratnam's films. She examines how his films acclaimed by the masses have created an intense fervour for the original literary texts. The mythological literary acclimations and references in his films which have created modern critical perceptions and vernacular trends, and its emerging contemporariness in the particular time period of his visual works of popular art and culture are scrutinised in the article.

Duality of the New Woman Identity and the Female Body

The stereotyped ideal Victorian woman due to its 'Angel in the House' manifestation has always been perceived as pure and pious, and anyone who deviates from the norm is deemed a fallen woman. At the same time, the female body has often been regarded as the object of desire to be conquered, and a mystery to be unravelled through the patriarchal male gaze. Sayendra Basu's article *"Kiss me with those Red lips": Duality of the female body and the new woman in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula'* looks at the stereotypes and the creation of dualities that leads to discrimination and vilification of women. Stoker's androcentric reaction to the concept of the new woman identity and the duality and polarisation of the female body to either be oppressed or resisted through a regulation of her sexual autonomy has been discoursed upon. The resultant marginalisation and the generation of 'the madwoman in the attic' trope has also been touched upon.

Reorienting a Travelogue through Postcolonial Alterity

William Dalrymple's *In Xanadu* traces the path taken by Marco Polo from Jerusalem to Shang du, the capital city of the famed "Kubla Khan". A travelogue is a literary discourse which documents the socio-cultural history of different lands travelled to. This emphasises the differences of cultures and Arup Kumar Bag through his work *Mapping the 'Quest' in In Xanadu with Special Reference to "Kubla Khan": A Comparative Study* raises the question as to whether a travelogue should foreground the

'otherness' of identity or celebrate its diversity. In this paper, he examines ways to justify Dalrymple's *In Xanadu* as less of a travelogue and more of a discourse on non-Eurocentric cultures. The hegemonisation of a Eurocentric cannon, and its subsequent lack of emphasis on the postcolonial alterity, the failure of justification of the subtitle of the text, *A Quest* is critiqued through an evocation of 'Sahasrara' of the '*Kundalini*', the sublime consciousness, lacking in Dalrymple.

Mapping Feminist Temporalities, Geopolitics, and Trauma through Fiction

Rita Felski's article "Telling Time in Feminist Theory" alludes to feminist temporalities of redemption, regression, repetition and rupture that lead to the formation of multiple female subjectivities like personal, maternal, psychological, domestic, social, corporeal, among others. The dynamics of such temporalities as reflected in the rich fabric of female saga fiction in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* and Gurmehar Kaur's *Small Acts of Freedom* are assessed through Swethal Ramchandran's article *Feminist Temporal Dynamics and Implications on Subjectivities: A Reading of select Indian English Female Saga Narratives*. Adopting the Felskian lens, the article contextualises modes of feminist temporalities in South Asian feminist narratives to assert and establish the cyclical functioning of time in alignment with the examined feminist subjectivities.

Northeast Literatures continue to be a critical field of inquiry seamlessly integrating theory with praxis to depict decades of multifaceted unrest, protests, and activism. The students' agitation in the late 1970s in Assam which demanded the deportation of all non-Assamese people from Assam started the unrest. This gave rise to several Assamese sub-nationalist fringe groups which demanded freedom from the Indian Union. Their agitation caused violence which led to the birth of fear and trauma amongst the people. Abantika Dev Ray in her article *Trauma and Women in the Late Twentieth Century Assam: A Reading of Mitra Phukan's The Collector's Wife* draws upon Cathy Caruth's hypothesis on trauma and violence to trace its effects through the perspectives of women who were in the middle of the crises. Alluding to Garland's theories of trauma and violence and Butler's theory of precarity, Dev Ray examines the political conflicts, manifestations of violence and power establishing women's experiences at the centre in the backdrop of Assam unrest unravelling the peace versus ideology dialectic and its underlying ramifications.

Corporeality and Posthumanism

The consumerist fascination around representation of corporeal horror and terror in media, and its jarring manifestations interwoven with ecological degradation and rising belligerence in the backdrop of contemporary neocolonialism forms the critical mode of inquiry of Chitrangada Deb's article *Abominable Corporeality: A Discourse on Reptilians and Hybrids in "Rakka" and "Firebase"*. The sci-fi horror genre's usage in exploring and understanding the study of the non-human sauropsids, cyborgs, and corporeal physiognomy of the predatory crocodiles to redefine the discourse on Lovecraftian horror is significant. Two crucial episodes titled "Rakka" and "Firebase" thriving on apocalyptic posthuman visions from the independently made miniseries *Oats Studios* (2017) have been strategically chosen by Deb to shed light on how the human body becomes a site of transmutations and monstrous creations. Horror is created with these predatory other worldly creatures who overturn the normative way of life creating terror among the masses.

Streaming Media Phenomenon, Late Capitalism, and Postmodern sporting celebrity culture

The streaming media platforms have become an increasingly preferred mode of popular culture as a great source of entertainment meant for easy consumption. With this popularity, a body of scholarship with regard to this is also expanding and becoming a nucleus of investigation for many scholars. Arup Ratan Samajdar's article *Cultural Calculus of Netflix Phenomenon: Investigating Relational Matrix of Serialised Narratives, Algorithmic Operations, and Late Capitalism* concentrates on two focal points, the mode of narrative distribution which creates an eagerness in people to watch, even "binge" watch, and how an algorithmic system forms to recommend titles. A theoretical explanation of the streaming media phenomenon alluding to the centrality of algorithmic recommendations, subscription politics within the larger purview of emerging data capitalism and its socio-cultural manifestation is surveyed through Samajdar's article.

Another noteworthy marker of contemporary culture is the postmodern sporting celebrity phenomenon in the backdrop of a global new democracy. Celebrities generate a lot of interest amongst the masses as they show them a way to escape from their humdrum lives and fantasise over a glittering lifestyle. The culture of the 21st century is engrossed with exuberant lifestyles and its disconcerted exhibitionism, which are the fantasies of the common man. Drawing from Stardom Studies, Subhasish Guha in his article *Postmodern Features of Contemporary Culture: Representation and Sporting Celebrity* gives insights into the phenomenon of media representation of the sporting celebrity David Beckham, arguing that Beckham belongs to a postmodern celebrity culture where his representation is not 'real'. The media vortex generates a consumerist ideology initiating a new cultural capital associated with celebrity culture in the new democracy in a postmodern era.

The Review Section

The Review section of the issue highlights new creative, critical, theoretical, and pedagogical works as well as narration through the performative arts. Indo-American writer Avni Doshi's debut novel *Burnt Sugar*, first published in India as *Girl in White Cotton*, in 2019 integrates themes of motherhood, memory, trauma and pain. Sneha Roy's *Exploring Memory and Motherhood in Avni Doshi's 'Girl in White Cotton': A Detailed Book Review* evocatively traces a complicated mother-daughter bond fraught with unhappy, even terrifying memories for a child. The toxicity of the mother-daughter bond and relationship, the idolisation and glorification of normative motherhood are seamlessly destabilised in this review. Foucauldian and Beauvoirian theoretical frameworks are used to elucidate the dynamics of human nature and the social impositions placed upon the protagonists of the novel.

The emergence and rise of the Film Studies Departments in Indian academic institutions has led to the study of films as social and cultural artefacts beyond the domain of aesthetics serving as signifiers of socio-political and cultural changes. Queer studies came to the forefront in the 1990s during the third wave of feminism and has created its own niche in academic culture and art today. A coherent amalgamation of Queer Studies, Literary Studies and Film Studies is represented through Shreyan Mukherjee's film review entitled *Nagarkirtan: Politics of the Body, Spaces and Religion*. Kaushik Ganguly's 2017 film *Nagarkirtan* showcases the othering and marginalisation of the trans and queer communities and their intrinsic struggles for gaining societal acceptance. Mukherjee alludes to the theories of Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire to investigate the influence of religion, architecture, and

body politics on the lived experiences of the queer community and its interactions with society through *Nagarkirtan's* narrative, laying bare modern society's oppressive and exploitative aspects, heteronormative paraphernalias and its deeply entrenched hegemonic linguistic politics.

At the end, the Editorial Board of *Interlocutor* would like to express its deepest gratitude to the members of the Advisory Board for their crucial guidance, the Editorial Team for their timely assistance and cooperation, the peer-reviewers for their meticulous assessment of the articles, and the management of the Bhawanipur Education Society College, Kolkata, for extending their support in our endeavour to publish this volume.

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The Hermeneutics of Symbol and the Subtext of a Dilapidated Marriage: A Close Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Short Story "The Bats"

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Abstract: Marriage is an elusive term with its legal, social, and religious connotations topped with the multifarious experiences of people who are in it. Surprisingly, the holy nuptial bond between two people, in many cases, has become a subversive ordeal of fettered freedom from the perspectives of gender and sexuality. In a heterosexual marriage, the patriarchal society has determined that for a woman, her sole aim in life should be to bear children and serve her husband. Even with an abusive husband, the wife has to adjust lest she be accused of being a 'bad wife'. This paper aims to decipher the subtext of a broken and harrowed marital bond between a husband and a wife from the innocent narrative of their small girl child in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "The Bats" which appeared in her short story anthology *Arranged Marriage* in 1997. With remarkably relevant symbols which this paper will decode and discuss, the author has woven the silent acceptance of the wife, the protagonist's mother, in an abusive marriage, providing a glimpse of the contorted definition of marriage in Indian society. The theoretical rendition of semiotics especially Ferdinand de Saussure's "signifier" and "signified" with I.A Richard's famous concepts of "vehicle" and "tenor" will be used to determine the symbols and metaphors and decrypt them to analyse the subtext hidden in the pallor of the metanarrative. Further Foucauldian concepts of disciplining and punishment will be applied to bring out the position of the wife and the child in the fettered institution of marital bond.

Keywords: Marriage, Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, Symbol, Subtext

The societal institution of marriage adheres to certain rules and regulations which are usually determined by law, religion and people's perception because of which the dynamism of the regulations is commendable. Different communities have variegated purviews on marriage. Stringent laws due to orthodox mindsets and interference of disputable religious beliefs have made the nuptial union more of a societal necessity than a personal endeavour. Rather than being a union in love, marriage has become, in majority of the cases, a unification of sacrificed dreams, relentless regretted adjustments, imposed responsibilities and in many cases physical and emotional abuse. Unhappy marriages that involve the coexistence of two unwilling individuals, give rise to domestic violence. When it comes to homosexual marital relationships, the stringency holds no bound. From typecasting the partners as 'diseased' to unleashing the violences of homophobia to the extent of lynching and murder, Indian society makes sure to intrude and devastate the physical, emotional and mental well-being of two queer individuals. By polarising marriage as a binary-gendered union and by refusing to acknowledge gender-neutrality in it, society witnesses frequent incidents where the partners in a same-sex marriage have been murdered. When it comes to unhappy heterosexual

marriage, surprisingly societal ideology refuses to take into consideration separation or divorce. Rather it is considered that adjustment is the key to a happy marriage. Chauvinistic Indian society has effectively made marriage a weapon of patriarchy to be specifically hurled upon women. The concept of marriage has become very gendered in the larger context as it has become mostly the wife's responsibility to maintain the happiness in the nuptial relationship. In most of the cases, if a marriage fails, society has the tendency to blatantly point a finger at the woman- if the husband is abusive, it ultimately becomes the woman's fault. If a woman decides to end an unhappy marriage, she is considered abominable and is cornered. A woman in a marriage is expected to adjust with everything from physical violence to lack of independence in order to be accepted by society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-), renowned Indian writer and a feminist at heart, has always addressed in her works various social issues and advocated for the emancipation of women. Besides some of her strong feminist novels like *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *The Forest of Enchantment* (2019) and the recent publication *The Last Queen* (2021), her genius is witnessed in her short story anthologies also. Her anthology entitled *Arranged Marriage* (1997) has taken up the social issue of marriage as its theme, and the author has particularly focused on the Indian system of heterosexually arranged marriage where the bride and the groom are brought together based on the negotiation between the two families. The negotiations however incline on the patriarchal needs of a woman for her reproductive capabilities and her ability to work perfectly in the household thereby proving Beauvoir's vexed remark, "Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her" (41).

The negotiation between the families also ensures that the woman should be indefatigable in accepting and adjusting to her husband's idiosyncrasies. In this collection, Divakaruni has shown the different types of marriage-mostly resulting in an unhappy ending as there is a formidable clash between the perspectives, interests and personalities of the arranged couples. Owing to globalisation's interference, although people are exploring new perspectives on marriage and family, still the looming presence of an arranged marriage, the juxtaposition of cultural heterogeneity, the forceful acceptance, the abuse and its consequent failure are all observed in the short story 'The Bats' in the same anthology. The story is a mirror to the manipulative phenomenon of adjustment in an abusive marriage and how miserable a woman's life becomes in an atmosphere of domestic violence, presented through the character of Ma in the story. Divakaruni has utilised symbols efficiently to unravel her theme in the story. What haunts the reader starkly is the fact that the story has been narrated by her child, an eight-year-old girl, who becomes the passive receiver of the domestic abuse initially and later directly. Her developing consciousness relates domestic violence to every inconsequential object in their small room, thereby, moulding her psyche to accept it as mundane. The menacing presence of the abusive father and a reluctant mother has created a dichotomy in her psychology thereby forever ruining her conception of domestic peace and happiness. Being told from the perspective of a child, the story becomes very disturbing as the unveiled and innocent expressions become juxtaposed with the macabre of the torture that the wife faces. Moreover, the various objects referred to in the story, act as strong metaphors of the failed marriage. These metaphors, thus, consolidate the presence of the sub narrative in the story, decoding which, the plot of the story gains a special momentum.

The first thing in the story that ought to catch the readers' attention is the fact that the characters are named according to their social responsibilities thereby indicating that in this marital relationship, there is no space for personal identity or choice for the husband and the wife except to enact the identities imposed upon them. Throughout the story they are referred to as "Ma" and "Baba" (Mother and Father) while the child herself remains unnamed, as a being, with just a voice and a timid presence. Both "Ma" and "Baba" have socio-linguistic connotations acting as strong "signifiers" (Saussure 67) which signify the performative gender roles of the individuals. These symbolic terms have been deliberately chosen to indicate that in an institution of forced arranged marriages, mostly the couple lose their own identities in the journey of saving it. A child is usually thought to be the fruit of procreation and paves the ground for emotional connectivity between the two individuals in a marriage. However, in this story, the lack of name of the child narrator perhaps indicates her failure to construct the commonality between her parents. She has proved herself to be the voice of truth about the dismantled marriage that can never be reconstructed. Thus, the voice begins the story without any aberration, "That year Mother cried a lot, nights. Or maybe she had always cried, and that was the first year I was old enough to notice (Divakaruni 1).

The nonchalance in the narrator's way of enunciation despite being an eight-year-old girl witnessing her mother's tears, is highly symbolic. It symbolises the regularity and the mundaneness of the tears that have perhaps conditioned her psychology to perceive it as an insignificant and regular act. The way the narrator reacts to her mother's tears is equally disturbing. She ignores by "plugging" (Divakaruni 1) her ears so that the sound of the sob does not reach her. This deliberate disregard points to the development of the psychosocial withdrawal that is seen in children with domestic violence. They tend to detach themselves from both the parents and start creating their own fictional world, refusing to conform to reality. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has effectively given the term "avoidance" (2) for this kind of phenomenon where the child simply negates the situation and does not talk about it. Throughout the story the readers find intermittent association to the violence shrouded through symbols of mundane domestic life. In Divakaruni's "The Bats", the mention of the "narrow child's bed" (1) where her mother fit herself to sleep with her every night parallels the claustrophobic image of the failed marriage to which both the mother and the daughter are enmeshed but which they are relentlessly trying to adjust with. The daughter's embodiment of her mother through materialistic entities like the "the damp smell of talcum powder" (1) and the stiffness of "sari starch" (1) are indicative of her emotional detachment from the latter- a void created due to the persistent physical violence that her mother goes through in the hands of her abusive father. The "talcum powder" (1) and the "sari starch" (1) metaphorically indicate the consistent efforts given by Ma to adjust and accept the marriage. These are feminine entities that usually symbolise an affluent lifestyle however the contradiction has been brought about by the narrator when she uses juxtaposing words like "damp" (1) and "stiff" (1)- which create an oxymoronic effect. The narrator's choice of words when she describes how the smell and the "sari starch" (1) felt to her is yet another conscious symbolism used by the author. The narrator uses the word "choke" (1) to express the suffocating atmosphere at home and also as a criticism for such failed marriages which are simply the fruit of Indian society's forceful intervention in two individual's lives. The word "choke" (1) is suggestive of how societal pressure slowly murders not only two individuals but also the offspring in a dilapidated arranged marriage. The depiction of the physical abuse is also

portrayed in a childish indifferent manner probably to convey the normalcy of the incident. The narrator's comparison of the "yellow blotch with its edges turning purple" (2) on her mother's face with that of her scrapped knee symbolises that the marriage is like the "chipped mahogany dresser" (2) which is only capable of inflicting pain and sufferings. The readers also cannot miss the indifferent mention of the omnipresent dark circles under her mother's eyes manifesting her miserableness in the marriage. All these objects act as cognitive metaphors that catalyse effectively the readers' perception about the failed marriage between the two individuals in the story. These mundane objects act as "signifiers" (Saussure 67) that are apparently dismissed as a child's prattle but are very significant to formulate the subtext and the theme of the story.

The minacious presence of the Father figure in the narration is almost like the Foucauldian concept of "absolutist" power exercised by the monarch or the sovereign through somatic punishment in the form of corporal torture (Foucault 1-15). Although the narrator fails to witness her father given his late arrivals at night, his presence is exhibited through loud voices and signs of physical torture on her mother. He exercises the "absolutist" (Foucault 1) power where the punishment is displayed through physical marks of torture that indirectly warns the narrator to commit any crime against her father. The signs of physical torture on her mother's body act as the means of disciplining the mother-daughter duo against the father figure. The narrator employs dark images in order to describe her father and through her description his presence as a dominant holding the power position in the family is clearly understood. Rather than talking about his looks and his relationship with her, the narrator uses fragmented imagery like "large" (2), "hands were especially big with blackened, split nails and veins that stood up under the skin like blue snakes" (2) with "chemical smells" (2) and "shouts that shook the walls of my bedroom" (2) to describe her father. Her father's presence is cataclysmic in her life as when her father is around, she tells, "Things fell a lot" (2). Unfortunately, the abuse is not restricted to her mother only, she herself experienced physical torture in her father's hands as her only memory of her direct connection with her father involves one such incident, "…when I was little and he used to pick me up suddenly and throw me all the way up to the ceiling, up and down, up and down, while Mother pulled at his arms, begging him to stop, and I screamed and screamed with terror until I had no breath left"(Divakaruni 2).

These terrifying memories along with the abuse makes this marriage comparable to a 'Panopticon', a type of a control system as described by the socialist theorist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham in eighteenth century and later talked about by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 201). A 'Panopticon' is a building where there are inbuilt systems of control on the residents of the building. However, most of the time, the residents are unaware of the control system and the presence of vigilance on them. It was a design employed to watch the prisoners entrapped in the building. In the story 'The Bats' when Ma wants to leave her abusive husband behind, her way of secretive endeavours almost gives the impression of a prisoner escaping the 'panopticon' (Foucault 201). She packed everything in a hurried manner, she spoke in "whispers" (3) and treaded lightly. Her activities were done to ensure that they do not wake Father up lest they be imprisoned again in the futile marital and domestic life.

In the book entitled, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973), famous formalist Valentin Voloshinov has attributed cultural and socio-historical dynamism to the meanings of words. According to him the meanings of words change in different social and historical contexts (99). Words undertake different metaphorical meanings as the narrator describes the journey when they flee from the house in Kolkata. The words used to describe her tr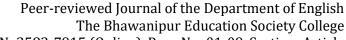ain journey and her eventful life when she stayed with her Grandpa-uncle exude emancipation and pure freedom. Thus, words used in the second part of the story is in stark contrast to the "signifiers" (Saussure 67) used in the first part of the story. The author almost deliberately uses such liberative images and phrases just to show perhaps that rather than accepting and being in an unhappy marriage due to societal pressure, it is always better to walk out of it and lead a life of peace. As the narrator hints at the very beginning, her life with her Grandpa-uncle becomes "magical" (Divakaruni 11) and blissful. Her usage of words in the later part of the story changes and the readers come across words like "wonderful" (6), "exciting" (7), and how the lines of her mother's face "wavered and turned smooth" (4), quite opposite to the depressing images used to describe her family in the first part of the story. The biggest symbol used in this part is the symbol of the "real live chickens" (6) which amused the narrator as she had not seen them before. The narrator was particularly surprised to see their wings flapping and the chickens themselves running very fast when they are chased. This imagery used is the resonance of the condition of the mother-daughter duo. When the violence became unbearable, they too have fled and chosen the life of peace. The dormant wings of the chicken are the symbol of the clipped wings of both the mother and the daughter. With time their wings will also grow strong enough to make them capable to fight and flee any unpleasant situation. It is the freedom of the birds that made the narrator relate to her imprisoned condition back at home in the city and thus made her surprised. The readers will get to see a lot of earthy imagery used by the author here like the Grandpa-uncle's house made of "mud walls" (6) and straw, the big cool "Kalodighi" (9), the farm with the animals and the huge trees around the house. The earthiness of the rural life is symbolic of its simplicity that the author contrasts with the suffocating city life with its complications and tribulations. The journey of the mother and the daughter from the city life to the rural house is indicative of their leaving behind the stringency of the city life, the turmoil of the torturous married life and embracing of the simplicity of the country-life. It is almost like the journey back to innocence where every moment is joyful and pleasant.

The cognitive metaphors used in the entire story also trace the development of child psychology. According to Melanie Klein's object relations theory, a child's association with the animate and inanimate objects surrounding it result in the comprehension of the "phantasies" (Klein 23) that further develop the consciousness. The "phantasies" (Klein 23) in Kleinian term are the mental projection of libidinal, aggressive as well as defensive impulses and substituting real person with object images. For the child narrator in the story 'The Bats', a propensity towards aggression and defensive mechanisms is shown by her. To describe her mother's distorted facial features caused by her father's physical tortures, she finds it easy to associates it casually with the "chipped mahogany dresser" (2) rather than directly talking about it. The cracked plaster of the wall reminds her of "drooping mouth" (3) which again is a subconscious association with her mother's face. Her act of describing her mother with materialistic attributes like "stiff saree starch" (1) and "damp talcum powder" and especially "tears" deduces the fact that her psyche perceives her mother as a distant

pitiable entity. The dampness and the stiffness are "signifiers" (Saussure 67) of her problematic relationship with her mother where she finds no emotion of attachment. As for her father, mere synecdoche like "big" (2) hands and colossal presence reverberates her mother's timidness and the child's complete dissociation from him. Her portrayal of defence mechanisms finds expression in her nonchalance to her mother's tears every time the latter cries, starting with obstructing her ears to obstructing her perceptive abilities altogether. Her intrapsychic conflict is catalysed by her parent's problematic relationship because of which her defence found expressions in her disregard towards accepting the gravity of the situation. Her psyche found a healthy chance to flourish in the abundance of love bestowed on her by her Grandpa-Uncle. However, that also became restricted when her mother forcefully took her back to the same constricted environment. Ultimately, the daughter's psychology mirrored that of her mother when she too accepted to be a part of the violence and in the end is shown to return again and again to the same torturous environment of the home. At the end, she exudes a doppelganger image with the bruises on her face like that of her mother and returning intentionally to the loop of the violence showing how her mind conditioned her to accept the emotional and somatic violence as something mundane.

The famous theorist I.A Richards in his critically acclaimed book *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936) had used two terms namely "vehicle" (120) and "tenor" (120) for the metaphorical word and the subject to which the metaphor applies respectively. He enunciated that the mechanism of a metaphor is simply to bring two disparate objects, especially the "vehicle" (Richards 120) and the "tenor" (120) and weave out of their interaction an effective meaning which otherwise could not have been replicated through simple literary assertion of the connection between the two objects (Richards 118-121). In Divakaruni's story, "the bats" (Divakaruni 8) are the most significant "vehicle" (Richards 120) that holds the crux of the entire story. The incident related to the bats as shown in the story is quite commonplace. However, the symbolic meaning attached to it holds the real value. The bats have been shown to destroy the mango orchard by eating the mangoes. Even though poisons are spread, still they return to the orchard with an unexplained affinity, ignoring the fatality. For quite a few mornings there has been a repetition of the ordeal where the narrator along with her Grandpa-uncle collects the bat carcasses and throws them. Surprisingly the population of the carcasses has shown to not decline which indicates the fact that the bats plunged into the same fiasco despite knowing the ultimate outcome. If the bats are the "vehicle" (Richards 120) here, the "tenor" (120) is Ma. The incident related to the bats plunging into their own death is the premonition of the end of the story. Relativity is drawn between the bats and Ma as the latter descends into her unsuccessful marriage once again, leaving behind the blissful innocence of the rural life. Moreover, the bats are the creatures of the dark. They mostly go unnoticed and are usually avoided by people. The metaphor is suggestive enough as similarly like the bats, the wife here is an unnoticed and unrecognised woman, living her life in the darkness. Her inability to create her own identity makes her an insignificant person in the society, usually ignored by people. The author's choice of titling her story with the same metaphor indicates that the essence of the entire story not only lay in the single incident but also in the parallelism drawn between the general attributes of the bats and the character of Ma. Ma's psychology of going back to the same futile marriage, however, has been triggered by the market women stipulating the insinuation of society into the privy of the personal lives of people. Had it not been the manipulative stares or the smirks or the whispers, probably Ma would not have taken the
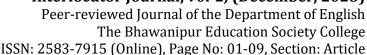
decision. What she does not realise is that along with her, she is about to ruin the life of her daughter similarly like the bat's clan. Moreover, her naivety is also indicated as she is blindly following other people without realising herself the outcome, again similar to the bats coming to light their own pyre. The narrator's statement regarding the foolishness of the bats resonates in a deep way the obtuseness of her mother's decision when she says, "I guess they just don't realize what's happening. They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they'll be safe. Or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here" (Divakaruni 8).

Pramod K. Nayar asserted very rightfully that "gendering is a practice of power where masculinity is always associated with authority" (83). The praxis related to this statement is observed in the immediacy of the mother's behaviour when she received a threatening letter from her husband. She even lies to her uncle that her husband has asked her forgiveness. The narrator, despite being a child, however has posed in this regard to be the voice of truth. She has become the advocate of peaceful rural life and thus tries to prevent her mother from going back to the same hellish atmosphere. She holds up many reasons as to not to go back but all efforts ultimately become fruitless. The truth is that by enacting her gender role imposed on her by society, the character of Ma has forgotten the bifurcation between right and wrong. In order to evade the humiliation, she has chosen to return to her husband even though she knows that the brutal domination will never end. Her compulsion to escape the ignominy is the "something that keeps pulling [her] back" (11) to her abusive marriage. From the perspective of her husband also, it is not the affection that made him call her back but rather the same compulsion and his needs for sustenance. In this regard, Levi Strauss' statement becomes very relevant when he shared his perspective on marriage by commenting that, "The relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasions of this relationship" (116).

Levi Strauss' statement finds the accuracy in the story as shown in the mother's expectation of the imminent trepidation that will be offered to her once she goes back home but chooses to play the role of the perfect wife due to the gendered pressure imposed by the society. Her blatant utterance of feeling the "[t]he loneliness without him" (Divakaruni 12) is a lie to herself. She has neither been able to forgive him nor has she forgotten the abuse. It is simply the societal pressure that manipulated her to take a perilous decision like that will ultimately result in the ruin of her life as well as her daughter's life. This is the tale of most of the marriages in the Indian society that Divakaruni has woven so poignantly with metaphors. The metaphor of the bats again gets repeated in the narrator's perception of the sky as "crinkled" and "black" as the bat's wings (Divakaruni 8) . In this regard, the bats have been associated with the imminent danger that the narrator and her mother are going to plunge themselves in. The story almost becomes a loop of repetitive imagery as it ends with the same incident of the physical violence that it starts with. Towards the later part of the story, the readers witness both the mother and the daughter becoming enmeshed in the violence where the bruised daughter is helping the mother with her blood-covered mouth to escape the house. However, the ending line suggests that both of them came back once again to the torturous co-existence reminding the readers of the fervour of the bats, returning again and again to the fated demise.

Simone de Beauvoir in her canonical work *The Second Sex* had made an elaborate statement regarding marriage which holds its truth even now, after almost a century. She stated,

> And although marriage is considered an institution demanding mutual fidelity, it seems clear that the wife must be totally subordinate to the husband: through Saint Paul the fiercely antifeminist Jewish tradition is affirmed…he bases the principle of subordination of women to man on the Old and New Testaments. 'The man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man'; and 'Neither was man created for the woman; but the woman for the man'. And elsewhere: 'For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church (133).

Thus, from the above quotation, it is clearly understood that marriage has taken on a patriarchal discourse and society along with its various institutional constructions like religion has aided in the formulation of such a discourse. Cohesion or the mutual affinity, which is considered to be the essence of a happy marriage, in majority of the cases has subsided to conform to its societal norm of subjugation and domination of the partner. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's genius lies in the fact that she utilises various significant societal issues as the crux of her stories and novels. Her anthology *Arranged Marriage* has effectively taken up the issue of marriage and treated some of the darkest lanes of this institution. It has delved deep into the themes of failed marriage and the domestic violence that are some common issues in Indian society but that mostly go unreported due to the fear of embarrassment and humiliation. In the story 'The Bats' Divakaruni has painted the gendered oppression through the image of a weak and vulnerable woman acting as the hurdle in a man's life as is mostly perceived by the society. Thus, her character, Ma, has no personal identity. In this story, Mother is also the character who promotes patriarchy even though she is one of the sufferers in its hand. Her non-resilience, her mistaken choice of going back to the same marriage, her act of paying more importance to the societal convictions rather than her own sufferings indicate how she has become subconsciously insinuated by the patriarchal world around her. Even though the narrator protested, the mother paid no heed and brought her back to the same fatal loop of domestic violence. This story thus shows how generations get affected due to unsuccessful and turbulent marriage and the author has effectively, with her artistic contoured use of symbols, has given the readers a glimpse of the looming perturbations associated with a failed marriage. The author's publication of such a theme in the modern era thus portrays that feminism and women emancipation has a long way to reach the level of praxis from being just theories. In the era, where the incidents of marital rape are not declared as punishable offence, more such stories are required by the society to get enlightened that marriage is not only about being a couple in a relationship but rather about being a couple in a loving respectable coexistence.

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The Fragmented Mother: Subversion of Normative Motherhood in Ashapurna Devi's Short Stories

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Abstract: The article delves into Ashapurna Devi's portrayal of motherhood in her short stories. Often, mainstream literary and cultural representations confine a woman's identity to the biological act of reproduction. This homogenized and sexist view overlooks women's potential as individuals. As a woman writer, Ashapurna thoroughly explores the intricate psyche of her female characters, emphasizing their individuality. Despite her popularity, she has been dismissed as a writer of mere 'domestic' stories lacking 'political punch.' This article contends that in her works, the domestic space becomes a contested arena where women engage in daily negotiations with patriarchy. Ashapurna deliberately positions her female characters as mothers, wives, and daughters within the domestic structure while simultaneously subverting it. She challenges the politically charged notion of motherhood, deconstructing it to unveil its neglected fragmentary nature. In her stories, women are not portrayed as helpless victims unaware of their subjugation. Even instances of surrender to domination are strategically employed to criticize the partiality and double standards ingrained in society.

Keywords: motherhood, sexism, gender, reproductivity.

> The Olinka girls do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked. Why, she said, the mother of his children. But I am not the mother of anybody's children, I said, and I am something.

> — Alice Walker, *The Colour Purple.*

The idea of motherhood across the world is determined by various patriarchal cultural codifications. Since giving birth to a child is an experience exclusive to women, maternity is held as basic to women's lives and has often been used as a ploy to curb their freedom. In India the popular notion of motherhood is shaped, constructed, and highly influenced by the mythologies and popular legends of the land. The imagination of the people of the sub-continent draws heavily from the maternal iconography present in its mythologies. In the popular imagination, the mother is a kind, generous, de-sexualized persona devoid of any desire for herself. According to eminent feminist writer, V. Geetha, "Amongst Hindus, the mother is a model woman, self-sacrificing, heroic and essentially noble." (Geetha 14). This particular notion of motherhood has 'elevated' the status of the Indian woman from an ordinary individual to that of a divine energy, a Devi. Sudhir Kakar, in his

book *The Intimate Relations*, analyzes that "Besides desexing the woman another step in the denial of her desire is her idealization (especially of the Indian woman) as nearer to a purer divine state and thus an object of worship and adoration." (125). Myths play a crucial role in this context as they shape the collective imagination and beliefs of the masses. Kakar underscores that in India, myths are not confined to a bygone era; rather, they persistently thrive, retaining their symbolic potency. These Indian myths form a cultural idiom that aids individuals in constructing and integrating their inner worlds. Instead of the presence of several goddesses in Indian myths, in real life "it has served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power." (65), argues Jasodhara Bagchi, a renowned feminist scholar and activist, in her essay "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal". The notion of motherhood, based on its mythological definitions and attributes, was reshaped and reconstructed during the Indian nationalist era. The nation was defined as a mother and it proved to be more effective to kindle the national fervor of the natives than a few geographical lines drawn on a paper. Criticized severely for their ill-treatment of their women in the form of child marriage, atrocious rituals of widowhood, and burning the widows, the bourgeois nationalists of nineteenth-century India, especially in Bengal, utilized the image of the mother as one of the positive grounds to challenge the superiority of the colonizers. It started with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay presenting the image of the mother as a metaphor for the country in his proto-nationalist novel, *Anandamath,* and found a politicized nature of its own in the nationalist discourse in Bengal. The mythologized, proverbial image of the Bengali mother was seen as the only way, apart from forming a model for the 'ideal wife', to reclaim the lost honor of the enslaved natives from the foreign rulers. It should also be noticed that it was the mother-son relation that was celebrated, and the glory of the mother was authenticated and justified by the masculine greatness of her Hindu warrior sons. To women, apart from being bestowed with unsolicited 'greatness', it reemphasized her restricted identity, limited to childbirth and nurturing her children. In her study of motherhood in colonial Bengal Jasodhara Bagchi argues:

> The nationalist glorification of motherhood had a far-reaching impact on the ideological control over women. Motherhood of Bengali women was seen as the 'ultimate identity' of Bengali women. It was an excellent ploy to keep women out of privileges like education, and professions that were being wrested by their men and glorifying motherhood only through her reproductive power. (65).

This persistently politicized and patriarchal perception of motherhood continues to thrive in the collective imagination, remaining an integral aspect of Indian culture and tradition. From literature to popular mediums of entertainment like television and cinema, the Indian mother is portrayed as an overtly dramatic and sentimental figure whose world revolves around the wellbeing of her sons.

This article explores the portrayal, envisioning, and rediscovery of 'mothers' in the short stories penned by Ashapurna Devi. Ashapurna belonged to the succeeding generation of Bankim-Sarat-Tagore. By the time she commenced her literary journey, Rabindranath Tagore was approaching the final stages of his life and career. Bankim Chandra had passed away in 1894, well before her birth, and Sarat Chandra died in 1938, just two years after she published her first short story. She started writing her short stories when the Kallol movement, the first conscious literary

movement in Bengal, had just begun. Determined to introduce modernism into Bengali literature, the movement began with a group of writers, influenced by Marxist and Freudian theories, endeavouring to address a world traumatized by the horrors of the post-war era. A conscious initiative was taken by a group of young and daring writers and poets, including Premendra Mitra, Buddhadeb Basu, Mohitlal Majumdar, and Bishnu De, to challenge the sentimental worship of nature's beauty and the romanticism associated with Tagore. They deliberately dismantled the ideal of motherhood and domestic love, replacing them with explicit passions and desires through provocative writing designed to shock readers. In this transformative period for Bengali literature, where the approach towards the world was undergoing significant changes, Ashapurna focused exclusively on the mundane lives of women. This singular focus led to her being labeled as a mere 'domestic writer,' dealing with the 'insignificant' aspects of daily life. However, what was overlooked in the process of simplifying her works was the subversion inherent in her treatment of the domestic and mundane. Consciously drawing her characters from the structured realms of domesticity, she placed her women characters within the confined roles of mothers and wives, only to challenge these very structures. Due to the conservative nature of her own private life, Ashapurna, in contrast to the 'rebellious' writers of her time, observed the reality of women's everyday lives intimately from within the confines of her home. Otherized in the contemporary literary scene of Bengal, Ashapurna chose the gendered Other as the focus of her short stories, turning it into a challenge to disrupt the tradition of stereotyped, sexist representations of women prevalent in mainstream literature.

The existing body of literary scholarship on Ashapurna Devi primarily focuses on her novels, particularly the *Satyabati Trilogy*. Regarding her short fiction, researchers have commonly employed a general feminist approach to comprehend her works. Remarkably, there has been a noticeable absence of in-depth analyses of her short stories. In these neglected pieces of literature, she consistently questions the conventional, homogeneous understanding of women in socially defined roles, an aspect that has unfortunately received limited attention in recent research investigations. Popular feminist critics Lalita and Tharu argue, "Where Ashapurna Debi is concerned...the critical dismissal is also the result of the apparently conservative posture her narratives promote. Rebellion, defiance, anger, resentment and passion are portrayed to evoke our sympathy....It is as if given the scheme of the Ashapurna world, a rebellion that stubbornly insists on its fruits is an escapist dream..." (Tharu 476). However, in this article, I intend to contest this observation and argue that Ashapurna's literary world serves as a mirror portraying the harsh reality. Ashapurna asserts that her writing is a direct reflection of what she observes and experiences in her surroundings. Writing exclusively about the private lives of men and women, the writer has created a fictional world that buzzes with the unheard voices of women confined behind the closed doors of Bengali households. She endeavors to delve into the often-overlooked personal experiences of middle-class Bengali women, providing a voice to lives that have historically been disregarded. A major number of her short stories deal with women within marriage and family. While she digs deep into the complex psyche of her female characters, playing various prescribed roles in the domestic space, motherhood emerges as an important aspect. Motherhood in her stories is no longer an ideology but a lived experience of women's day-to-day lives. Mothers in her stories neither have any 'divine capacity', nor are they godly beings devoid of all desires. Rather, they possess a multitude of emotions inherent to every

human being. Their authenticity lies in unveiling the reality concealed behind the imposed facade of divinity.

While Ashapurna has a substantial body of work that sheds a critical light on the subject of maternity, for conciseness, this article focuses on four short stories that center around the concept of motherhood and the experiences women undergo as mothers. The four chosen stories, "Chhinnamasta", "Bhoy", "Sthirchitra", and "Kasai" reveal four different aspects of maternal experience. While in "Chhinnamasta" a mother's hurt pride overshadows her love for her son, in "Bhoy" she becomes the subject of social mockery for outliving her children, in "Sthirchitra" the author recounts a mother's disappointment after she gets the news of her son being alive, and in "Kasai," Ashapurna condemns the hypocrisy ingrained in a society that incessantly compels women to demonstrate their domestic value as both mothers and wives. In each of the stories Ashapurna with the brilliant observational strength of a writer portrays the struggles, the negotiations, and the criticisms that a woman goes through in a society governed by patriarchal cultural norms.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen, in her introduction to Ashapurna Devi's short story collection, remarks, "In Ashapurna's short stories the women characters are more important and more complete than the male characters. It is only with the perspective of a woman that Ashapurna has seen the world." (Sen xvii). Her female characters are capable of subtle, complex, and conflicting emotions. She repeatedly interrogates the deified image of the mother and deliberately punctures the elevated socio-cultural construct of the maternal figure. One such story is "Chhinnamasta '' which depicts the mother-son relationship where the power politics of the domestic sphere revolves around exerting control over the son. "Chhinnamasta '' is the tale of Jayabati, a widow mother, and her daughter-in-law, Pratibha, both of whom indulge in a power play at whose center is Bimalendu, Jayabati's only son. Jayabati's dream to welcome the new daughter-in-law into her household shatters as soon as she realizes that Pratibha does not fit into the role of a coy newlywed woman who would listen to her instructions. Pratibha's rude manners, ruthless complaints, and growing control over Bimalendu turn the otherwise quiet Jayabati into a quarrelsome mother-in-law. The author writes, "How the son slowly starts to move away and the daughter-in-law begins to spread her authority! Jayabati only stares with helpless rage." (Devi, *Chhotogalpo Sankalan* 164). Pratibha appears as a rival to her in the domestic battlefield and strives to snatch away from Jayabati the dearest thing in the world, her son. Jayabati feels envious as she witnesses Bimalendu distancing away from her, "She could bear anything but not the change in Bimalendu." (Devi 166). Soon Jayabati's rage turns to her son as well who now hardly speaks to her. The same Jayabati who could not bear separation from her son for a single day takes a sigh of relief when Bimalendu returns to Kolkata after his marriage. Unable to bear the insensitive remarks of Pratibha on her widowhood, at one point in the story she even wishes for the death of her son as a way to teach Pratibha a lesson. Ironically her wish is fulfilled as soon Bimalendu dies in a road accident, but was Jayabati mortified at the death of her only son? Did she regret her fatal wish? The story reaches its end as we see Jayabati smiling as she 'affectionately' feeds Pratibha, now a widow herself.

"Chhinnamasta" is unsettling for readers as they witness Jayabati, once an exceedingly loving mother, smiling cruelly at the demise of her only son. Jayabati subverts the conventional understanding of maternity, as her character resists the popular image of the nurturing 'good

mother'. According to Kakar, "It needs to be noted that this idealized image of the 'good mother' is largely a male construction. Women do not sentimentalize their mothers in this way. For daughters, the mother is not an adoring figure on a pedestal: she is a more earthly presence, not always benign but always _there_." (83). Nancy Chodorow also raises a similar argument in her seminal work _The Reproduction of Mothering_. Chodorow argues that boys and girls have different experiences while being mothered. Whereas boys in order to understand their identity must gain a gendered identity that is not female i.e. not mother, for girls their identity is based on and is developed through a process of identifying with the mother. While explaining the male understanding of the maternal figure Kakar further argues, "..in unconscious fantasy, the vagina as the passage between being and non-being is not only perceived as a source of life and equated with emergence into light, but also shunned as the forbidding dark hole, the entrance into the depths of a death womb which takes life back into itself." (89). The argument becomes poignant in case of Jayabati. The death of Bimalendu becomes instrumental in her pursuit of revenge, ultimately leading to her triumph in the private domain. Her lost control over the household is ironically regained by the death of her son. In this context, Bimalendu transcends his roles as a son and a husband. He becomes the primary instrument in the hands of Jayabati's ruthless adversary, Pratibha. Jayabati emerges as the punishing mother, not only penalizing her daughter-in-law but also her son. This is in response to the humiliation she endured and the loss of the authority she once wielded over the household and its occupants.

What seems interesting here is Ashapurna's choice of the title, "Chhinnamasta". In Hindu mythology, _Chhinnamasta_ represents the ferocious side of the _Devi,_ one of the many forms of the mother goddess, a self-decapitating figure who severs her own head to drink her blood. Her duality as both destructive and nurturing energy represents temporality and immortality. As a self-sacrificing figure, she is popular as a symbol of Indian motherhood but at the same time, her sexuality and tremendous power are at odds with the caring and nurturing aspects of the mother. In the portrayal of Jayabati, Ashapurna boldly constructs a maternal figure who sacrifices her son not for any greater purpose but to satisfy her quest for vengeance. What intrigues the reader even further is that Jayabati is never cast as a villainous character in the narrative. Rather, her unconscious yearning for her son's death arises as a natural and humane reaction to the repeated humiliations she experiences. As readers, we also covertly relish in her eventual triumph. The instance when Jayabati is observed smiling instills a sense of unease in the reader. It disrupts their comfort and prompts them to question their capacity to embrace the distinctiveness of the character. Jayabati's character not only dismantles the portrayal of the stereotypical Hindu widow mother, reliant on male family members for survival, but through her persona, Ashapurna also casts a counter gaze at patriarchal definitions of womanhood.

While in "Chhinnamasta" Jayabati's satisfaction in avenging her humiliation adds different dimensions to her character, "Bhoy" depicts a mother's earnest desire to stay alive even after the death of all her children. Ashapurna gives a sarcastic picture of our society which finds it difficult to believe that a woman has a life of her own beyond childcare. In "Bhoy" Ashapurna explores Drabamoyee's journey through different stages of motherhood. We find her in the story playing solely the role of a mother from the tender age of eighteen when she lost her firstborn until the death of her last son, Murari. The story begins and ends with the death of her children and in between we find Drabamoyee metamorphosing from a sad young woman who wanted to die as she could not

bear the death of her firstborn to an old woman who earnestly clings on to life even after the demise of her last son. Ashapurna also shows how patriarchy exercises its power not only through men but often through women as well. Hence, we see a middle-aged Drabamoyee, who herself after much sorrow and grief gradually learned to cope with the untimely death of her children, taunting her daughter-in-law for staying at her parents' home on the 'pretext' of her three-year-old brother's death. Drabamoyee represents the majority of Indian women, whose worth in the household is determined by the number of sons they can reproduce. In her middle age, Drabamayee is seen with her seven children as a powerful authoritative figure dominating the course of her household and then suddenly life takes a turn. At sixty, she lost her eldest son Ananda, the earning and obedient son who used to run her household. The loss of the son was emotional as well as financial. Ashapurna narrates Drabamoyee's situation, "She would turn into the soil by leaving food and water.....this is an easy way she discovered to make death closer in the shame of being alive." (Devi, *Chhotogolpo Sankalan* 153). Slowly she loses five other children. Her decline in age and power begins. In her old age Drabamoyee, bereft of her authority, productivity, and power, becomes a subject of mockery to others for outliving her children. Once a dominating and intimidating figure, Drabamoyee is now taunted by her daughters-in-law for being "shamelessly" alive. Ashapurna's heart-wrenching description of the misery of the old woman makes us empathize with her, "Where is her ability to forsake food and water, leading to an oath of death? ...She has even lost the strength to utter the names of those who have abandoned her. What only has increased is the sense of hunger and thirst." (154). On the *Shraddha* ceremony of her last son, Murari, an old and fragile Drabamoyee is seen roaming around the house with a stick supervising all like a dethroned queen as if trying to vainly recall the days of lost glory. In the final scene, we see her skeptical about the treatment of the native doctor, asking for a sahib doctor for better treatment, earnestly imploring all to save her life.

As the story ends Drabamoyee emerges as a tragic figure, laughed at and ridiculed by all for her desire for life. This highlights the pervasive issue in our country concerning women's health that has predominantly been associated with maternal health. Unfortunately, teenagers and women beyond their reproductive years scarcely garner the attention of society and the state, both of which often exhibit indifference toward the overall well-being of women. What catches our attention is that throughout the story Drabamoyee, the perpetual mother, is criticized sometimes for 'overreacting' to the loss of her firstborn at the age of eighteen, for her 'unbearable' hue and cry when she again lost a child at the age of thirty-two and finally, she becomes the subject of contempt to all at the end when she stops mourning the death of her children and expresses an earnest desire to live. Her identity and her manners are the subjects of scrutiny and are constantly regulated by others. As a mother her subjectivity is continuously modified by the demands of society. Her explicit desire for life is seen by others as a threat to the extraordinary ideology of motherhood. A mother, like the old Drabamoyee, is seen as an embarrassment to society, an unnecessary liability and hence she is told that she 'should' die as if it is her moral duty to renounce her life once her children are not there. Drabamoyee's story reminds us of Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi's "Stanadayini". Jashoda could exercise her authority and was valued by all as long as she could breastfeed the children of the Zamindar family. No sooner did she lose the ability to breastfeed, which was seen as her 'use value', than she was dethroned from the 'noble status' of a *Devi*. Mahasweta Devi highlights in the story the unambiguous difference between myth and reality. The Jashoda of her story is the stark opposite of the mythological Jashoda, Lord

Krishna's foster mother. In "Stanadayini" the author shifts from myth to reality and shows the insufficiency of mythology in India where gender, class, and various other factors bind women to a subordinate position. In Ashapurna's story Drabamoyee's 'use value' deteriorates with her age and she gradually loses her status and worth in the family. Like Jashoda, Drabamoyee too has no memory of her own mother and childhood. Her only memory is that of being a mother herself, of perpetually carrying a child in her womb. As motherhood is deemed 'innate' to women, it has often been employed as a motif to restrict their rights. Maithreyi Krishnaraj in her introduction to the book, *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?* shares her personal experience as an expecting mother: "I once had a strange personal experience. I was pregnant and was returning from work; it had rained heavily. The street on my house was flooded and I had no umbrella. A fruit vendor selling fruits ran across the street to offer me his umbrella saying, 'Ma you should not get wet in this condition.'" (2). Although the gesture was a kind one, Krishnaraj highlights that the problem lies far deeper. She points to "the pervasive respect that motherhood has in Indian culture as opposed to a woman as an individual". (2).

Maternity becomes a subject of interrogation in another story of Ashapurna, "Sthirchitra". "Sthirchitra" is a complex story of a mother's attachment to her son and her desire to immortalize the memory of her dead son by making a memorial temple. However, events become problematic when she unconsciously uses the memorial temple as a pretext to fulfill her long-repressed desire to have her own house. The story begins with the accident and the consequent news of the death of Dibyakumar Sen, the only son of Sati Sen and Malabya Sen. Sati turns into stone when she receives the news of her son's death. The author depicts how the loss of her only son leaves her shattered, "The media world only keeps count of the numbers of the dead and injured, but who does keep the account of the numerous dead hidden inside the number? The woman called Sati Sen, who died with that news on the thirteenth of November, cannot be made to flow back in the tide of life anymore." (Devi, *Swanirvachita* 213). Soon she is informed that they will get a good amount of money as compensation from Dibya's office. Although, at first, she taunts her husband for accepting the money, she is found more excited about it later. She plans to make a house with that money and there she decides to build the memorial temple of her son. With childlike excitement, she starts dreaming of the house, something that she has desired for long. Forgetting her present tragedy she exclaims in joy "How I always longed for such a day!" (Devi 218). She plans the room where she would make the temple for her son, how she would decorate it with a large photo framed in white where there would hang a thick garland. She eagerly waits for the day when they will move into their new house. Coincidentally the day of the inauguration collided with her son's birthday and she imagines how her son will get a new life and will be metaphorically born again in that memorial room. The story creates a twist when the day before the inauguration she receives a letter written by her son, informing her that he is not dead, he has lost his body parts but is still alive. Sati, the mother, feels as if someone has cruelly smashed her dreams. "How could the woman called Sati remain standing if she sees an unfamiliar strange creature coming out of the depths of the sea pushing aside the young fresh picture of her son framed in white, kept above the slim bed in the middle of the pure untainted memorial temple room of Dibya and trying to replace it?" (223). Instead of being happy we find Sati dumbfounded as she reads the letter written by her son requesting them to rescue him and take him home.

Sati's character, as perplexing as it seems to the reader, once again disrupts the age-old concept of the benevolent mother. She fails to realize when she stopped mourning for her son and started using his memory to defend her dream of owning a house. Her affection for her son is replaced by her artificial desire to immortalize his memory. Her transformation is shown through her fluctuating emotions. The metaphorical rebirth that she envisioned for Dibya through the splendid execution of his memorial temple, a manifestation of her profound love for her son, is shattered by the revelation of his survival. Similar to Jayabati's character, Sati's intricate psyche unsettles the reader and evokes moments of anxiety as one witnesses the 'forbidden' aspects of motherhood. Her character, like the character of Jayabati, disrupts the expectations of a conventional reader accustomed to the orthodox, gendered portrayal of mothers as goddesses.

Ashapurna endeavours to question the deeply rooted norms linked to motherhood within Bengali society and, more expansively, in Hindu culture. She examines societal hypocrisy and double standards in another short story titled "Kasai," casting a critical light on the overwhelming expectations imposed on women in terms of domestic responsibilities, especially in the nurturing of children. The narrative of "Kasai" paints a poignant portrait of a husband questioning his wife's maternal duties, highlighting the burdensome nature of societal expectations. The story recounts the misery of a woman trapped in the politics of domestic life where ironically it is the women of the house who are ruthless and unsympathetic to the plight of another woman. Kamala finds herself unable to tend to her crying infant due to her household duties. As she endeavors to care for her ailing son, she faces relentless taunting from the members of the household. Unable to soothe the child, her frustrated husband angrily abandons the infant at the kitchen door, prompting sarcastic comments from those around them. Ultimately, after a series of dramatic events, when Kamala seeks solace on the terrace to escape the oppressive atmosphere within the house. The relief is short-lived as soon her husband returns and forcefully takes the child from her. The doctor declares the child to be dead. Kamala is finally 'relieved' from her household duties and is alienated by her family members for 'failing' to perform her responsibilities as a mother. Unable to bear the inhumanity any longer Kamala bursts out in protest against her husband one day but all her allegations turn into dust when her husband accuses her of being selfish and calls her a *Kasai*, a butcher, who murdered their child on the pretext of performing domestic duties.

Discussing mothering and childcare in the Indian context V. Geetha argues, "…pregnancy and mothering do narrow a woman's chances of being economically productive and this, in certain circumstances, could and does lead to a lowering of her bargaining position and even status within the household" (*Patriarchy* 70). Discussing the position of economically productive women within the domestic space she further argues, "...her contribution might not be valued as work, but an extension of her household responsibilities. This is most likely to happen with respect to home-based labour, which, being done at home, remains 'invisible' and is not viewed as productive work, in the sense a man's work, done outside home would be" (*Patriarchy* 70). Adrienne Rich in her groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born* proposes that the structure of motherhood comprises various control mechanisms that constrain women to the roles of motherhood and compliance. These

mechanisms operate subtly, ensnaring women without their awareness, ultimately reducing them to powerless victims:

> …marriage as economic dependence, as a guarantee to a man of 'his' children; the theft of childbirth from women;…the laws regulating contraception and abortion;…the denial that work done by women at home is part of 'production': the chaining of women in links of love and guilt; the solitary confinement of 'full-time motherhood'; the token nature of fatherhood, which gives him rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility; the psychoanalytic castigation of the mother…that she is inadequate and ignorant…all these are connecting fibers of this invisible institution (276-277).

In "Kasai," Kamala feels betrayed by her husband, who accuses her of being the one accountable for their child's death, all the while avoiding his own responsibility as a father. Both Kamala and her child are portrayed as victims of the covert politics within the Bengali joint family structure. Her character is presented as a casualty of the substantial expectations placed on her to be an exemplary wife and mother within the joint family dynamics of a middle-class household. This portrayal urges us to reflect on the significance of the title. Who is the real butcher? Is it Kamala, who overburdened with her domestic 'duties', fails to save her child, or the family members whose astonishing lack of empathy leaves the readers bewildered? Similar to many of her other stories, the choice of title in this narrative compels readers to reflect on the role of society in the oppression of women and the unfiltered portrayal of social realism evident in Ashapurna's works.

According to Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, editors of *Noon in Calcutta*, a Bengali short story anthology, Ashapurna's stories lack 'political punch'. Here I would like to argue that Ashapurna's position as a woman writer cannot be simplified and dismissed as such. In the four stories discussed in this article, Ashapurna intricately exposes the readers to the multifaceted aspects of motherhood and the continual negotiations a woman has to make every day in a male-governed society. In stories such as these Ashapurna boldly dismantles the conventional ideology of motherhood by her fearless portrayal of emotions that are frequently overlooked in women. Her characters subvert the widely accepted notion of the 'good mother'. Be it in "Chhinnamasta", "Sthirchitra", or "Bhoy" Ashapurna boldly rejects the so-called glory attached to maternity by presenting the more human side of the woman where she ceases to be a politicized metaphor. Even in stories such as "Kasai" where the protagonist seemingly lacks agency and appears to succumb to her circumstances, the narrative style suggests that this surrender is not a conformity to tradition; rather, it serves as a strategic maneuver by the author to emphasize the necessity of solidarity among women as the sole pathway to liberation from oppression. As Ashapurna pragmatically expresses, "One cannot help mentioning that one of the major reasons for this is the woman's lack of loyalty to her own sex…If we want this state of things to change we must have a strong sense of solidarity so that women don't have to turn to men every time they are trying to build up something….Women need a special kind of self-sufficiency which can come only with the consolidation of female power."

(Devi, *Indian Women* 22). Ashapurna in her stories not only subverts the stereotypical image of womanhood but also gives voice to the hitherto unspoken aspects of women's lives. In one of her interviews with Chitra Deb, Ashapurna remarked:

> I had created these women with a view to voice a protest against the predicament of women but I never wanted to make it explicit .... the plot of all my writing is inspired by real life incidents. I have never been judgmental about any issue but only documented episodes…hence my rebellious image remained camouflaged. (Deb 283).

In her works, 'home' or the domestic sphere emerges as a contested space where women negotiate with patriarchal forces in an attempt to retain their individuality. She deliberately challenges the notion of the 'archetypal mother,' portraying her as a tangible, human woman. As she aptly puts it in her essay "Indian Women: Myth and Reality": "Women have always been misled by this imposed ideal of womanhood….The very word 'woman' is a symbol of eternal mystery and enchantment, as if it is not enough that she is flesh and blood, but that she must be something higher than what she is." (19). Ashapurna consistently undermines the rigid image associated with an Indian woman as a mother, purposefully keeping it fragmented. Her women characters defy and subvert the ideological constraints of motherhood, exposing the human side of women, confined within the framework of maternity, along with all their intricacies and desires. The author refrains from passing judgment, instead articulates what she perceives as truth—truth seen through the lens of a woman. In doing so, she dismantles the prevalent notion of the 'divine mother.'

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* Translations from original Bengali texts have been done by the writer of this article.

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From Mythology to the Modern Age: Exploring the Role of Mythology and Literature in Mani Ratnam's Cinematic Adaptations

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Abstract: Mani Ratnam has evolved as one of the significant faces of Indian cinema. His scripts usually carry an ideology that would have multiple parallel sub themes and they would equally emanate the motives contributing to the main plot. One such element specially, is the literary references that are often infused in his movies in the form of songs, dialogues and characterization, or even as the main plot with certain changes to be presented as a screenplay. His other movies like *Raavanan (2010), Thalapathy* (1991), also had the shades of Indian epics into their plots and characters. The effect of these movies, especially when it reaches various sections of the society, creates an inquisitive fervour over the original literary text based on which the script is curated. The trend of reiterating the literary works that are already globally acclaimed stays as a trend for a particular time period to conceive the movie, the adaptations and to travel along with the popular trend that the movie sets in the society at the time of release and the critical discussions followed by the movie release. Apart from the literary acclimations as the whole plot, the literary references from vernacular languages exhibited through songs and dialogues gained attention and popularised the particular literary section that is revisited, reinterpreted by viewers as readers for precision of thoughts and comprehension over the acclimated literary content represented in the visual art form. The paper intends to examine the literary acclimations and references in the movies of Mani Ratnam, in detail, that have created positive and critical perceptions and trends in all aspects for a particular time period.

Keywords: Acclimation, Adaptations, Literary works, Mani Ratnam, Movies, Trend.

Literary Adaptations

Literary texts have long served as a rich source of inspiration for the creation of compelling and thought-provoking cinematic experiences. When it comes to choosing literary works suitable for adaptation into cinema, several factors come into play. A literary text that has a captivating and well-developed narrative structure lends itself well to the visual medium of cinema. Stories with strong

plotlines, well-defined characters, and richly imagined settings have the potential to translate into visually stunning and emotionally engaging films. The texts that explore universal themes and evoke deep emotional responses have a higher chance of resonating with a wider audience when adapted into cinema. Themes such as love, loss, redemption, identity, and personal growth have enduring appeal and can translate into powerful cinematic storytelling. Additionally, literary works that possess vivid and descriptive language can provide filmmakers with a strong foundation for visually immersive storytelling. The evocative imagery and sensory details found in such texts can inspire filmmakers to create visually stunning and thematically rich cinematic experiences. Moreover, literary works that offer complex and multi-layered narratives, filled with subplots, symbolism, and thematic depth, can provide filmmakers with rich source material for adaptation. These texts often offer opportunities for nuanced character development and exploration of intricate relationships, adding depth and complexity to the cinematic adaptation.

The cultural and historical significance of a literary work can make it an attractive choice for adaptation. Texts that shed light on important social issues, historical events, or cultural contexts can be compelling for filmmakers aiming to bring such stories to a wider audience and promote understanding and empathy. Literary texts suitable for adaptation into cinema, the interplay between captivating narratives, universal themes, evocative language, complexity, and cultural significance serves as a guide for filmmakers seeking to create impactful and visually captivating cinematic experiences from the wealth of literary material available to them. Adapting literary works into movies is a captivating process that involves translating the written word into a visual and auditory medium. Filmmakers face the challenge of staying true to the essence of the original work while making necessary adjustments for the cinematic medium. This often requires condensing the story to fit within the typical runtime of a film. Visual and cinematic considerations play a crucial role, as filmmakers strive to find visually compelling ways to depict the story, utilizing cinematography, production design, costumes, and special effects. Literary devices, such as internal monologues or extensive descriptions, must be transformed into cinematic equivalents. Casting is vital in bringing characters to life on the screen, and adaptations may require modifications to suit the film medium. Narrative structure may need adjustments to ensure clarity and coherence. Additionally, audience' expectations for well-known literary adaptations must be balanced with the need to provide a fresh perspective. Successful adaptations strike a balance between faithfulness to the source material and utilizing the unique qualities of cinema to create an engaging experience for the audience.

Indian Perspective

Indian cinema has a rich history of adapting literary works as a source for the scripts, and also from novels, short stories, plays, and poems. Classic literature, both in Hindi and regional languages, has been a popular choice for adaptations, showcasing iconic stories. Filmmakers bring their own interpretations and artistic vision to the adaptations, infusing their unique cinematic style. The integration of music and dance, a hallmark of Indian cinema, adds an extra layer of entertainment to these adaptations. Many Indian literary adaptations have achieved both popular and critical success, bridging the gap between literature and cinema while captivating audiences with their storytelling. They serve as a testament to the talent and creativity of Indian filmmakers and have become an integral part of the cultural and artistic landscape of Indian cinema.

The evolution of Indian cinema based on literary representations has been a fascinating journey. Initially, adaptations were often straightforward and aimed at bringing popular literary works to the screen for mass entertainment. However, as Indian cinema matured, filmmakers began to explore a more nuanced approach to literary adaptations. They sought to capture the essence of the original works while infusing their own artistic vision. This led to creative reinterpretations that went beyond mere replication, resulting in innovative storytelling techniques, unique visual styles, and experimental narrative structures. With advancements in technology and a greater emphasis on visual effects, filmmakers have been able to create visually captivating worlds that do justice to the imagination and grandeur of the literary source material. Whether it's the mythical landscapes of epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* or the vivid descriptions of regional folklore, Indian cinema has pushed boundaries to bring these literary worlds to life on the big screen. Furthermore, Indian filmmakers have expanded the scope of literary adaptations to include works that address contemporary social issues and reflect the diverse cultural fabric of the country. They have utilized literature as a powerful tool for social commentary, using storytelling to shed light on topics such as gender inequality, caste discrimination, political unrest, and human rights. These adaptations have not only entertained but also served as catalysts for social change, sparking conversations and raising awareness among the audience. The evolution of Indian cinema based on literary representations has also witnessed a growing emphasis on artistic integrity and a deeper engagement with the source material. Filmmakers have collaborated closely with authors and literary experts to ensure a faithful adaptation that captures the essence of the original work. This collaboration has led to a more nuanced understanding of the literary texts, resulting in adaptations that resonate with both fans of the original works and newcomers to the stories.

Moreover, the success of Indian literary adaptations has had a significant impact on the global stage. Many Indian films have garnered international acclaim, showcasing the rich storytelling traditions of Indian literature to a global audience. This has opened doors for cross-cultural exchange and appreciation, fostering a deeper understanding of Indian literature and culture. The evolution of Indian cinema based on literary representations has seen a shift from straightforward adaptations to more artistic and socially relevant interpretations. Filmmakers have pushed the boundaries of storytelling and visual aesthetics, capturing the essence of the source material while embracing their own creative vision. These adaptations have not only entertained but also reflected the social fabric of India and introduced its rich literary heritage to a wider audience, both within the country and on the global stage.

Mythology as Source

Indian mythology has been a significant source of inspiration for movies in India, with filmmakers delving into the rich and diverse mythological tales from Hindu epics, such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as well as several regional folklore based myths. These adaptations bring larger-than-life characters, Gods, Goddesses, and mythical creatures to the big screen, showcasing their extraordinary powers, struggles, and moral dilemmas. The stories are often presented in a grandiose and visually stunning manner, incorporating elaborate sets, costumes, and special effects to transport audiences into the mystical realms of Indian mythology. These movies not only entertain but also serve as a means of cultural preservation, passing down ancient legends and

teachings to newer generations. They explore profound philosophical and moral concepts while captivating audiences with their epic narratives. Indian mythology represented in movies allows viewers to immerse themselves in the fascinating world of gods, heroes, and mythical adventures, celebrating the rich heritage and spiritual traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

Methodology

Film adaptation theory is the transfer of a work or story, in whole or in part, to a feature film. While the most common form of film adaptation is the use of a novel as the basis, other works adapted into films include non-fiction (including journalism), autobiographical works, comic books, scriptures, plays, historical sources and even other films. Adaptation from such diverse resources has been a ubiquitous practice of filmmaking since the earliest days of cinema in nineteenth-century Europe. In contrast to when making a remake, movie directors usually take more creative liberties when creating a film adaptation. A derivative of the film adaptation theory is the literary adaptation is the adaptation of a literary source (e.g. a novel, short story, poem) to another genre or medium, such as a film, stage play, or video game. It can also involve adapting the same literary work in the same genre or medium just for different purposes. The literary text adapted in the case of Mani Ratnam movies has had a double way interaction with the viewers. In certain cases the movie has gained familiarity due to the adaptation and certain literary works have gained a sudden momentum of popularity due to its representation in the movies. Movies - a form of visual art compresses long narratives, text and literary pieces to present itself to the audience in a concise form. Movies hold the power of influencing our conversations, thinking patterns, expressions, relationships and perceptions. Mani Ratnam's movies have taken into account for its literary acclimation, its blend of literariness and screenplay without losing the essence of the original work. These movies keep infusing into our daily lives after watching it brings literature and life much closer day by day.

Drawing from the vast reservoir of ancient texts such as the *Mahabharata, Ramayana*, and other regional folklore, Mani Ratnam masterfully weaves together elements of these epics into his narratives. His movies embody the timeless themes, moral quandaries, and philosophical depth found within these literary treasures. Mani Ratnam's adaptations go beyond mere retellings of the epics. He ingeniously reimagines the characters and situations, adapting them to contemporary settings while preserving their essence. By doing so, he bridges the gap between the ancient and the modern, presenting audiences with stories that resonate across time.

In these adaptations, Mani Ratnam deftly explores the complex and multifaceted nature of human relationships. He captures the moral dilemmas, internal conflicts, and shades of grey that exist within characters, blurring the boundaries between heroes and villains. By utilizing Indian epics as a source, Mani Ratnam's adaptations offer more than just entertainment; they provide a means to explore profound human experiences, societal dilemmas, and timeless wisdom. Mani Ratnam's films reflect his deep understanding of the epics' moral and philosophical underpinnings, while also presenting them through a contemporary lens. His adaptations serve as a reminder of the enduring relevance of these ancient texts, making them accessible to a wider audience and allowing the richness of Indian mythology to resonate with viewers worldwide.
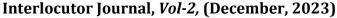
Mani Ratnam's utilization of Indian epics as a source in his movies showcases his ability to translate the essence of these timeless texts into compelling cinematic experiences. Through his adaptations, he brings forth the complex characters, universal themes, and moral quandaries of the epics, making them relevant and relatable to contemporary audiences. Ratnam's films stand as a testament to the enduring power of Indian mythology and its ability to captivate and enlighten across generations.
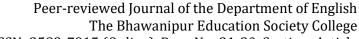
Mani Ratnam's Movie Making

Mani Ratnam, a renowned Indian filmmaker, is known for his distinctive style and his remarkable contributions to Indian cinema. His movies are celebrated for their unique blend of compelling storytelling, complex characters, and visually stunning cinematography. Mani Ratnam often weaves intricate narratives that explore a wide range of themes, including love, relationships, social issues, and political unrest. His films often delve into the human psyche, portraying characters who grapple with moral dilemmas and internal conflicts. One of Mani Ratnam's notable strengths lies in his ability to create layered and relatable characters. He portrays them with depth and complexity, allowing the audience to empathize with their struggles and aspirations. His films often revolve around strong female characters who challenge societal norms and expectations. Mani Ratnam's exploration of human relationships, whether romantic, familial, or friendships, is marked by authenticity and emotional depth, capturing the complexities of human connections.

Visually, Mani Ratnam's movies are a treat for the senses. He collaborates with talented cinematographers to create breathtaking visuals that enhance the storytelling. Whether capturing the vibrant landscapes of rural India or the bustling cityscapes, his films exude a visual richness that adds another layer of depth to the narrative. Mani Ratnam's meticulous attention to detail is evident in his production design, costumes, and use of colors, contributing to the overall aesthetic appeal of his movies. Music plays a pivotal role in Mani Ratnam's films, and he has collaborated with renowned composers to create iconic soundtracks. The integration of music and choreography seamlessly blends with the narrative, enhancing the emotional impact of the storytelling. Mani Ratnam's movies are known for their memorable songs, which have become chart-toppers and timeless classics in Indian cinema.

Throughout his career, Mani Ratnam has not shied away from addressing social and political issues in his films. He often weaves these themes into the fabric of the narrative, offering thought-provoking commentary on topics such as communalism, corruption, and societal inequalities. Mani Ratnam's approach is nuanced, encouraging viewers to reflect on these issues and sparking conversations about the pressing concerns of Indian society. His scripts carry an ideology which has parallel themes. The sub plots add vigour and multiple perspectives towards the perception of the main theme. Gopala Mani Ratnam Subramaniam, professionally known as Mani Ratnam, left his consulting job and became a filmmaker. He started off his career with *Pallavi Anu Pallavi* that earned him Karnataka state government's best screenplay award in 1983. His script etches out the liveliness of his characters in spite of criticism regarding his casting, portrayal of a particular community and their norms. His Tamil debut was in the year 1985, with the movie *Pagal Nilavu.* This was followed by the release of *Idhaya Kovil,* a remodelled script based on *Charlie Chaplin's* novella, Footlights. Mani

Ratnam's scripts right from his initial days as a filmmaker tend to carry literary references and inspiration. The familiarity that he easily ceases is majorly due to the literary acclimations that he uses as the base of his scripts. The literary pieces that are already well known, when presented with modifications according to the plot, Mani Ratnam hits the target right, capturing the attention of the viewers. Following *Mouna Ragam* in 1986 that earned him the first national award, his most celebrated work, Nayakan was released in 1987. The movie was based on *Mario Puzo's* novel *Godfather.* The character Vito was presented to the Tamil audience as Velu Naicker with familiar elements and characterization. The plot of the novel was adapted and several Indian elements were added with certain modifications in the actual plot of the novel. The modifications made it appealing to the viewers .The movie was a box office hit due to its eminence among urban sections and as an entirely new genre among the rural audience. The movie fetched a spot in the Time magazine's 'All time 100 greatest movies' along with other two Indian films in the entire list. The accolades also include three national awards and India's official entry for Oscars. The movie also had real life references and characters based on which the plot was developed.

Epics as Source

Mani Ratnam, has shown a penchant for drawing inspiration from Indian epics in his movie adaptations. He weaves elements from these timeless literary works into contemporary narratives, creating a bridge between the ancient and the modern. Mani Ratnam's exploration of Indian epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana showcases his deep understanding of their rich mythology, philosophy, and ethical dilemmas. In his adaptations, Mani Ratnam delves into the complexities of human nature, often using characters and situations reminiscent of those found in the epics. He reinterprets the moral conflicts, the battle between good and evil, and the larger-than-life heroes and heroines, breathing new life into these mythical stories. Mani Ratnam's movies embody the epic's core themes of love, duty, honor, sacrifice, and the consequences of human actions. One of the remarkable aspects of Mani Ratnam's adaptations is his ability to relate these ancient tales to contemporary social and political contexts. He seamlessly connects the universal themes of the epics to present-day issues, making them relevant and relatable to modern audiences. By blending elements from the epics with current realities, Mani Ratnam creates thought-provoking narratives that reflect on the complexities of human relationships, societal structures, and the struggle between righteousness and moral ambiguity. Mani Ratnam's artistic vision and attention to detail are evident in the visual and auditory aspects of his adaptations. He employs striking visuals, grand sets, and meticulous costume designs to transport viewers into the mythical worlds of the epics. The integration of music and dance, a hallmark of Indian cinema, adds depth and emotional resonance to his adaptations. Mani Ratnam collaborates with renowned composers to create soul-stirring soundtracks that complement the narrative and evoke the emotional essence of the epics. Through his adaptations, Mani Ratnam encourages audiences to explore and appreciate the profound wisdom embedded in Indian epics. He presents these timeless stories in a manner that appeals to a contemporary audience, bridging the gap between ancient mythology and the modern world. Mani Ratnam's adaptations serve as a reminder of the enduring relevance and universal appeal of these epic tales, highlighting their timeless messages and moral lessons.

When literary acclaims earned Mani Ratnam, commercial success and appreciation, he used *Mahabharata* as a partial source for characterization in his movie *Thalapathy* in 1991. In *Thalapathy*, Mani Ratnam's adept characterisation shines through, drawing inspiration from the complex characters of the *Mahabharata*. The film features a diverse ensemble cast, with each character embodying distinct traits and motivations. Ratnam skillfully adapts the epic's archetypal characters into relatable and multifaceted individuals, navigating their personal journeys within the modern context. The central character, portrayed by Rajinikanth, mirrors the charisma and enigmatic qualities of the legendary character Karna from the Mahabharata. Ratnam imbues him with a compelling blend of righteousness, strength, and vulnerability, capturing the essence of a conflicted hero torn between his loyalties and personal convictions.

Mammootty's character, inspired by the character of Duryodhana, showcases shades of both power and vulnerability. Ratnam explores the depths of his character's complexity, highlighting the internal struggles and conflicts he faces, as well as his unwavering loyalty to his friends. The film also delves into the contrasting dynamics between the female characters. Shobana's portrayal of a resilient and courageous woman reflects the spirit of Draupadi, while Bhanupriya's character draws inspiration from the virtuous and self-sacrificing character of Kunti. Ratnam crafts their character arcs to reflect their strength, resilience, and unwavering loyalty to their loved ones. Additionally, Ratnam excels in developing supporting characters that add layers of depth to the narrative. The film explores themes of friendship, camaraderie, and the complexities of human relationships through the interactions between the characters, capturing the essence of the Mahabharata's intricate interpersonal dynamics. Ratnam's mastery of characterisation lies in his ability to present flawed and complex individuals who are relatable and evoke empathy from the audience. Through the characters' interactions, moral dilemmas, and personal journeys, he brings forth the timeless themes and moral lessons of the Mahabharata, reimagining them within the context of contemporary society. In the movie *Thalapathy*, Mani Ratnam demonstrates his skill in bringing the layered and morally ambiguous characters of the *Mahabharata* to life, providing a fresh and captivating interpretation of these iconic personalities. The film's characterisation adds depth, emotional resonance, and relatability, elevating the narrative and contributing to its enduring impact on audiences. It explored the portrayal of the same theme with modern modifications which had both critical acclaim and commercial success upon its release. People received the movie well due to the familiarity of the base story and characters played by the favourite stars of the time. Certain scenes and elements are used to bring the shades of Karna portrayed as Surya in the movie. The usage of sun's ray as the backdrop of the scene, Surya's constant battle to establish his identity associates him to the characteristics of Karna from the *Mahabharata*, where Surya is also found in a basket from the river as Karna in the epic. These elements increase the resemblance of the epic in the plot of the movie that lead to the reception of the adaptation used.

Similarly *Raavan* (2010) was based on the epic the *Ramayana* to which Mani Ratnam added his own twist which was subjected to various versions of perception. He crafted a contemporary narrative that intertwines elements of the ancient myth with modern storytelling. Ratnam reimagined the characters and the core conflicts of the Ramayana, creating a gripping tale of love, vengeance, and redemption. The movie explores the complex relationship between the righteous protagonist, Dev, and the enigmatic antagonist, Veera, who embodies both the hero and the villain. The embodiment

is personified based on the mythological characters with symbols and detailing. Ratnam's interpretation of the *Ramayana* goes beyond the simplistic notions of good and evil, delving into the shades within human nature. The movie's visual grandeur, breathtaking cinematography, and powerful performances bring the epic landscape to life, while the haunting soundtrack adds depth and emotional resonance. *Raavan* stands as a testament to Ratnam's ability to merge the timeless wisdom of the Ramayana with contemporary narratives, offering a thought-provoking exploration of the human condition and the choices that define our destinies. The later part of the movie was modified to suit the screenplay which differed from the original plot of the epic. This created critical and religious condemnations towards the movie for the different portrayal. The effect of literary acclimation used in the movie led the audience to oppose the movie when it slightly differed from the already known story. This ultimately led the audience to conceive the movie as a wrong portrayal of the existing epic *Ramayana* though the movie intended to carry only the shades of the epic in its characterizations. This caused revisits to the original literary text by a large number of audiences to know the genuineness of the adaptation represented. The literary discussions based on the movie led to the popularity certain associative literary works of the epic *Ramayana* like Raavana Kaviyam and Periyar's Ramayana Kurippugal that had a similar shade of plot when compared to the plot of Mani Mani Ratnam's *Raavan*. His movies that have literary acclimations has always led the mob to revisit the literature to verify the modifications and representations made by him in his scripts.

Textual Adaptation

All the above mentioned films had a part of epic as their source but Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan* released in 2022 was a direct textual adaptation of Kalki's Tamil masterpiece fiction *Ponniyin Selvan.* The fervour that the movie created among the audience of the entire nation was visible through social media and the response to the promotional campaigns of the movie. Exceptionally the movie created an inquisitiveness to the people who read the original novel of Kalki to know and develop a familiarity with the plot of the movie. Though the visual representation of the epic had slight variations due to the text to movie conversion, the effect that the movie created over the original text was undeniable. In the case of Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan*, along with reading of the original text, various conceptions and clarifications from the novel were discussed. Similar to other movies that had epic as a source *Ponniyin Selvan* also created a sudden inquisitiveness among the audience towards the other associative less familiar texts like *Nandhipurathu Nayagi* and *Malar Solai Mangai.* The novels based on *Ponniyin Selvan's* sequels and prequels became sought after due to the increased popularity. This was done by the viewers to perceive the plot with more precision about each character of the main plot. *Nandhipurathu Nayagi* deals with the love affair of Kundavai and Vandhiyadevan while *Malar Solai Mangai* deals with more details about the character Nandhini. The movie also caused a sudden demand and hike in the sales of the bestseller novel *Ponniyin Selvan* which has never gone out of trend. The characterization, the screenplay and the dialogues faced certain critical observations from literary enthusiasts due to certain variations. At the outset Mani Ratnam's Ponniyin Selvan created a literary inquisitiveness among the Indian over the original text like no other literary adaptations ever done.

In Mani Ratnam's adaptation of *Ponniyin Selvan,* his meticulous attention to historical accuracy shines through, immersing the audience in the rich tapestry of the Chola dynasty. The grandeur of

the era is depicted through opulent sets, intricate costumes, and stunning cinematography, transporting viewers to a bygone era. Mani Ratnam's directorial finesse allows him to balance the epic scale of the narrative with intimate character moments, bringing depth and emotional resonance to the story.

One of the standout aspects of Mani Ratnam's adaptation is his ability to breathe life into the complex characters from the novel. Each actor brings their A-game, delivering powerful performances that stay true to the essence of their respective characters. From the charismatic Vandiyadevan to the enigmatic and strong-willed Kundavai, the characters are multifaceted and relatable, eliciting empathy and fascination from the audience. Mani Ratnam's screenplay weaves together multiple plotlines and subplots, creating a web of intrigue and suspense. The narrative unfolds organically, gradually revealing the political machinations, romantic entanglements, and personal conflicts that shape the fate of the Chola dynasty. The pacing of the film keeps the audience engaged throughout, with well-timed twists and turns that heighten the tension.

Visually, Mani Ratnam's film is a treat for the eyes. From sweeping vistas of ancient Tamil Nadu to intricately designed palaces and battle sequences, every frame is crafted with an eye for detail. The use of vibrant colors, stunning compositions, and evocative lighting adds to the visual splendor of the film, enhancing the overall cinematic experience. Mani Ratnam's adaptation delves into the timeless themes explored in the novel, such as loyalty, honour, love, and sacrifice. He navigates the complexities of human relationships and power dynamics, offering profound insights into the human condition. The emotional depth of the characters and their journeys resonates with the audience, leaving a lasting impact. Mani Ratnam's direct adaptation of *Ponniyin Selvan* is a masterful cinematic achievement. Through his meticulous attention to detail, compelling storytelling, and stunning visuals, Mani Ratnam successfully brings Kalki Krishnamurthy's epic novel to life on the silver screen. The film stands as a testament to Mani Ratnam's artistry and serves as an immersive and unforgettable experience for audiences, both fans of the novel and those new to the story.

The representations of indigenous and native arts, portrayal of love, phrases, in Mani Ratnam's movies highly influences the trend of the people socially and culturally. Representation of Mahakavi Bharathiar's songs in his movie *Kaatru Veliyidai* in 2016 created an interest towards the less familiar works of the renowned poet. Though the works of the poet were internationally acclaimed in the literary world, its common usage among people accelerated. The familiarity to common audiences over a poem of Bharathiar increased by the adaptation of the song *Nallai allai* in the movie. Several usage of phrases, lines from Bharathiar's poems like *Nin mugam theriya kanden* in the iconic scene of the film has entered the frequently used phrases of people than before. This is due to the impact that the movies create, representing literature in a more connected way to our daily life.

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"Kiss me with those Red lips": Duality of the female body and the new woman in Bram Stoker's *'Dracula'*

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Abstract: The female body has often been regarded as an 'object' of desire, of mystery and a trophy to be conquered. Authors across the globe have used the female body to depict certain values, ranging from god-like piety to the vices of a temptress. The woman, considered as a weaker, submissive sex has been constantly subjugated to the all-encompassing gaze of man and society, holding her in the highest of expectations and lowest of value. The paper explores the stereotyping of the female body and the creation of polar opposite tropes that lead to baseless discrimination. In Bram Stoker's *'Dracula'*, Mina's desire for autonomy and Lucy's desire for intimacy and her sexual freedom are used to depict a detraction from the stereotyped concept of the pure Victorian woman and essentially reduce them to fallen women, the witch or the trickster figure, entrapping men into their vices of sexual perversion and evil. A woman's sexual freedom and her desire to experience freedom and self-satisfaction are villainized in Stoker's male gaze centric response to the new woman movement.

Keywords: body, autonomy, new woman, sexuality, Victorian society

The revered world of religion has some straight and direct ideas as to the role and power of women in society, depicting their role as equals in society and the household. On the land under the sky ruled by these deities, the constitutions specifically state that men and women are alike in all form and character and discrimination of any kind based on the sexes or sexuality of either genders is a criminal offense. Then, does it not raise the question of where this gender disparity arises from? Both religion and state clearly expound on the virtues of equality and the vices of discrimination. Yet, amidst the seemingly perfect rainbow and sunshine, the cloud of gender inequality steadily covers the sky, raining down stereotypes, ideas, restrictions and the creation of the 'other'. The discrimination and depiction of women as the inferior 'other' has been prevalent since language gave structure to it. Reference can be drawn to Aristotle's 'Poetics' where he clearly depicts the role of the woman as the inferior sex. While defining the characteristics of tragedy in a play, Aristotle wished for women to be subdued if they are to reflect goodness or good moral behaviour: "There is a type of manly valour: but valour in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness, is inappropriate" (Aristotle 51). The discrimination against women stems from the social constructs of division of labour and of body politics present in every social era. The differences between men and women in society is the underlying cause of gender inequality. These come about as a consequence of socially constructed relationships, which in turn have their roots in sexual labour divisions that are based on biological differences between the sexes, such as the capacity for breastfeeding in women and the notion of superior strength and physical dominance in men. Economically speaking, women's positions are valued less, and they frequently have restricted mobility and are confined to the home. Women frequently face various forms of discrimination, such as social, institutionalised, communal, and domestic discrimination, which negatively impacts their well-being and maintains their inferior

status to men in the patriarchal system. These power structures are present in every society that has a gendered structure. Feminist scholars have stated that the body is socially moulded as well as colonised and this gives rise to the insurmountable disparity between the two sexes. American writer and activist Andrea Dworkin in her celebrated work *Woman Hating* states that "In our culture not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered.… From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification" (Dworkin 113-114). Social mores, customs and gender-imposed expectations end up shaping women physically as well as emotionally.

The role of women in society has undergone rapid change with the shifting times. Each era brought in new socio-political ideologies that shaped gender roles, especially the role of women in society. Before the advent of the 20th and 21st century, gender roles were anything but fluid and women were expected to conform to certain social, political and domestic roles and the failure to do so was heavily punished – in the eyes of society and God himself. The nineteenth century and the Victorian era were particularly harsh about gender roles and what was expected of a woman. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* explores the narrative based on the idea of the good and the bad woman through the female characters of Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker and this paper explores the body and its related sexuality as a crime in the eyes of patriarchy and male dominated social structures with respect to female autonomy, sexuality and expression of willful desire, fueled by the liberating concept of the new woman.

Before the 'crimes' of the female body are explored, it is essential to give a brief outline of the various ways in which women were relegated as the physical and social inferior and how they had to try their best to stand in comparison to the self-declared supremacy of their male counterparts. Franz Joseph Gall's phrenology opined that the inferiority of women in society was not a social but a biological 'flaw', stemming from their skulls and their cranium being five ounces lighter on average and having lesser bumps than the skulls of men, who were biologically superior. Simone De Beauvoir's '*The Second Sex*' points out how male scientists' preconceptions and biases have frequently influenced scientific study on sex differences. She observes that distinctions in female behaviour and physiology have been overlooked or disregarded and that male subjects have frequently been utilised as the standard for experimentation and research. In addition, she claims that the idea that sperm are active and aggressive, whilst eggs are docile and inert, is a cultural myth that has been utilised to support gender stereotypes. This concept of gametes, she contends, has been used to support male superiority over women since it is a consequence of a male-dominated culture that emphasises aggression and power. All of these subjugations and relegations to a lower or inferior position essentially throttled women to be in positions without any semblance of authority or power. This subjugation gradually led to the rise of female voices all across the globe who wanted equal authority and power for women to make their own decisions, to have financial and social security without the necessity of a man to provide the same. These voices united into what came to be known as the new woman movement.

The phrase "New Woman" was first used at the end of the nineteenth century to characterise women who resisted societal norms of what it meant to be a woman and questioned traditional moral and conduct standards. Although the term's origins are subject to debate, it is thought to have been coined

by the Irish author Sarah Grand in an article[1] from 1894 that discussed the disparities between male and female sexual virtue that existed in Victorian marriages. Critic and author Gail Finney, in her analysis of the works of Henrik Ibsen gives an accurate description of what the new woman entails:

> "The New Woman typically values self-fulfillment and independence rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self-sacrifice; believes in legal and sexual equality; often remains single because of the difficulty of combining such equality with marriage; is more open about her sexuality than the 'Old Woman'; is well-educated and reads a great deal; has a job; is athletic or otherwise physically vigorous and, accordingly, prefers comfortable clothes (sometimes male attire) to traditional female garb."[2]

The new woman was a thought, a way of living that gave rise to a new and resilient generation of women who rejected conventional social mores and sought freedom and equality, applying for male-dominated jobs and positions and working towards causes such as female suffrage and the right to female inheritance of ancestral money. The new woman threatened to tumble the self-imposed superiority of men in the social hierarchy and led to reactionary works and depiction of women as evil and disobedient.

The new woman essentially created two groups of women – the angelic woman was the conventional woman who abided by the patriarchal mores and the rebellious woman represented the demonic or monstrous woman who protested against the social injustice and the repressive gender roles. It is here that Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* throws light upon the central concept of the new woman in society.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work of feminist literary critique, *Madwoman in the Attic* was first published in 1979. Gilbert and Gubar examine how female authors have historically been either excluded from the canon of literature or relegated to the periphery by creating "madwomen" or "monstrous" figures in their book. They contend that these representations demonstrate patriarchy's attempts to stifle and silence women's voices as well as societal anxieties about the creative and intellectual abilities of women.

The notion of the "angel in the house" as opposed to the "madwoman in the attic" is one of the major ideas examined in '*Madwoman in the Attic*'. A stereotypical image of womanhood, the "angel in the house" is passive, submissive, and devoted to her domestic responsibilities. She embodies conventional gender roles and expectations and is viewed as a comforting presence who serves and cares for her family. On the other hand, the "madwoman in the attic" is a symbol of feminine creativity and rebellion who is frequently viewed as threatening or dangerous. She represents the worries and concerns of a patriarchal culture that attempts to stifle and silence the voices of women. Gilbert and Gubar contend that these two individuals stand for a dichotomy that has traditionally been employed to silence the opinions and experiences of women. The "madwoman in the attic" is a figure of rebellion

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[1]An expression first used in an essay by British feminist Sarah Grand in 1894 to characterise an independent woman who strives for accomplishment and self-fulfilment outside of marriage and the family. Grand claims that the New Woman "proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and proscribed the remedy"

[2] Freud states that the Madonna-whore complex is "where such men love they have no desire and where they desire they cannot love"

and creativity who is frequently depicted as monstrous or insane, whereas the "angel in the house" is an idealised figure who is frequently used to silence women's opinions and experiences.

Traditionally, *Dracula* has been interpreted as a reactionary work by conservatives to the emergence of new gender roles at the close of the nineteenth century. Critics contend that novels like *Dracula* reveal male novelists' fears about the sexual and social effects of feminism, fears mirrored in predatory and monstrous female characters. This paper will be divided into two halves – the angel figure turned into the monster and the monster figure or the "madwoman in the attic" in the novel. This essentially depicts that any woman who detracts from the conventional system is bound to end up with the same fate – as the fallen woman.

The first chapter of the novel introduces the readers to Jonathan and Mina Harker, the couple who come to Transylvania. It must be noted that just like Jonathan is a solicitor, Mina is a school teacher too – she is gainfully employed and has a semblance of financial freedom. Stoker's highlighting of Mina's employment throughout the novel essentially seems to depict that the gradual fate of Mina is partly due to her rebellion against the socially expected role of being a good, faithful wife and instead regarding herself as an equal or near equal partner. The communication between Mina and Lucy through their letter provides critical insight on the role of women, when Mina iterates that women are told that they must not interfere in men's work

This essentially depicts the expected role of the woman in Victorian society, the angel figure in the narrative which Mina seems to be a critical part of. It must be noticed that Mina also talks of the new woman in the eighth chapter:

> Some of the 'New Women' writers will some day start an idea that men and women should be allowed to see each other asleep before proposing or accepting. But I suppose the 'New Woman' won't condescend in future to accept. She will do the proposing herself (Stoker 84).

The concept of the new woman is critical in understanding the transition of Mina from the angel figure to the monstrous figure. One of the driving forces behind the social stature of women in the Victorian era was the concept of the new woman. The new woman represented the changing times by opposing gender norms and promoting women's rights and liberties. The new woman tirelessly fought to advance women's rights and freedoms and was a vocal supporter of women's suffrage. Virginia Woolf was among the most well-known representatives of the new woman. Woolf played a significant part in the Bloomsbury Group, a group of intellectuals, artists, and writers who questioned conventional gender roles and advanced novel conceptions of gender and sexuality. Some of the traits of the New Woman are embodied by Mina, including her desire to further her education and participate in intellectual activities. However, Mina is equally subject to the same forms of oppression and restrictions that other women in her period endured since she selectively chose to embrace the hallmarks of the new woman by being gainfully employed but not seeking complete autonomy or freedom from dependence on her male counterpart. She is frequently relegated to the domestic realm and is not permitted to participate in Jonathan's legal work. She must be modest, obedient, and respectful of the men around her. Mina is equally a victim of the oppressive social mores of her period. It is important to mention that Mina also demonstrates a sense of leadership and autonomy that goes against these expectations. Despite the social constraints, she is eager to learn and take part

in her fiancé's job. She plays a significant role in the group's attempt to stop Count Dracula and makes use of her intelligence and creative thinking to assist them. As a result, Mina stands as an example of the New Woman and defies the expectations that were put on women during the Victorian era. It must be noted that since Mina contributes to the furthering of the 'patriarchal cause' of defeating a common enemy, her defiance and autonomy are praised and she is even called a man for it: "She has man's brain - a brain that a man should have were he much gifted - and woman's heart" (Stoker 221).

Many of the traits attributed to the "good woman" archetype are embodied by Mina's character in Dracula. She supports her fiancé Jonathan Harker in his inquiry into Dracula's activities and is intelligent, devoted, and caring. Mina is portrayed as a strong and resourceful character who uses her proficiency with shorthand and typing to assist the other characters in solving the riddle surrounding Dracula's whereabouts and agendas. She is a perfect example of the angel figure, abiding by the social duties expected of her, to an extent that Van Helsing states that she is:

one of God's women, fashioned by His own hand to show us men and other women that there is a heaven where we can enter, and that its light can be here on earth. So true, so sweet, so noble (Stoker 177).

Thus, many of the traits that were admired and anticipated of Victorian women are represented in Mina's character. She is modest and righteous, and she and Jonathan are shown to have a loving yet respectful relationship. Despite her abilities and intellect, Mina is never seen as a danger or a challenge to the male characters; rather, she is viewed as a crucial part of their investigations.

Another essential role that Mina serves in reinforcing her role as the angel figure in the narrative is her depiction as the chaste and pure woman – in tune with the values of a good and virgin Christian woman. Mina is portrayed as a lady of impeccable virtue in addition to her intellect. She is referred to as "pure" and "innocent," and the relationship she has with Jonathan is understood to be one of admiration and regard. Although Mina's sexuality is never brought up directly in the book, it is suggested that she is a virgin and that she and Jonathan are courting rather than pursuing each other for a baser, carnal desire. In contrast to the more sexually explicit and perilous female characters in the book, such as Lucy Westenra and the three brides of Dracula, Mina's modesty and purity stand out. Mina's character stands for a purer and conventional image of womanhood, while the other characters embody the darker and more transgressive sides of femininity which truly embrace the concept of the new woman rather than when it suited their purpose. Mina stays at home, taking care of the household and preparing for her upcoming marriage to Jonathan, while Lucy travels abroad and has romantic relationships with several different men. The conventional expectations of women in Victorian society are reflected in Mina's position as a housewife and caregiver. Mina's role can be perfectly described using Virginia Woolf's observation of the angel in the house in *A Room of One's Own*: "The Angel in the House is a perfect woman who has no flaws, no desires of her own, and who always puts others first" (Woolf 59).

Then, how and why does Mina become a prey of Dracula despite having an immaculate record in the department of faithful Victorian affairs? In the simplest of terms, Stoker uses Mina as a scapegoat, a dramatic flair that comes out of the perversion of the pure woman. Mina is a fallen woman not by her actions but by her association to Dracula. Much like Tess of the D'urberville, Mina is a fallen woman

as a result of consequences. Mina's attraction, however fleeting to the Count opens a pathway for Stoker to ravage her, when she says she has a: "sort of fascination, not altogether unholy" (Stoker 242).

Mina feels ashamed and guilty about her desire for Dracula because she is aware of how inappropriate and perilous it is. But she cannot resist the allure of Dracula, and her attraction to him ultimately puts her in jeopardy and essentially 'compromises' with her position as an angelic figure. In Victorian literature, the story of the innocent woman being guided astray by a man is a frequent trope, and Mina's experiences with Dracula reinforce the result of giving in to temptations. Stoker uses this situation to show the audience what happens when a good Victorian woman strays the path of righteousness. Stoker essentially portrays female autonomy and control over their body as a sin and highlights that free thinking leads to eventual ruin. The experiences of Mina in the narrative are consistent with the trope of the fallen woman, which was frequently depicted as a woman who had been seduced or misled by a man. Additionally, Mina's connection to Dracula has real-world repercussions for her existence and her fate. Her interactions with the Count have an impact on her body and psyche, and she feels corrupted and damaged as a result. The fallen woman trope is known for this feeling of irreparable harm and shame because women who were driven out from society often have to live with the shame of their alleged immorality. Mina's association with this trope, however, highlights broader cultural concerns about women's sexuality and agency during the Victorian period. Mina's transformation to fit the role of the Monster is important since it speaks of the patriarchal idea of stereotypes against the sexual and sensual freedom of a woman. A mere attraction to another man is pitted as the way for the devil to weasel its way into her heart, subtly hinting at the fate of women who dared to explore or follow up on their desires instead of following orders like they were supposed to.

The second trope of the "madwoman in the attic" is portrayed explicitly by Lucy Westenra. She is portrayed as a youthful, vivacious woman who personifies the principles of the New Woman movement - women's desire for greater freedom and independence, as well as their desire to seek higher education and careers and have control over their own bodies and sexuality, all of which served to define this movement. Lucy's actions and views towards these concepts are used throughout the book as a reflection of how women's roles have changed in Victorian culture. The new woman was not just one person, but rather a broad spectrum of females who sought to liberate themselves from the confines of Victorian society and forge new pathways for themselves. She disagreed with the idea that women should only be involved in domestic affairs and rather pushed for the new woman to be independent. Although she is depicted as "a thoroughly good and sweet young lady", her flaw is that she is "very modern in some aspects". When Lucy agrees to marry Arthur Holmwood but demands a lengthy engagement so that she can continue to appreciate her freedom, it shows that she is independent and unafraid to speak her mind. This essentially speaks of Lucy's autonomy and freedom, something that the Victorian society was not so ready to cede to women. Her outward approach and interest in multiple partners depict the hollowness of character according to the patriarchal concept of purity and Stoker depicts that it is this shallowness that makes her an easy prey for Dracula. Stoker essentially punishes a woman who wishes to assert her own freedom by likening her to the devil, since Dracula was a common denotation of the antichrist figure in Christian faith.

The new woman's embrace of style and attire was one of her most notable characteristics. She shunned the constricting and inconvenient clothing of the Victorian period and favoured more loose-fitting, practical attire that allowed for more freedom of movement. As it was viewed as a symbol of women's freedom and empowerment, this new style was frequently linked to the suffrage movement and the fight for women's rights. Stoker uses this concept and perverts it by depicting Lucy's free flowing attire: "Lucy was looking sweetly pretty in her white lawn frock; she has got a beautiful color since she has been here" (Stoker 60).

It is as if Lucy's rejection of constricting corsets and bodices and choosing free flowing frocks creates a gateway for her to be oppressed. This essentially highlights the topic of the commodification of the female body and the male gaze that perverts comfortable clothing and likens it to loose morality. Many men perceived the new woman as a danger to their established dominance, and some women thought she was unfeminine or even immoral. They felt threatened by the new woman, who they perceived as a danger to their traditional power and authority, as a result of the change in societal attitudes towards gender roles and expectations. One of the main concerns about the new woman was that her assertiveness and independence would cause the conventional family structure to fall apart. Many men worried that the new woman would undermine the conventional patriarchal power structure and pose a threat to their position as household heads. The reality that many new women were active in the suffrage and women's rights movements—at the time, seen by many as radical and dangerous—exacerbated this fear. The new woman was also considered as a fallen woman in society. This is exactly what fuels Stoker's narrative of Lucy's destruction.

Lucy gradually becomes more and more susceptible to Dracula's sway. The vampire visits her during her sleepwalking episodes, which are characterized in erotic terms, implying that their interactions have a sexual undertone. This implies that Lucy is being gradually seduced by Dracula. Stoker essentially depicts this sexual fallacy as the major contributing factor behind her transformation into a vampire. As Dracula's power over Lucy grows stronger, she starts to display characteristics of the "fallen woman." Her demeanour changes to one that is more sensual and provocative, and she is described as becoming more restless and disturbed. Her voracious hunger for blood, which can be seen as a metaphor for her sexual appetite, also begins to develop. The men around her view her as a deviant and a threat to their own sense of morality because they perceive her behaviour as threatening and dangerous.

Perhaps one of the most important depictions of how the bodies of women were used to regulate social conduct is through Stoker's transformation of Lucy's physical attributes. In the beginning she is depicted as "a thoroughly good and sweet young lady" but she gradually transforms into the devil incarnate: "Lucy Westenra, but yet how changed. The sweetness was turned to adamantine, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness" (Stoker 199).

Stoker essentially transforms Lucy and physically desecrates her when he describes her after her transformation:

> When Lucy, I call the thing that was before us Lucy because it bore her shape, saw us she drew back with an angry snarl, such as a cat gives when taken unawares, then her eyes ranged over us. Lucy's eyes in form and colour, but Lucy's eyes unclean and full of hell fire,

instead of the pure, gentle orbs we knew. At that moment the remnant of my love passed into hate and loathing. Had she then to be killed, I could have done it with savage delight. As she looked, her eyes blazed with unholy light, and the face became wreathed with a voluptuous smile. Oh, God, how it made me shudder to see it! With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone. The child gave a sharp cry, and lay there moaning. There was a cold-bloodedness in the act which wrung a groan from Arthur. When she advanced to him with outstretched arms and a wanton smile he fell back and hid his face in his hands.

She still advanced, however, and with a languorous, voluptuous grace, said, "Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!"

There was something diabolically sweet in her tones, something of the tinkling of glass when struck, which rang through the brains even of us who heard the words addressed to another (Stoker 199).

Thus, the "sweet young lady" who was decked in her "white, with a gold crucifix around her neck" is transformed into a woman who is "unclean and full of hell fire" and wears a "white nightdress" which "was smeared with blood". According to the Victorian era, the good, lawful and faithful woman was to look weak, frail and pale – depicting a weakness and a need to be guarded. Instead, Stoker transforms Lucy into a temptress with a "voluptuous" body, eyes "full of hell fire" and her "lips were crimson with fresh blood". Stoker essentially employs the male gaze and patriarchal standards of beauty and shatters it to depict Lucy as a seductress with an alluring and sexually tempting body that had the power to lead men astray, almost like a siren. Her "look of voluptuousness" is considered as a characteristic of a fallen woman who uses her body to ensnare.

Her lips look "redder and fuller", and her skin is described as being "whiter than ever". Lucy no longer resembles the innocent and pure girl she once was due to her physical transformations and her escalating sexual behaviour. Ultimately, Lucy's transformation results in her demise. She is used as a pawn by Dracula in order to gain access to the men in her life, weakening and making them susceptible to his sway. In a terrifying scene, Dracula's influence causes Lucy's body to be twisted and deformed as she crawls on the roof of her bedroom. She transforms into a grotesque and terrifying figure, a far cry from the lovely and innocent child she once was. Stoker essentially lines Lucy right alongside the three brides of Dracula, implying that she got transformed to the dark side. Stoker's hypocrisy is evident from his depiction of the three brides when he states: "There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal" (Stoker 34).

Stoker calls the "voluptuousness" of the women both "thrilling" and "repulsive", essentially laying bare the double standards of the male authors when typecasting women who did not fit into the Victorian standards of the petite woman as the temptress figure or the fallen woman and this essentially speaks volumes about the hypocritical double standards of men in the Victorian society who arranged narratives to suit their patriarchal needs.

Thus, the body plays a significant role in the narrative's concepts and symbolism - from the objectification and sexualisation of female bodies to the transformation of characters into supernatural entities. The objectification and sexualisation of female bodies is one of the most notable uses of the body by Stoker. Female characters, like Lucy and the three brides of Dracula, are frequently fetishized by male characters, who characterise them in highly sexualized terms.

Reference can be made to the 1988 essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" by feminist Sandra Lee Bartky. She makes the point that women are frequently judged for their size and shape because their bodies mirror their personalities and nature by describing socially accepted "norms" for a woman's body and behaviour. She uses this information to support her argument that the "ideal body of femininity is constructed," and she claims that this ideal woman is a reflection of societal obsessions and preoccupations. According to Bartky, the ideal female body changes over time and is influenced by society. The ideal body, according to Stoker's Victorian ideal, is that of a newly pubescent girl or one that is "taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation." Women are able to project an image of weakness, obedience, and subservience to males due to their frail appearance and lack of muscular strength. With the help of these rules, Bartky claims that "femininity is something in which virtually every woman is required to participate," and that women who fail to adhere to this strict methodology and go against these norms are considered "loose women", which is essentially purported by Stoker's transformation of the women of the novel into fallen women. The construction of femininity led to the development of a "practiced and subjected body on which an inferior status has been inscribed" (Bartky 71) by society. Society's obsession with keeping women in check so that men can appear more powerful is reflected in all these standards for the ideal feminine figure.

This is especially clear in the scene where Harker is approached by Dracula's brides, who seduce him with their voluptuous bodies and pointed fangs. The focus on women's physical attributes and sexuality supports patriarchal norms and the notion that women's value is derived from their attractiveness. Lucy's transformation into a vampire also emphasises the peril of female sexuality and the dread of women who are unconstrained by conventional gender roles. As she is consumed by the vampire's spell and transformed into an undead demon, her body becomes a site of transformation and horror. The body not only plays a role in character transformation, but it also represents identification and power. The transformation of Dracula's body and his ability to manipulate others are symbols of his supremacy and power over those around him, perverting women and destroying their femininity to create the "madwoman in the attic": "There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips" (Stoker 34).

Thus, Stoker uses femininity and the autonomy and freedom of the female mind and body as a credible threat to the patriarchal rule of the Victorian era and transforms the new woman into a monster to curb female suffrage. Stoker all but fails since centuries later, in the present context, his central concept of the female body is nothing but a crumbling relic of a distant, dusty past. The way that female body types are portrayed in literature speaks to the societal mores, expectations, and prejudices of the time and place in which it was written. The depiction of female characters with various body types and shapes can send multiple signals about social norms for beauty, gender roles,

and power relationships. The paper depicts how feminine body types influence society in literary works and influence the power and authority of characters in the text. Women's bodies have been fetishized, objectified, and used as representations of sexual desire, fertility, and appeal throughout history. This objectification of female characters in literature is frequently mirrored in the way they are physically described.

During the middle age, fair skin, and a curvy, voluptuous figure were regarded as ideal traits of female beauty. These traits were regarded as symbols of wealth and prestige. This can be seen by how women are portrayed in works like Boccaccio's '*The Decameron*' and Chaucer's '*The Canterbury Tales*'. The ideal feminine figure changed during the Renaissance to a slenderer and delicate form, which was regarded as a symbol of refinement and elegance. This is further demonstrated by how women are portrayed in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus". The ideal female form was even more constrained in the 19th century, with an emphasis on a small waist and cinched hips. Characters like Emily Bronte's Catherine Earnshaw in "Wuthering Heights" and Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet in "Pride and Prejudice" serve as literary examples of this ideal. The ideal female body grew even more elusive in the 20th century, with an emphasis on extreme thinness and a "boyish" figure. Characters like Daisy Buchanan from "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Holly Golightly from "Breakfast at Tiffany's" by Truman Capote serve as literary examples of this standard. This ideal was also connected to the development of the fashion industry and the celebrity cult, which led to the development of a new standard of attractiveness that was out of reach for the majority of women and continues to be a site of alienation and detachment from the social milieu for millions of women globally.

The paper essentially explores the duality of the female body in the Stoker's '*Dracula*' and how the sexuality of a woman is weaponised to fight against the rise of the new woman movement. The red lips and the voluptuous bodies of these women in Stoker's novel represent the threat of women embracing their sexuality, a duality which is both "thrilling" and "repulsive" for the men in the novel. A woman's attraction and her freedom of choice in her emotional/sexual/sensual decisions is depicted as an agent of corruption and Lucy's desire to enjoy her youth and embrace her sexual desires makes her the ideal scapegoat to take upon the role of the fallen woman. Just like anti-sentimental comedy was a reaction to the grim and emotional plays of the age, Stoker's work is essentially a reaction to the looming 'threat' of the new woman. The two sides of femininity also essential echo the old dichotomy of the Madonna-whore complex[3] where men see women as either saintly like Madonna or as fallen as a prostitute. This complex is deeply rooted in literature, film and art, echoing in canons of literary works such as Joyce's '*A portrait of the artist as a young man*' where Stephen Daedalus sees women as either the religious and virtuous "ivory-tower" or the fallen prostitute and even in Martin Scorcese's '*Taxi Driver*' where the Madonna-like Betsy is a stark contrast to the debased prostitute Iris. Thus, male authors like Stoker have historically upheld patriarchal norms by shaming women, promoting gender stereotypes, and enabling men to seize power and

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[3] Gail Finney, 1995. 'Ibsen and Femininity' in The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen, edited by James McFarlane, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 95

dictate women's sexual autonomy in order to rest the hollow crown of superiority upon their hypocritical heads.

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Mapping the 'Quest' in *In Xanadu* with Special Reference to "Kubla Khan": A Comparative Study

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Abstract: The ratiocination of Colonialism had helped in formulating a lot of literary discourses, and travelogues are the most prominent ones because of their documentations of the socio-cultural history of different ethnic groups. But unlike the other discourses, travelogues emphasise the process of 'Alterity' at the most critical level where the tendency in the narrators of superiorising the Occidental discourses in mainstream praxis is prevalent, representing the hegemonic 'Self', and establishing Oriental discourses as the 'Other'. (Said 43). William Dalrymple's *In Xanadu* (1990) is no exception. Should a travelogue emphasise 'Alterity', or should it celebrate diversity as a unique identity? This was the central question with which this research began. The proposed paper aims to justify the hypothesis that William Dalrymple's *In Xanadu* is less a travelogue and more a commentary on the cultures which are 'non-Eurocentric', specifically the Islamic culture, and that a deliberate attempt has been made by the author himself to establish Eurocentrism as a canon. In the due course of the process of this attributing, the author does not realise the importance of the subtitle he added to the text: 'A Quest'. The process through which the Islamic and all other ethnicities are seen, aims to concentrate Islamophobia and Xenophobia in readers' minds and simultaneously dilutes the importance of the place 'Shang Du' [Xanadu] which Samuel Taylor Coleridge saw as the epitome of creative imagination. The paper also tries to lens through Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" from an Oriental discourse and tries to hypothesise Xanadu as the ultimate reality- the 'Sahasrara' of the '*Kundalini*' which symbolises the higher spiritual consciousness, something that William Dalrymple is unable to internalise.

Keywords: Alterity, *Kundalini*, Islamophobia, Travelogue, Xenophobia

Introduction

While defining the genre of 'Travel Writing', Carl Thompson in his *Travel Writing* (2011) remarks:

> To travel is to make a journey, a movement through space. Possibly this journey is epic in scale, taking the traveller to the other side of the world or across a continent, or up a mountain; possibly, it is more modest in scope, and takes place within the limits of the traveller's own country or region, or even just their immediate locality. Either way, to begin any journey or, indeed, simply to set foot beyond one's own front door, is quickly to encounter difference and otherness. All journeys are in this way a confrontation with, or more

optimistically a negotiation of, what is sometimes termed alterity. Or, more precisely, since there are no foreign peoples with whom we do not share a common humanity, and probably no environment on the planet for which we do not have some sort of prior reference point, all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity and identity, difference and similarity. (Thompson 09).

One can see that there are two prominent sections- first, where Thompson describes the nature of a travelogue, and in the latter, the essence of a travelogue. Scholars might not feel puzzled with the first section since it is a generalisation of the thematic discourse, whereas it is the second half that brings us to certain critical questions. Among them the first could be- is it necessary for a travelogue to create the binary of 'Self' and 'Other' through the process of 'Alterity'? Why would any author put his text to an edge where the cultural differences are emphasised rather than establishing the different ethnicities uniquely? What are the processes through which these binaries can be juxtaposed? These questions might not be raised for every travelogue but when it comes to William Dalrymple's *In Xanadu* (1990), these become crucial. *In Xanadu* is considered to be one of the well-written travelogues, perhaps, a much celebrated jewel for the crown of travel narratives. It traces back the journey which Marco Polo took from Jerusalem to Xanadu, the summer capital of the emperor Genghis Khan in the inner core of Mongolia, China. It is a journey through the different parts of the world that conjoin one of the oldest trading traffic- the silk route, and binds the political history of different nations. But, does this text emphasise 'Alterity'? If it does, what are the ways through which it has been emphasised? The proposed paper aims to justify the hypothesis that William Dalrymple's *In Xanadu* (1990) is less a travelogue and more a commentary on the cultures which are non-Eurocentric, a deliberate attempt made by the author himself to establish the Euro-culture as a standard one. In due course of the process of attributing, the author does not realise the importance of the subtitle that he added to the text: 'A Quest', because Shang Du [Xanadu] is a place that carries much historio-religio-cultural significance which is larger than Dalrymple's arguments that attack the different Oriental discourses.

Literature Review and Hypothesis

While going through the available literature, it has been observed that there are not many scholars who have shown a great deal of interest in Dalrymple. The extent that we get is also not towards *In Xanadu*, but some other popular texts [specifically, *The Last Mughals* (1857)]. Despite the very fact that *In Xanadu* is a popular text, a prominent reason for not taking it into the consideration for research could be that the text wove too many objectionable and politically offensive discourses together which the scholars would find problematic to work on. Sana Nisar, a scholar from Islamabad, has tried to sketch a detailed picture of the journey in her paper entitled "Travel Writing; A critical study of William Dalrymple's *In Xanadu: a Quest*" (2016). She has delineated the journey and tried to juxtapose it with that of Marco Polo's. However, the attempt seems very general because Nisar did not discuss the ideas which are critical and crucial to identify the importance of different cultures. While talking about the importance of the place 'Shang Du', she writes: "Coleridge's description of Shangdu has shadows of the works of both Marco Polo and Samuel Purchas. Through Coleridge's portrayal of Shangdu, Xanadu became a metaphor for magnificence, lavishness, delight, glory and supremacy. Since then it is widely used in all literature to symbolise splendour, richness

and authority." (Nisar 4). She tried to trace the history back to 1271 when Polo was only 17 years old and began his journey. In 1275, he finally reached the place, but unfortunately in 1396, the place was destroyed by the Ming dynasty under the rule of Zhu Yuan Zhang (Nisar 4).

Amoolyaratna and Suresh Kumar have tried to weave three narratives in a single thread in their work "A Study- the Travel Writing of William Dalrymple Include *In Xanadu: A Quest*, *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi, THE Age of Kali: Indian Travels & Encounters*" (2022), but the thread is very loose as far as the critical approaches to the texts are concerned. The interpretations are also not reliable since no textual references are there to validate the arguments. Trinanjana Roy, an independent scholar from West Bengal published a book review on her official blog despising the author. She did not approve of the text at all since she considered it to be a planned attack on the Asian countries on the grounds of 'Racism, Islamophobia and Sexism'. She writes:

> Before writing this review I repeatedly told myself not to get overly personal or emotional because reading this book was torture. I had several moments of throwing this book across the room or burning it down. And no I am not being dramatic… The book is filled with the callousness, arrogance, and ignorant mind of a whining privileged white child. He definitely showed no respect for any culture other than his own. While he wrote pages after pages about how refined the Byzantine empire was and how Ottomans were basically classless… The book stinks of Islamophobia. It's not that he is unaware of the religion but why not mock it and make fun of it when you can! His understanding was very limited to incorrect stereotypes and a disgusting attitude towards modesty and someone's faith. (Roy *www.trinanjana.com*)

Roy's arguments are firmly rooted in an understanding where she does not approve of the authorisation in the name of religion. However, she did not justify her arguments properly in the article and touched the critical points vaguely.

Divyeshkumar D Bhatt, a scholar from Gujarat, India, defended his Ph. D. dissertation on Travel literature entitled "A Study of Travel Literature with Reference to Travel Writings of William Dalrymple" where he tried to analyse the texts written by William Dalrymple. The second chapter is devoted to *In Xanadu* where he presented a comparative study of Polo's journey with that of Dalrymple's. He writes:

> The entire work [*In Xanadu*] revolves round his scheme of following the route of Marco Polo and thereby issuing his own reactions to the journey and observations of Polo, verifying the narrations and the details provided by this senior traveller and marking his own observations on to how the scenario has withstood the course of time and traits of development. (X).

However, the colonial interpretation of the text is entirely based on migration and diasporic tension. On the other hand, Rebecca Dorgelo presented a colonial and post-colonial interpretation of the text in her dissertation entitled "Travelling in history: the travel writing and narrative history of William Dalrymple". According to her: "Dalrymple's popularity and engagement with colonial history and discourse, as well as the way his work spans multiple genres, make his texts particularly interesting examples of the ways in which popular non-fiction functions rhetorically in the public sphere." (2).

We cannot agree with her because there are no overwhelming qualities so far as the delineations are concerned; rather, there is a tendency to represent his [Dalrymple's] culture as the 'Subject' which does not share equal standards with that of the Asian ethnic groups. Therefore, after consideration of the available literature, we could see two hypothetical gaps emerging from the dissection- Dalrymple's projection of the 'superior' culture is entirely Eurocentric and the Oriental discourses are treated through a lens of subaltern objectification. Secondly, in the due process of this constant alterity, the essence of the 'Quest' is lost. Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" (1816) has a universal appeal and philosophical dimension because there is a spiritual quest which can only be perceived through a reading where the readers are sensitive towards perceiving a higher consciousness. Dalrymple's attitude towards Xanadu loses its essence as he diverted his attention towards a diluted reading, and Xanadu becomes only an emblem of fortified ruin seen from a pair of materialistic eyes.

Analysis

A two-fold analysis has been done here. In the first section, we can talk about how Dalrymple's portrayal of the journey is full of racist comments. His attempt to establish the high British culture as the sublime is evident in his narrative which ultimately questions too many ethnological aspects. The paper tries to focus mainly on three most important discourses. First, how Islamic community has been seen from a distance where the whole community is blamed time and again for institutionalised terrorism triggered by their religion. This is also a way of installing 'Islamophobia' into readers' minds, and therefore, perhaps, a deliberate attempt made by the author to juxtapose two different discourses that should not share any commonality- religion and terrorism. Secondly, how the cultures of the different non-European countries have been jeered at as they do not match with the European parameters which is a very common way of emphasising 'otherisation'. Finally, how the idea of 'Quest' has been seen from a Coleridgian perspective through a cross-sectional study of his poem "Kubla Khan" is also relevant. Dalrymple tried to establish a disconnection. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the narrative seems to be an attempt towards the defamation of the Islamic culture. This whole discourse directs us towards an understanding as to why we have to pay attention to the idea of 'Quest', and here a parallel discourse can be evoked to set it into the context. Xanadu is not a place to be discovered like 'Araby'. It is a higher consciousness to be acquired through the realisation of the great art and its sublimity. In fact, a careful reading suggests that the poem "Kubla Khan '' where Coleridge mentioned the place, is chaotic, and at the same time, very spiritual. There is a transcendental aesthetics in the 'sunny pleasure dome' of Kubla Khan because the power behind the existence of the same [secondary imagination] transcendences it beyond material reality as Gyung-Ryul Jang mentions in his article entitled "The Imagination *Beyond* and *Within* the Language: An Understanding of Coleridge's Idea of Imagination" (1986):

> 'Repeated meditations' led Coleridge to suspect that, beyond the limits of this mechanical mode of memory, there must exist another "distinct and widely different" faculty of the mind which also occupies the middle place. In order to illuminate this unexplored faculty of the mind, i.e., the Imagination, he, in due course, presupposes the similar trichotomy [Fancy, Imagination, and Association] mentioned above... [t]hus it becomes pressing for Coleridge to give an immediate answer to the question of how the intermediate faculty possibly works.

Faced with that epistemological problem, Coleridge takes the road which is essentially transcendentalist. (506).

The same transcendental theology is also seen in the doctrines of '*Kundalini*' that we have in Tantric and Yogic studies since it refers to a space called 'Sahasrara' which exists beyond the 'Shat-Chakra' [The Six Points of '*Kundalini*']. Thus, it becomes axiomatic in many ways to juxtapose the transcendental theology of '*Kundalini*' with Kubla's palace. Kubla's 'pleasure dome' is that sphere where the '*Kundalini*' sets the energy free from the bonds of material subsistence and proceeds towards the realisation of the divinity through the operation of secondary imagination that further illuminates it with transcendental aesthetics. This is the point of 'Quest' – the knowledge of knowing the unknown- the sublime existence of being and non-being together. William Dalrymple deliberately failed to understand this because he considered the journey only as an external affair. In fact, in one of his interviews, he mentioned that he wanted to take it [the journey] up only because he would get a handsome scholarship. (Acknowledgements). His own comments disappoint readers in ways he can never imagine. He remarked that Marco Polo's journey was never a quest in that sense, and was a journey of a merchant who never cared about anything but economic pursuit: "Marco Polo's journey wasn't just a journey of religion. It was very clearly a journey by a merchant hoping to make a profit…My own book I wrote when I was still in university, and it was something I wrote to get someone to pay for my student travels." (Joshi 15).

Throughout the narrative, Dalrymple tries to establish his axiom that religion triggers institutionalised terrorism. We find Dalrymple writing: "This country [Turkey] has two problems. One is the mullah, the other is the army- both want to rule the country, and stop democracy." (78). The Army and the Mullahs, according to Dalrymple, are the representatives of the RSA (Repressive State Apparatuses) who have power-control. Terrorism as an institution has no place in religion, but making it a religion to rule the world is something we cannot agree to. Similarly, people from the Islamic communities have believed in many different ill-institutions like slavery and polygamy. Dalrymple's portrayal is questionable because it is as if all these institutions are Oriental discourses and the Western discourses have nothing to contribute to it. He tries to establish these cultural norms as the 'Other' but does not believe the fact that similar instances are there in Occidental discourses. Slavery and child labour are the products of colonialism which we can trace back with American history and Afro-American narratives. Krishna Sen, a renowned scholar from West Bengal, observed in her chapter on "African American Literature" [in the jointly edited book *A Short History of American Literature* (2017)]: "The post-Reconstruction years saw the institution of slavery being replaced by the equally oppressive social stigma of racism throughout the nation, and efforts by Black leaders to combat it." (227). Therefore, Dalrymple's representation is not reliable in that sense as he has merely tried to attribute the blame to a civilization by suppressing the history of colonialism. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) writes:

> Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. (Said 24).

Dalrymple creates this process of 'Otherisation' under the discourses of race, religion, language, and the superiority of British literature.

The establishment of 'Islamophobia' began when Dalrymple presented a conversation that he had with Krikor about Beirut in chapter 2. When Laura was suspicious about the 'Fireworks' and asked Krikor about it, he commented: "No, the restaurant is very safe. Beirut is a good town. Many nightclubs, many girls, and much dancing. There are some problems- bombs, kidnapping, gun fights, but nothing serious…" (54). He even said that he himself always carries a pistol for safety. But, the point is that there is no incident that has happened, nor is there any narrative that we get from Dalrymple which proves that such things happen in Beirut. So, the narrative that we get from Dalrymple is in reflexion. This narration has been taken into consideration because a few pages previously, Dalrymple mentions the same thing about the 'Hezbollah' community. He was of the opinion that they were 'religious' (31), but Laura claimed that "They're the most extreme terrorists in the entire Middle East, responsible for most of the recent kidnapping in Beirut." (31). These references also seem less justified because though Laura advised Dalrymple to read newspapers to look at the reports they contained, she neither mentioned any incident, nor any references from the newspaper itself. Travelogues are not reliable if they are not presented with pictures or proper entries. So, Dalrymple's narrative is in many ways questionable.

Secondly, Dalrymple was tremendously critical about 'Afghan' people, and the hatred that he has for them has no valid reason. In fact, he went to the extent of calling them 'piratical-looking'. In the beginning of chapter 5, when they were about to catch a bus in Afghanistan, Dalrymple writes: "Personally I wouldn't recommend it. Afghans are animals. I would wait until tomorrow. Quite apart from the smell, those barbarians are more than likely to rob you of everything you possess." (150). It is not clear why Dalrymple thinks of these people as barbarians. Is it for their long beard, their colour, their religion, or their culture? The instance of registering the pidgin wrongly is also something that the readers might find unethical on Dalrymple's end. On being asked about the identification of a 'Travel writer', Dalrymple replied, it is more like someone who drives the bus (151-152). This is not something we expected, because rather than telling them the real meaning of the unknown word, he simply jumped to the conclusion that Afghan people are illiterate and do not understand the lexical meanings of English words. Edward Said talks about a similar discourse in *Orientalism* (1978) and mentions it as a way of superior rising European society: "There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more sceptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter." (Said 24). Similarly, Dalrymple does not have any mouthful appetite for Mughal [Islamic] food and that is the reason why he found 'Kebabji' [a place that is famous for Kebabs in Iran] as 'filthy' (139). This is not only differentiating and establishing the European food habits and cuisine as a standard, but despising the non-European discourses as 'non-standard'. He even saw Mongols as 'ugly' and condemned them for their complexion. Dalrymple writes: "The Mongols were ugly and inquisitive. They had narrow, high-set eyes and tight, dark skin." What makes the narrator think that these features mentioned in the quote make a person ugly is still under speculation. As a travel writer, Dalrymple is more occupied in creating the binary. One can ponder over these explicit comments but what is more important is the outlook with which

European society looks at non-Europeans. The process of 'alterity' and presenting the oriental discourse as 'Other' resulted out of the sheer hatred for the countries that lack centrality.

Let us now consider the second part of the argument. Dalrymple conferred the subtitle 'A Quest' to the text, and here we cannot but speculate what ideas of 'Quest' he has been forming in his theology. To answer this question, we must look at the very end of the travelogue where Dalrymple has finally reached Xanadu only to discover the ruins of history. He even compared the condition of the ruins with the heath scene of *King Lear* (Dalrymple 298). The enigma with which he began his journey to Xanadu seems to be lost, and now the destination feels like a boy's whimsical journey to a fair. After reaching the place, Louisa and Dalrymple recited Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" to which one of the policemen remarked "English people, very, very bonkers." (300). The speculation we will have to take into consideration here as to why it becomes necessary for them to recite this poem. From the beginning till the end, Dalrymple was concerned about Marco Polo's journey and not Coleridge's, so what made them think that it was apt to recite the poem? Is it also an attempt to establish high British poetry as a canon before the Chinese policemen? It is better that we pause the discussion here and look at Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" from a different context.

The intensity of Coleridge's poems is such that G. Wilson Knight in his *The Starlit Dome* (1941) remarked that Coleridge, with his one complete and two incomplete poems, could match with Dante and Shakespeare: "I SHALL concentrate first on *Christabel, The Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*. Within a narrow range these show an intensity comparable with that of Dante and Shakespeare." (Knight 83). "Kubla Khan" is always seen from a discourse of creative imagination where the faculty of the artist has been emphasised. There are multiple ways through which the text can be seen, and its multiple interpretations have made it a complex labyrinth. G. Wilson Knight states: "I next translate the domed symbolism of *Kubla Khan* into such shadow-terms corresponding to the original in somewhat the same way as the science of Christian theology corresponds, or should correspond, to the *New Testament*." (91). What makes the poem complex and almost impregnable is its rich and multi-layered symbolism and the power of hypnotism to which the readers seem baffled. Though, Hilde Scheuer Bliss and Donal Thayer Bliss are of the opinion that "Kubla Khan" 'lacks high spiritual beauty' which "The Ancient Mariner" bears: "It remained a mystery to me why it should be so highly praised, for I recognized in it nothing more than a rather grotesque fantasy of a type not unsuited to an addict's pen, but quite lacking in that high spiritual beauty which so informs and perfuses *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*." (261). Though, this is not entirely true.

After a deeper probing into "Kubla Khan", there is no confusion to understand that there is a 'Quest' that Coleridge would like to emphasise on. But this quest is not something which Dalrymple or Marco Polo has emphasised. This is a quest which a soul undertakes to achieve higher consciousness that can never be achieved by someone who lacks spiritual understanding. The quest is within, and here the whole journey becomes a part of something which can be understood from a perspective of higher spirituality that we see in Occult, Tantric, Yogic, and Buddhist studies- 'The *Kundalini*'. Crism, an independent Tantric scholar, is of the opinion that [secondary] imagination is the first step through which we can attain higher spiritual wisdom of *Kundalini*. He mentions about the same in his article entitled "Imagination: from a *Kundalini* Perspective" (2015):

We can fantasise and daydream, but we can also create and we can also open areas beyond the fantasies and beyond the creating into venues that allow us access to remote viewing and experiencing visions, etc. Imagination is the first step into visualisation, which has a better reputation. I suggest that as *Kundalini* people we can cultivate the imagination and release the doubts that we have been programmed with regarding its use… It is necessary to use this faculty for the discernment of the metaphysical. (www.edgemagazine.net).

By 'imagination', Crism did not mean the primary one because primary imagination is based on 'perception' (Coleridge 488). Whereas the secondary imagination holds the power of 'creation', and *Kundalini* has always been the source of all creative energy. This justifies as to why we can compare Coleridge's journey in "Kubla Khan" to the astral realm of *Kundalini*. Many scholars have talked about '*Kundalini*' in their articles by providing suitable references from the Hindu and Tantric Scriptures. To brief it simply, *Kundalini* is a hierarchical astral structure that resides within the human body conjoining the coccyx and the human brain. It contains six *chakras* [power centres, each containing lotuses different in colours and petal numbers] which are located at different places of the human body. Professor Madhu Khanna, an eminent Tantric scholar from Oxford, is of the opinion that:

> The Shakti principle of the cosmos in the subtle body is known as Devi *Kundalini* or the Coiled One conceived of as an infinite reservoir of power (Shakti). In her unmanifest, latent state *Kundalini* is visualised as a sleeping serpent. It lies coiled in three-and-a-half circles around the central axis at the base of the spine, in *Muladhara* the 'root support' chakra, located between the anus and the genitals. Resting, *Kundalini* Shakti is subtle as a fine fibre of lotus-stalk and bright as a lightning-flash. The microcosm is something akin to an electric battery in which this cosmic power latently lies. When this power is not orderly channelled, it either withers away or has limited expression. In a generic sense *Kundalini* is the energy that lies at the root of all creation. It is the origin of all powers, all strengths and all forms of life that this universe may assume. (228-229).

'*Kundalini*' is the source of power in the human system. It contains the six *chakras* which help us to differentiate between our physical and astral body, and they are- *Muladhara* [The root *chakra*, situated at the base of spine], *Swadhisthana* [in the area of the genitals], *Manipura* [at the navel], *Anahata* [at the heart], *Vishuddha* [at the throat], and *Ajna* [between the eyebrows, considered to be "the third eye"]. After crossing these six astral knots, the soul reaches a space that is beyond any existence and contains the divine knowledge of higher consciousness- the *Sahasrara* [The Crown]. These astral chakras are weaved through spiritual knots by the three principal 'nadis' [considered as the sacred rivers]- *Ida, Pingala* and *Susumna*. Now, let us read the lines from "Kubla Khan":

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree:
> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
>   Down to a sunless sea.

> So twice five miles of fertile ground
> With walls and towers were girdled round;
> And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
> Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
> And here were forests ancient as the hills,
> Enfolding sunny spots of greenery...

Many readers [including Dalrymple] think that Xanadu is a place that Marco Polo tried to reach in order to establish the point that Christianity prevails over every other religion. But that is not true. Polo's *The Travels* (1613) contains only two chapters which are dedicated towards the places of Kublai Khan. The centre of the narrative is not 'Shangtu' [Xanadu] but the heroic adventures and achievements of the emperor Kublai Khan. It is the palace only that Polo has described in his narrative:

> DEPARTING from the city last mentioned, and proceeding three days' journey in a north-easterly direction, you arrive at a city called Shandu [Shangtu], built by the Great Khan Kublai, now reigning. In this he caused a palace to be erected, of marble and other handsome stones, admirable as well for the elegance of its design as for the skill displayed in its execution. (70).

Polo mentions the name in his narrative only seven times and he never adds any importance so far as cultural history or religio-philosophical importance is concerned. We have to remember that Purchas' reading was not a cultural reading. It was purely a spiritual one. It was *Purchas, His Pilgrimage* (1613) which Coleridge was reading before he fell asleep. Therefore, Xanadu is not an external place, but an inner consciousness that is triggered by 'secondary imagination'. Xanadu, therefore, is the '*Kundalini*' and the 'A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice' is the crown, white in colour that represents the divine consciousness- *The Sahasrara*. We can find the reference in Robert E. Svoboda: "The *Sahasrara*, the 'Thousand-Petaled Lotus' is at the top of the head. Although it is a lotus, it is not a Chakra because there is no plexus of *nadis* there; there is only one *nadi* [The *Susumna*], which connects the *Sahasrara* with the *Ajna*..." (*Aghora II* 64). Alph, the 'sacred' river 'meandering' is the prime serpent- The *Susumna*; 'the ancient forest' is the *Dwadasha Chakra*- the abode of the 'Shakti' [the Power]; 'The woman wailing' and a 'Damsel' are the Shakti herself symbolising the 'Chaitanya' who is dancing with a Dulcimer that represents divine knowledge. Coleridge tried to look within this spiritual structure and could not recollect it after the interruption. To recollect is to experience that divine consciousness within and that is a 'Quest'. G. Wilson Knight argues that the river Alph is a symbol of life. He states that: "The river is 'sacred'. Clearly a sacred river which runs through nature towards death will in some sense correspond to life. I take the river to be, as so often in Wordsworth, a symbol of life." (91). So, the quest is within that creates, and therefore, symbolises the blooming life-force.

    A quest that Marco Polo and William Dalrymple have failed to realise is that there are seven places that conjoin this journey into a single thread- Jerusalem, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan [with India], and China. A cultural reading will obviously inform us about the diverse ethnic discourses. But, a religious reading of the text would help us to locate the seven places which are not

only spiritually [representing the higher sublimity], but culturally important. While delineating, Dalrymple subconsciously mentioned seven important cultural and religious places that form the lotuses- The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, The Ummayad Mosque in Syria, The Gok Medrese in Turkey, Dogubayazit in the border of Iran, Shrine of Ali in Afghanistan, Ig-Gah mosque in China, and Finally Xanadu. These are not religious places in that sense, but represent the higher consciousness that any art form attempts to venture. All these structures are large and rich in aesthetics that enable us to realise the sublimity behind any art. This is achieved through a creative process, and ultimately leads us to the realisation of the sublime. Dalrymple was trying to set a comparison between Islamic and European architecture, but he did not realise that he was tangling a consciousness through these places that creates a counter discourse for the narrative hypothesising that the divine consciousness is there, irrespective of the fact which religion one belongs to. One can believe in nothing and yet can have a higher consciousness. The way this consciousness is achieved is the 'Quest', and it is never external.

Conclusion

Let us go back now to the first question with which we began this paper- is it necessary to create 'alterity' in a travelogue? The answer to this question is an obvious 'no'. The only way to respect any culture is to accept the fact that the culture is unique and, therefore, there should not be any place for comparison. Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) observed that: "…uniqueness is not only in its size, or even in the intelligence of its contributors, but in its attitude to its subject matter, and it is this attitude that makes it of great interest for the study of modern Orientalist projects." (85). The way Dalrymple's narrative sets its flow makes it clear from the beginning that a twenty-one year old boy with a 'prejudiced Anglocentric undergraduate' (Dalrymple Acknowledgements) will obviously set a discourse where Eurocentric culture has been prioritised. The idea of 'Quest', therefore, mediaeval or modern, is lost because Dalrymple's intention was not to create a travel narrative. His primary purpose was to glance through these cultures from a Euro-hegemonic angle and never to appreciate the diversity. So, from the beginning it was not the silk-route, it was the route of the Oriental world he ventured and tried to establish xenophobia. "Kubla Khan" talks about a journey; a 'Quest' and not the destination itself. It is because the 'Sunny pleasure dome' exists only in the higher consciousness and to witness that, human souls have to travel a long way through rigorous practice of the faculty. Even after reaching that space, one might feel baffled and there is no parity between the realisations of the sublime by two souls because it might vary depending on the creative faculty and consciousness. The poem is not incomplete in that sense, because it is the unfledged existence that attributes a unity to the poem. Therefore, the subtitle that Dalrymple added to the text is not justified as he himself fails to realise the same. He produced a narrative containing more than three hundred pages only to discover the fact that he was granted a scholarship, and never acknowledged the fact that there is actually a 'Quest' that a writer has to take every single time whenever s/he tries to produce a piece of art. The journey towards this experience is the 'Quest' and that is the higher reality.

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Feminist Temporal Dynamics and Implications on Subjectivities: A Reading of select Indian English Female Saga Narratives

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Abstract: Female saga fiction is a literary genre which focuses on a rich tapestry of female characters across multiple generations, over extended periods of time, traversing different families, ages and geographical regions. Time as an expanding factor becomes an important aspect which governs the way in which female protagonists build upon their identities in varied contexts in female saga narratives. Rita Felski in her article on "Telling Time in Feminist Theory" points to four temporal modes namely, time as redemption, regression, repetition and rupture, which together contribute to the formation of multiple female subjectivities such as personal, maternal, psychological, domestic, social, corporeal etc. This study is a reading of the workings of the four modes of time and its implications on female subjectivities, in two recent Indian English female saga texts, namely *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Small Acts of Freedom* (2018) by Gurmehar Kaur. The study will substantiate the argument through a critical content analysis of the text through the theoretical framework of Felski. The present study contends that by superimposing various feminist temporalities, saga fiction provides women an avenue to articulate their subjectivities and thereby arrive at intertwining connections.

Keywords: feminist temporalities, redemption, regression, repetition, rupture, subjectivities.

Introduction

In the realm of literature, saga fiction is a genre that intricately weaves together the lives of multiple characters and families, spanning across ages, generations, and regions. When it comes to female saga fiction, the focus shifts to a multitude of female characters across different generations, interweaving their lives and connections in a captivating manner. While saga narratives traditionally tend to centre around male protagonists, often exploring themes of success, wealth, and power, female saga fiction takes a different approach. It delves into the complex and intricate lives of women, highlighting the gradual forging of their identity and thereby is a compelling exploration of the inner worlds and interconnectedness of the female protagonists. Thus, such narratives present a distinct perspective within the genre.

Within female saga narratives, time assumes a paramount role in shaping the development of the protagonists' identities across various contexts. As the narrative spans different time periods and settings, the female characters embark on transformative journeys that explore the intricacies of their lives. The expansive nature of time in this genre, in opposition to the bildungsroman, allows for a nuanced exploration of how their identities evolve, showcasing the interplay between personal

growth, and socio-historical events. Feminist temporalities refer to the exploration of time and its significance from a feminist perspective. This approach examines how time is experienced, constructed, and understood in relation to gender, acknowledging that temporal experiences are shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts. The intersection of time and female subjectivities offers a nuanced lens through which the complexities of identity, agency, and the impact of historical and cultural contexts on women's lives can be examined.

In the ambit of Gender Studies, there have been varied theories which explore the interconnectedness between time and female subjectivities. For instance, Elizabeth Grosz introduces the concept of 'temporal drag' to describe the ways in which societal expectations and norms impose a temporal framework on women's lives. Iris Marion Young proposes the concept of 'relational time', highlighting the interplay between individual experiences and broader social structures. According to Young, women's subjectivities are deeply intertwined with their relationships and social contexts, and their experiences of time are influenced by power dynamics, care work, and the demands of emotional labour. According to Julia Kristeva, time is not merely a chronological dimension but a complex framework that influences the formation of women's identities and their experiences within patriarchal societies. Kristeva argues that women's subjectivities are deeply intertwined with the passage of time. The temporal dimension plays a crucial role in shaping women's identities as they navigate various stages of life, such as childhood, motherhood, and ageing. Furthermore, Kristeva highlights the significance of women's relationship with their own bodies in understanding time and subjectivity. She explores the unique temporal experiences tied to menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause, which impact women's self-perception and the ways in which they are perceived by others. In her article "Telling Time in Feminist Theory", Rita Felski identifies four distinct forms of time namely redemption, regression, repetition, and rupture, that play a crucial role in the construction of female subjectivities.

While South Asian theories on feminist temporalities may not be explicitly codified in the same way as Western feminist theories, scholars and thinkers from the region have engaged with issues related to gender and time in various cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts. They have engaged with aspects such as the significance of intersectionality in shaping temporal experiences and subjectivities, critiquing conventional temporal norms that prescribe specific timelines for women's life course events and drawing on cyclical notions of time, the influence of colonial histories on gender dynamics and temporal experiences, proposing alternative modes of temporalities, exploring the temporal dimension of women's movements in South Asia and so on.

This study aims to enrich the South Asian discourse on feminist temporalities by attempting to explore the workings of the four modes of time as explicated by Rita Felski, within the broader context of narrative time, in two contemporary Indian English female saga texts, *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Small Acts of Freedom* (2018) by Gurmehar Kaur.

Before We Visit the Goddess by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a captivating novel that spans three generations of women, delving into their personal journeys, relationships, and the challenges they face in pursuit of their dreams and identity. The narrative begins with Sabitri, a young girl growing up in a remote village in rural India. Sabitri possesses a strong desire for education, seeking to break

free from the confines of her traditional upbringing. Despite her family's disapproval, she persists and secures a scholarship to study in Kolkata. Over a period of time, we find young Savitri mature into being a woman who etches her name in the food industry, by setting up her own sweet business amidst facing the loss of a partner, financial struggles, cultural clashes, and heartbreak. It is seen that her determination remains unwavering as she navigates the complexities of love, loss, and self-discovery. The story then shifts to Bela, Sabitri's daughter, who grows up in Kolkata, grapples with her identity as a single child and struggles to connect with her mother. As she enters adulthood, Bela's married life takes her to America, where she seeks independence. In this new land, she encounters the challenges of cultural assimilation, romantic relationships, and the clash between her past and present. Bela's experiences shape her perception of her mother, leading to a deeper understanding of their complicated relationship. Tara, Bela's daughter, is born and raised in America and is barely aware of her fragmented family history and yearns to unravel the secrets and journey of her mother and grandmother. Through her search for identity and belonging, Tara embarks on a transformative journey and she unravels the intricate tapestry of her family's past, discovering the sacrifices, aspirations, and resilience of the women who came before her. Divakaruni's storytelling beautifully captures the intergenerational dynamics in the form of shifts in narrative, cultural clashes, and the complex bond between mothers and daughters.

Small Acts of Freedom by Gurmehar Kaur is a poignant memoir that chronicles the author's personal journey and activism, exploring themes of resilience, social justice, and shaping up of one's own identity. The memoir centres around Gurmehar Kaur, who gained prominence as a young student activist in India. Through the memoir, Kaur delves into her own experiences of loss and trauma, having lost her father, an army officer, at a young age. She reflects on the impact of his death on her life and her journey towards healing and self-discovery. With shifts in narrative, the memoir introduces significant characters such as Kaur's mother, Raji and her grandmother, Amarjeet, both who were widowed at a very young age and who played a significant role in imparting strength and shaping Kaur's life and identity. Kaur also specifically explores the complexities of identity, navigating her dual heritage as an Indian with Pakistani roots and the challenges she faces in reconciling these two aspects of her identity. She also delves into her growth as an activist, detailing her experiences as she uses her voice to advocate for gender equality, peace, and social justice. The memoir explores the power of small acts of resistance and how collective action can bring about positive change. Throughout the narrative, she sheds light on the gendered inequalities around her and brings in intersectional perspectives on her own experiences and those of other women she has encountered.

In both these narratives, within the scope of the broader narrative time, multiple individual female-oriented subjectivities can be traced. Hence, this study precisely aims to arrive at the nuances pertaining to these subjectivities in the form of the four R's, redemption, regression, repetition, and rupture, as introduced by Rita Felski, in the select narratives.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

The theoretical frame of reference that underpins this study is derived from Rita Felski's article, "Telling Time in Feminist Theory" (2002) which offers a comprehensive examination of the intricate

relationship between time and feminist perspectives. Felski explores how different temporal modes, namely, time as redemption, regression, repetition and rupture, shape and influence women's subjectivities, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of the temporal dimensions within feminist discourse. Redemption involves the idea of transformation and progress, wherein individuals strive to overcome past struggles and achieve personal growth. Felski investigates how this temporal mode intersects with feminist thought and how women's subjectivities are influenced by the potential for redemption within their lived experiences. Regression, another temporal mode explored by Felski, refers to a backward movement in time. This mode acknowledges the possibility of setbacks, regression, or the re-emergence of past challenges. She considers how this temporal dimension affects feminist theories and the experiences of women, recognizing that progress is not always linear and that setbacks can play a significant role in shaping subjectivities. Repetition is another temporal mode examined by Felski, highlighting the cyclical nature of time. She delves into how repetitive patterns and routines can impact women's subjectivities, emphasising the potential for both stability and stagnation within this temporal mode. Lastly, Felski explores the concept of rupture in relation to time. Rupture refers to moments of disruption, discontinuity, or profound change. Felski examines how ruptures in time, such as significant life events or social transformations, impact women's subjectivities. She recognizes the potential for rupture to create new possibilities for self-formation and the re-evaluation of societal norms. Through her analysis of these temporal modes, Felski highlights the complexity of temporal experiences and their profound influence on shaping women's subjectivities.

The present study has adopted a qualitative research design where the explication of the four modes of feminist temporalities will be analysed in detail in the select Indian English Female Saga texts. By undertaking such an analysis, the convergences and divergences among female subjectivities and their implications would point to the formation of various identities such as personal, maternal, psychological, domestic, social, corporeal etc. for each of the female protagonists. Employing a critical content analysis approach and drawing upon Rita Felski's theoretical framework, the study seeks to substantiate the argument. In doing so, it contends that through the integration of various feminist temporalities, saga fiction provides women with a platform to express their subjectivities and establish intricate connections.

The choice of Felski's template over other formulations is because her work not only contributes to feminist theory but also provides insights into the diverse ways in which time intertwines with gendered identities and lived experiences. Her framework provides a suitable model to undertake a critical examination of how the temporal dimension intersects with gendered experiences, offering a deeper understanding of the complexities and intersectional challenges faced by women in their formation of selfhood, in the Indian context. By intermingling global ideas with regional and temporal contexts, the framework helps to contribute to a richer and more authentic analysis of feminist temporalities.

Temporalities & Subjectivities: Explication of Four R's

Temporality and relativeness are two concepts which recur in women's stories and there is always a mediation between the past and the future. In "Telling Time in Feminist Theory", Felski

delves into how different temporal modes shape and inform women's subjectivities, and theorises the workings of time in four ways such as redemption, regression, repetition, and rupture. It can be seen that all these four modes of times have been represented as general tropes in literature and more importantly women's writings.

Redemption is a trope which is associated with a female character undergoing a transformative journey or experiencing personal growth, thereby leading to a vindication of her circumstances. It can be a powerful narrative tool that explores themes of self-discovery, resilience, and empowerment. In women's writing, redemption can take on different manifestations such as personal, social, redemption through relationships, redemption through strength and resilience etc. Hence, Felski avers that for time as redemption, "This is a hopeful orientation to the future, or what we sometimes call belief in progress" (22). In both *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *Small Acts of Freedom*, we find women protagonists navigate the complexities of their relationships, personal aspirations, and cultural identities. They experience mistakes, regrets, and missed opportunities and as time passes, they are given opportunities to reflect on their choices, confront their pasts, and seek reconciliation or forgiveness. For instance, the letter that Sabitri in *Before We Visit the Goddess* pens down for her grand-daughter Tara, is in a way a reference of her redemptive journey, as she implicitly spills out the fact that all through her life, her choices and actions were spurned in a way to emerge out of the guilt and regret of ruining her chance for higher education and for achieving upward mobility through a romantic relationship. Bela is also a classic example of how redemption operates over a period in time within the mindset of a mid-generation protagonist, when her marriage and career is jeopardised and she undertakes a transformative journey in a foreign country and thereby acknowledges the importance of her mother's wisdom. Same is the case of Tara, in whom there is a drastic shift with regard to mindset and the idea of building a family. Very importantly her journey of healing runs parallel to her abandoning a dangerous habit such as that of kleptomania, which is indicative of the fact that following the path of redemption has done wonders in her. Thus, Micah Orsetti rightly avers that,

> Sabitri is a self-made woman who takes her future in her hands when her world seems to be falling apart. Bela is a romantic who thinks with her heart more than her head, but whose resilience guides her through the heartache. Tara is headstrong and rebellious and has all but severed herself from her Indian background.

Gurmehar's path of redemption in *Small Acts of Freedom* is rooted in the discovery of the fact that all through the years, she has been trying to strive and be like her father, in terms of agency and forging of identity. In her words, "My only dream is to be like my father, to be the same person he was and to emulate his personality. Would it comfort my mother to see me walking around the house giggling and happy, to see his shadow, a watered down version of him, alive? I think it would" (Kaur 108). In this sense, time can be seen as a catalyst for self-discovery, healing, and personal redemption. The characters grapple with their past actions and the consequences that arise from them, ultimately striving to find resolution, forgiveness, a sense of fulfilment and seek personal growth.

Regression as a trope typically involves a female character reverting to a previous state, often characterised by dependency, vulnerability, or a loss of agency. When examined in the context of intergenerationality, regression takes on added layers of meaning, suggesting a cyclical pattern or repetition of behaviours and societal expectations across generations of women. The concept of time as regression implies a longing for the past. In saga fiction, where the focus is typically on female growth, regression serves as a narrative device to delve into protagonists' pasts, confront unresolved issues, explore intergenerational dynamics, and rediscover identity. A major tool to depict regression is through flashbacks and memories. In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, the last chapter titled, 'A Thousand Words: 2020' is entirely built on moments of intergenerational convergences, which occurs through regression. Towards the end of the narrative, both Bela and Tara have met each other after long and have amicably decided to spend a week together and in due course of their conversation, late Sabitri is brought in through a photograph, few anecdotes and a crucial letter. In the words of Tara:

> I pick up the picture and peer at it. My grandmother looks out at me, her gaze lovely and cryptic. It bothers me that I know so little about her. I search the photo for clues to her character…I want to keep staring until the photo yields its secrets to me. Maybe now that her own end flickers like a shadow in the corner of her eye, my mother will be ready to tell me more about my grandmother (Divakaruni 196-197).

The letter also turns out to be revelation for Bela regarding her mother's choices and hence she repeatedly remarks, "Oh, God, I didn't know" (Divakaruni 206). In spite of Tara being physically present there, the scenario literally translates to Bela invoking Sabitri and begging for forgiveness. A similar scenario is presented in *Small Acts of Freedom*, where the past is unearthed through flashbacks and memories and every time either Raji or Gurmehar falls back to Amarjeet for strength, it becomes a regressive tendency. As mentioned by Felski, "An attachment to the past can throw critical light on the present, allowing us to question the smugness of the now and the sovereignty of the new" (25). Thus, it can be seen that such moments of recollection reiterate this fact and allow characters to revisit significant events from their pasts and through these revisitations, they gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their choices, and the impact of their past actions on their present circumstances. The narratives reiterate the fact that despite the passage of decades, the past can resurface in the lives of women, influencing the present and potentially leading to moments of regression in behaviour, emotions, or relationships.

The concept of time as repetition is a fascinating element as it involves the idea that time does not progress in a linear fashion. Time as repetition reiterates that time is cyclical which can mean either transcending historical time and going back to the past or the mundaneness of everyday life. This notion can add depth and complexity to narratives, allowing authors to delve into themes of history, memory, fate, and personal growth. In feminist narratives, the bonds between mothers and daughters are built on repetition and continuity. The theme of time as repetition is the crux of both the select narratives, as it is depicted in the form of interconnectedness of experiences, themes of sacrifice and unfulfilled desires and recurring patterns in relationships. For instance, all the three women protagonists in both the narratives, Sabitri-Bela-Tara and Amarjeet-Raji-Gurmehar are interconnected based on their experiences across different time periods. Certain events and challenges, such as the pursuit of education, career, choice of love and marriage or feelings of longing

and displacement, recur among the characters to emphasise the ways in which similar experiences are shared and echoed through the generations. Anitha Ramkumar is of the opinion that:

> On a cursory first glance it seems that this is the story of three women, Sabitri, Bela and Tara and the only thing that connects them is that they share the grandmother-mother-daughter relationship. But soon the reader would discover that these three women are connected not just by DNA, but also by how their actions, however insignificant it might seem from their own point of view, has monumentally affected the life of the other.

Similarly, in a review in the Free Press Journal it is opined that:

> Through recollections across generations, Gurmehar narrates instances in the lives of her grandmother, the mother and herself that weave into a portrait of the family. Each instance is a snippet of this larger canvas and follows an unusual but effective flow. It's as though three parallel stories are moving forward together, and yet they remain incomplete without each other.

Similarly, the theme of sacrifice recurs among the characters. The elderly protagonists, Sabitri, Bela, Amarjeet, and Raji, in both narratives grapple with unfulfilled desires driven by familial or societal expectations. Their reflections on life choices underscore a cyclical pattern of decision-making, highlighting the recurring theme of introspection and unmet personal aspirations. Both narratives explore the recurrence of socio-cultural traditions and the influence of markers like education, employment, and history on female subjectivities. Single women like Sabitri, Bela, Tara, and Raji leverage education and employment to maintain self-reliance amid societal pressures. The repetition of socio-cultural experiences underscores how subjectivities are predominantly shaped by societal expectations, emphasising the cyclical nature of this milieu in the narratives. It must be noted that the uniqueness of female saga fiction lies in the fact that repetitive experiences are evoked and brought out on a linear plane, in the generic form of the narrative.

Time as rupture is a concept celebrated in postmodernism where dislocation or change becomes incremental. Rupture is a significant trope in women's writing, often employed to challenge and disrupt societal norms, expectations, and power structures and involves a deliberate break from conventional patterns and traditions. In both the narratives, rupture is a key feature that is associated with the shifting ways of living of the younger protagonists. Many a time, with the passage of time, it is through a rupture of existing norms and conventions that the younger protagonists are able to forge a renewed sense of identity. When the same is undertaken in an environment where it is least expected, such women turn out to be harbingers of change. Apt examples are both Sabitri and Amarjeet, as their lives are a testimony of how single women can build and lead a family, in spite of various challenges and also within the scope of the socio-cultural circumstances that are available to them. In another sense, each woman protagonist goes through a rupture in different manners, be it psychological or through their actions, which in turn reveals a new path for them. While for Bela, it was a rupture in terms of her idea of a stable family, for Tara it is while mending her reckless ways

of living and yearning for stability. While for Raji it was a rupture it terms of leading a smooth life and embracing challenges at a young age, for Gurmehar it is when she unearthens her true identity and decides to face harrowing challenges with determination and strength, instead of retracting into familial life and towing the line of what is expected out of women of her community. Thus, rupture becomes a significant trope which can be a powerful tool for exploring themes of liberation, resistance, resilience and transformation. It serves as a means to subvert and question the existing order, opening up possibilities for change and empowerment.

An in-depth analysis of the explication of the four R's also reveal that their workings are not in a linear fashion, but significant overlaps can be traced. A unique pattern of formation can be derived from both *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *Small Acts of Freedom.* It can be asserted that, most often Rupture is the significant event which in turn leads to regression and redemption and thereby establishes the fact that repetition cannot be glossed over completely. While rupture is associated with moments of intergenerational divergences, regression and repetition is executed through intergenerational convergences and redemption becomes an eclectic mix of both, because identification of divergences is what leads to assertion of convergences, at a later stage. Thus, Felski's argument that all these four modes of temporalities are inter related for women and the formation of their subjectivities, and that we cannot conceptualise one single time for women, is precisely seen to be executed in both the select narratives.

Conclusion

This study has majorly intended to contextualise modes of feminist temporalities, as averred by Rita Felski in select Indian English female saga narratives. In doing so, it contends that Felski's argument, "Time knits together the subjective and the social, the personal and the public; we forge links between our own lifetime and the larger historical patterns that transcend us" (22) is seen to be adapted in a precise manner in both the structure and thematic content of female saga narratives. A major finding is that within the scope of the genre, there is a perfect blend of the idea that time functions in a cyclical or spiral manner and its manifestations are relational for women. Thereby, the nature of the subjectivities that get built across decades also turns to be transitional and shifting in nature. The four R's, redemption, regression, repetition and rupture contribute to the formation of a cyclical pattern which, with significant overlaps, point to the ways in which intergenerational convergences and divergences are represented in both the select narratives. The adaptation of the four R's also leads to the overarching finding which is unique to female saga narratives that, within the genre, a single subjectivity for women cannot be charted for any of the female protagonists, as it is always an ensemble of vivid subjectivities, built around varied contexts and is thereby experiential in nature. This precisely makes the present study unique and is also the first of its kind to echo Felski's template in the South Asian feminist narrative scenario. The limitation of this study is that it has not looked into other aspects of time and subjectivity as averred by various other feminist scholars globally. Future studies in this domain can be expanded to include multiple workings of time and subjectivity and thereby arrive at an eclectic model for interpretation, in the Indian scenario.

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Trauma and Women in the Late Twentieth Century Assam: A Reading of Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*

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Abstract: This paper aims to deal with the representation of common people's sufferings in the late twentieth century Assam, through Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*. The paper shall attempt to look at the crisis from women's perspectives who often struggled silently as a result of the demands of sub-nationalistic fringe groups of dissatisfied people in Assam for sovereignty and freedom from the Indian Union ('Swadhin Asom'). Because of the unresolved conflict and violence between these groups and the Centre which reacted quite strongly to their demands, there was fear and trauma, and eventually a disillusionment towards the cause. Cathy Caruth traces the link between trauma and external violence which shall be used as a theoretical framework in this paper, to understand the manifestations of trauma in the novel. In addition, Caroline Garland's theories of trauma and Judith Butler's discourse on violence shall also be alluded to in this context.

Keywords: Trauma, violence, power, sub-nationalism, sovereignty

I

The processes of policy-making, nation-building and governance with regard to Northeast India have led to the creation of multi-dimensional problems. Several causes may be attributed to their rise. For instance, the Partition in 1947, in addition to creating the landmass called 'Northeast India', also turned the region into a landlocked area in which the problems of immigration, land, identity and language were paramount. Not only was the region's link with the entire nation disrupted, but its trade and commerce were also affected by the creation of international borders between India and Bangladesh. To add to this, problems of discrimination, unequal distribution of resources, poverty, unemployment and many such others rose exponentially in the years after the Partition. Therefore, the linear direction of policy-making in the region has often proved to be quite inadequate for the people's needs and demands.

As a fallout of the Partition and demarcation of borders, previously legitimate migrations now became illegal. Several northeastern states had to deal with the pressures of a continuous string of migrations which became a critical issue in the newly independent country. This has unfortunately remained a problem till date. The region, which was already separated due to the colonial policies, began to develop an isolationist mindset. Movements demanding the separation of the region from

the Indian Union were not uncommon. Udayon Misra writes that the "fight for the rights of the small nationalities which took on a new edge in post-Independence North-Eastern India had their beginnings in the issues of financial and political autonomy which figured during the Constituent Assembly debates" (21). Among many such nationalistic groups/fringe organisations which rose to prominence, the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) formed in 1979 at Sivasagar gained perhaps the maximum amount of popularity since they appeared to represent the issues of the people very clearly. Nani Gopal Mahanta writes, "ULFA is the culminating point of a movement that craves for a separate voice and identity for Assam" (xviii). The organisation soon came to acquire a violent colour in their functioning and agenda - as a result of which there were also measures taken by the Centre to curb them. In spite of initial support, the trauma that people underwent due to the violence adopted on both sides led to an eventual choice for peace. This issue has been one of much discussion and continues to be so, although the violence in the region has now reduced considerably.

II

This paper intends to deal with Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005) which is a representation of trauma on common people's lives, particularly from the women's perspectives. The novel narrates the story of Rukmini, a young woman married to the District Collector of a small fictitious town named Parbatpuri in Assam. It is set in this troubled period in Assam during which the violent functioning of these groups and the Centre's equally aggressive retaliation impacted the socio-cultural lives of the people severely. People were traumatised due to the violence, which is represented through various literary and non-literary works of the region. In this novel, Rukmini's life is outwardly protected and sheltered from the violence that goes on around her, since she lives in a bungalow atop a hill. There is a cremation ground just below the hill, which is witness to several deaths in the small town. However, it is not possible for her to stay unaffected for a very long time as she gets inadvertently drawn into it and like many other women in the novel, she is also a victim of trauma in Parbatpuri. The fear and uncertainty that grip the town each time there is an outbreak of violence is reflected in her own life too. Additionally, being the wife of the District Collector, she is exposed to news of violence almost on a first-hand basis. The mobility from one place to another without being able to settle in any one place due to her husband Siddharth's transferable job is an indispensable part of her life. However, Siddharth is quite reticent and hardly has time for his wife, which makes Rukmini's near-solitary sojourn in Parbatpuri even more lonely.

Rukmini teaches English at the local DS College, but it is not a job that she particularly enjoys since most of her students have no inkling about the intricacies of English literature. The student body is more inclined towards participating in movements that demand an independent homeland. The events in the novel are almost a microcosmic representation of the larger movement in Assam of the 1980s, which demanded a sovereign homeland ('Axom for the Assamese'). The movement in Parbatpuri during that time is called MOFEH, or the 'Movement For an Exclusive Homeland' which is quite akin to that carried out by ULFA in Assam in the late twentieth century. It seems to be insinuated that some people engaged in this movement of MOFEH were not exactly sure of their wants and demands; they are called "terrorist-out-of convenience groups" or "fake terrorists, who were little more than gangs of dacoits, thinly disguised as insurgents" (Phukan 81). There is also a

mention of 'Surrendered Ex-Ultras', who are a representation of SULFA or the Surrendered ULFA in Assam - who were welcomed into the mainstream after they were urged to lay down their arms. In many cases, such surrendered people sided with and took aid from the government to secure their futures. In the process, they also gave rise to a different kind of atrocity in the region, which people often suffered from. Sanjib Baruah mentions the testimony of Angshuman Choudhury in his book *In the Name of the Nation*, who points out that this amnesty policy of the government "triggered a camouflaged form of lawlessness and political violence" (131). Thus, the condition of common people in Assam was quite complicated since they were being terrorised from all quarters.

In the mid to late nineteenth centuries, 'trauma' was conceptualised as a 'disease' of the mind, which was evoked by railroad accidents. This then came to be related to 'shell shock' and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Along with this, trauma began to be explored through biomedical and psychiatric intervention. A traumatised person was not only physically wounded but also began to be psychically wounded, vulnerable, un-whole. Gradually, there were other epistemological shifts in the concept of trauma and its scope extended to include narratives of memorialization, cultural representations of trauma and genealogies of trauma. This has established trauma within the purview of humanities and social sciences, helping to recognize it not only as a condition of broken bodies and minds but also as a cultural object. Thus, trauma is a product of history and politics, subject to transformations, contestations and reinterpretations. Colin Davis and Hannah Meretoja write that the impact of trauma is so widespread that over the last few decades, our culture has sometimes been characterised as traumatic or post-traumatic (1).

Notwithstanding the discussions of psychic breaks and cultural representations, the material body has been a part of the imaginings of cultural trauma studies; even if not completely theorised, the body and the impact of trauma on it has been closely considered time and again. Perhaps, one of the most tangible impacts of trauma has been on the human body. The field of trauma studies, now called critical trauma studies, is a set of intellectual ideas about ruptures in lived experience and transformations of self and being. It asks fundamental questions about human relationships with one another, the "natural" world and other species. The novel is replete with examples in which the human body becomes a site for attack - there are often recollections of incidents involving violence and mutilation of the body. Often there are reports of tea estate managers being abducted and looted; in Rukmini's college staffroom, one of her colleagues reports that there was a demand for money from the manager of Baghkhuli Tea Estate:

> Each one spoke with authority as though they'd been eyewitnesses to the murder.
> 'Both the Manager and his wife were tied to the bedposts before being shot.'
> 'They used an AK-47. That means this was no ordinary robbery.'
> 'The wife was raped before she was shot. Repeatedly. In front of her husband.' (26)

Such incidents were not uncommon in the late twentieth century Assam. Additionally, there was also an intellectual shift towards the ideology of the MOFEH since several of Rukmini's students seem to harbour a similar perspective too. There was also, on the other hand, the silent disapproval of the activities of MOFEH as there was displeasure towards ULFA's activities.

Cathy Caruth calls trauma a direct link between the psyche and external violence. Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also an enigma of survival. Recognising this paradoxical relation enables one to understand the incomprehensibility at the heart of traumatic experience. An impact of trauma, according to Caruth, "is the sudden catastrophic blow to the mind, which leads to an uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other disturbing phenomena. Through these repetitions, one is able to explore what it means to survive. Often the mind is unable to confront the possibility of death directly, so survival becomes an endless testimony to the impossibility of living" (62). In the novel, the innumerable deaths induce in people's minds the possibility of the proximity to death - that they are alive is a constant reminder of how close they are to death due to violence on an everyday basis. Caroline Garland writes that trauma aids in confirming one's worst fears:

> The external event is perceived as confirming the worst of the internal fears and phantasies - in particular the reality and imminence of death, or personal annihilation, through the failure of those good objects (internal and external) to provide protection from the worst. (11).

When there is a knock on the door late at night in Parbatpuri, people panic because their worst fears seem to be confirmed. This could be a call for ransom, extortion, abductions or worse, "perhaps a request for shelter by armed men who had the police hot on their heels" (64). To make matters worse, state-aided violence and surveillance seem to trap people in a 'panopticon' - where all activities are monitored at each point. Rukmini is often escorted by a PSO (Personal Security Officer) as she goes out on visits and car-rides in the town. Even though she is the wife of the DC, such surveillance at all times seems to stifle and humiliate her at the same time. This comes into direct conflict with the functioning of such organisations with sub-nationalistic demands. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* defines 'nation' as an imagined, sovereign, limited and horizontal comradeship which allows people to not so much as kill, but to die willingly. The activities of organisations such as ULFA may be said to have a sub-nationalist fervour, since there is a strong anti-Delhi stance in their politics and ideology. Their idea of nationalism is also limited to an extent, since they focus on the idea of attaining sovereignty in a limited and finite space within the greater landmass known as India. The 'golden homeland' that they aim at achieving would also potentially exclude all 'foreigners', people who are illegal immigrants after the Partition. Sanjib Baruah, deriving from Prasenjit Duara mentions, "Its (ULFA) rise underscores the fluidity of relations on which national identities are founded, as well as the neighbourhood or spillover effects of armed conflicts" (128). These are reflected in the novel through the MOFEH, as they are also found to emphasise on local items that uphold their Assamese regional identity, like *mekhela sador* and *gamosas.* Rukmini, however, is able to determine the limitations of these activities too, as she is often found questioning her students as to the validity of such beliefs:

> The girls in the group, who usually wore the ubiquitous and practical salwar-kameez to college, were now dressed in simple yet traditional mekhela-sadors to emphasise their regional identity. The almond eyes, the golden skins of the Mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexions of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colouring of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners! (91).

Unfortunately, on one occasion, she also gets caught up in a brawl between the students and the police - which may be seen as a representation of the conflict between the Central administration and the local groups. Her student Bondona is ill affected by this clash. Rukmini visits her in the hospital later - but to her dismay she realises that Bondona's non-violent idealism would soon lead to violence, as she questions, "How long would idealism sustain them?" (182).

On one of her visits to a local wedding, Rukmini meets Manoj Mahanta, who works with a company named Calcutta Tyre Factory. Mahanta is also on a job that requires him to be out of Parbatpuri for quite some time, even though he spends a considerable amount of time here too. Manoj Mahanta talks to Rukmini about a slightly older Pranab Bishaya, who is a manager at a tea estate, but unfortunately has hardly any money. However, Bishaya is abducted once for ransom, although he is unable to provide any. This incident of Bishaya being a victim to violence and ransom demands is an occurrence that scares his close aides, Mahanta being one of them. Since many people in the town of Parbatpuri are also liable to be exposed to similar threats, their trauma arises not only in the direct imposition of violence on them but also in realising that they too, are vulnerable to abduction and death at every moment. Rukmini also shares a cordial relation with wives of other government officials who suffer under similar pressures.

Rukmini begins to spend time with Manoj Mahanta on various occasions and with this, begins a relationship that is furtive but friendly at the outset. Rukmini's loneliness is in a large part responsible for this, since she also has no company in Parbatpuri and also no children who can occupy her time. When she visits weddings, traditionally patriarchal views are imposed on her, as she is considered inauspicious for she has not been able to bear a child as yet. A large part of this novel focuses on the discrimination towards women, and the trauma they face while dealing with the violence in Parbatpuri. In fact, women in the novel are often doubly marginalised - primarily due to their gendered identity and secondly, due to the situation of violence and trauma in the secluded town. It is in this respect that Rukmini finds her relationship with Manoj to be quite liberating. Together they are able to rise above parochialism, discuss their schooling and likes and dislikes. It is Manoj who inspires Rukmini to send in her resume to advertising and copywriting firms so that she may be able to discover a new life. Women discovering a new avenue and identity for themselves is also presented as a possibility in the novel.

Robert Eaglestone writes that it is difficult to express trauma in language, for the registers of language may prove to be inadequate in particular cases: "the representation of trauma is a kind of "limit case" of language – the representation of an event so overpowering that just naming it is already to be profoundly engaged with it" (288). This element of silence being an integral part of the representation of trauma, is seen to be reflected throughout several works of fiction in Assam. In

some cases, people even forget the importance of one abduction after a few days of discussion - it all seems to settle in a kind of lull after discussions regarding ransom etc have been completed. Once the abducted man returned from captivity, he would also refuse to engage in any conversation regarding his experience.

> He would, however, also insist that he was unable to identify his abductors, even after all these months in captivity. He would pose with the *phulam gamosa* given to him by his abductors for the benefit of press photographers. This piece of woven cloth, symbol of goodwill and friendship, would sit around his neck throughout, but nobody would comment on the irony of the gift (58).

There is hardly any furore created about the impact of such abductions and deaths on the family members of such people, but in fact, women and children in such households are severely disturbed and affected, which shall be seen in some instances in the novel.

Kai Erikson mentions the difference between collective and individual trauma, as he mentions that collective trauma indicates a blow to the basic tissues of social life, by which the bonds among people and the sense of communality are destroyed (456). Individual trauma, on the other hand, signifies a blow to one's psyche with such brutal force that one cannot respond to it effectively. The impact of the revolution demanding an independent sovereign Assam, albeit supported by people in the initial years, soon stirred up trauma in people's lives, both on the individual and collective levels. Rukmini is not the only affected in the novel, but there are many women like her who experience collective trauma of abductions, ransom or killings. The intense collective trauma of people was represented by the fact that people in Parbatpuri do not venture out of their homes after sundown since it was unsafe to do so. People also had to pay the extra 'tax' which were similar to donations which made the prices of essential commodities soar. Many government officials also had to engage in underhand activities to keep the system afloat, although Siddharth is quite conscious of his privileges and the distinction between public and private property. People also refer to the activities of these organisations secretively, in fear of being victimised by them: "People invariably lowered their voices and looked around stealthily as though they, and not the organisation that they were talking about, were the ones indulging in lawless activities" (109).

Rukmini's association with Manoj soon materialises into something more than friendship. It happens out of a need for company as well as solidarity with each other's lives. Manoj offers to take Rukmini out for a day to Hatibagan, where Pronob Bishaya is the manager. Rukmini quite looks forward to it since it means moving away from the solitary life that she leads at Parbatpuri. It also appears as one of the ways in which to deal with Siddharth's lack of interest in their marriage. It is on this trip with Manoj that she comes to know why he had divorced his wife; she also happens to engage in a relationship with him that would yield results soon. However, on the way to Hatibagan, Rukmini is exposed to first-hand scrutiny and surveillance by khaki-clad men, who view her and Manoj with a great deal of suspicion. Also, this is a new experience for her because on this visit, she is unaccompanied by her PSOs and the frisking makes her aware of the difficulties of common people, who go through it almost on a daily basis. Besides, her being a woman makes her more unsure and uneasy, even if she is accompanied by a male. As Rukmini travels with Manoj, she is intimidated:

So this is how it felt. This frisson of fear that ran like a swift-moving spider down her spine, this tightening at the back of her neck. This feeling of an invasion of privacy. No wonder the papers were full of angry editorials that thundered on about the high-handedness of securitymen. (125).

This happens despite that these securitymen were comparatively polite. Rukmini understands why people across the region respond so badly to state surveillance at the current time. Particularly, for people living in a conflict-ridden zone, violence becomes a way of life and it is also common to note the loss of control over their own bodies. Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* writes that our bodies do not necessarily belong to ourselves. Since the body is mortal, it is also tangible, and thus exposed to the gaze, touch and violence inflicted by others - "at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well." (26). The body has also a public dimension and thus, constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, one's body is and is not one's own. Butler writes,

> Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the wilful action of another. (29).

Additionally, by engaging in violence, one human is always acting on another, putting the other at risk and thus, one lives with this vulnerability as a part of life. In Assam of the late twentieth century, people's bodies were unsafe and exposed to the touch of violence, since it became an intrinsic part of their lives. Women's bodies are also exposed to violence in the form of assaults, rapes etc which is one of the central issues in fiction of this era. In this novel, women are indirect receptors of violence and trauma. This becomes apparent in the series of mishaps and killings that take place in the novel, in Rukmini's immediate vicinity. Nandini Deuri is the wife of Hrishikesh Deuri, the SP of Parbatpuri. Her association with Rukmini is not extremely close, but not very distant either. In fact, most of their conversations take place in the Parbatpuri Ladies' Club where Nandini is an important member and quite active in social work too. After one such meeting, when Nandini returns home, she comes to know of the gruesome murder of Hrishikesh Deuri. Siddharth is also present that day unlike other days, and he is also extremely shocked. Once again, it is a murder that seems to have been committed by extremist groups. This incident explicates the impact of violence on human bodies.

As Rukmini makes her way to visit Nandini after the incident, she looks at the cremation ground just below the hill which seems to mock her. Deuri's death is surreal, almost impossible to grasp because only that afternoon Nandini had told her about a dinner at a Chinese restaurant that Deuri's family would be attending after a long time. It is incomprehensible how something so joyful as a family dinner could turn into something so horrific and spine-chilling. The trauma undergone as a result of this only reminds one of the proximity to death - the fact that they were alive almost seems to be impossible: "The burning field was indeed waiting with patient good-humour to welcome them all into its yawning jaws. Deuri's time had come. Theirs would too. If not by violence, then by a natural process" (169). Death and the trauma surrounding it seem to bring everyone on an equal level - it does not spare even the most powerful people in Parbatpuri. Rukmini is reminded of the death of

an elderly Gandhian social worker earlier, who had been shot down due to his vocal protest against MOFEH and its methods. On that occasion, the onlookers had been so scared to say anything against the shooters that everyone fled the scene and no one had even thought of informing his wife or children. The killers were confident of Parbatpuri's confounded silence, so they had not even bothered to hide their faces while committing the murder. Nandini and her three children can be seen sitting around a table that still had remnants of the food that they had ordered. Nandini is the only female member in the crowd of people guarding Deuri's body and she is relieved and glad to see Rukmini. Nandini is no longer as efficient as before, she is shell-shocked. As an effect of the trauma, Nandini's hands fidget and tremble. When Rukmini holds Nandini's hands, she breaks down immediately. Her children also begin to cry once they see their mother. Nandini tries to hold on to herself but "the words came out in tumbling gasps. She had to talk, so that she could begin to understand, so that she could try to make sense of the senseless thing that had happened right there, in front of her" (172). Women's trauma due to violence is reflected in Nandini's actions, and it becomes representative of many other women's trauma throughout Parbatpuri. Unwittingly, Rukmini also becomes part of the process and her life is no longer cloistered to the boundaries of her bungalow atop the hill and cremation ground.

Since Rukmini and Siddharth do not have a child, everyone naturally seems to consider that it is Rukmini's prerogative and responsibility to bear a child and her mother-in-law Renu Bezboruah even gives her an amulet to aid her in child-bearing. However, no one knows that Siddharth and Rukmini do not share a conjugal relationship and both of them indulge in affairs outside of wedlock. Rukmini eventually does become pregnant with Manoj Mahanta's child rather than Siddharth's. Surprisingly however, Rukmini does not know anything about her pregnancy till she goes to a hospital after being caught in an unrest involving student agitators and the district administration. She collapses on the ground, later develops a concussion on her head. When she wakes up, she hallucinates about being back in a missionary school. Rukmini's trauma here is not only physical but also psychical. It is also here that she comes to know of her pregnancy. But she refuses to let anyone know of it just then, primarily because she is apprehensive of how Siddharth would react to the news. Since Manoj travels most of the time, she cannot share the news with him either. However, she does feel the need for feminine protection in this state. This also explains Rukmini's predicament as a woman, as she feels the need to be surrounded by women several times in the novel - while she handles the crisis inside and outside home.

The fact that Rukmini's life in Parbatpuri is guarded and sheltered only on the outside, while it is actually under surveillance at all times is understood from the mysterious circumstances in which she comes to know that her driver, Anil is a member of the MOFEH. One afternoon after she has discovered the shocking affair between Siddharth and her own colleague Priyam, Rukmini takes a turn about the town, goes down the hills to take shelter in a park, away from her bungalow. Anil discovers her there, brings her back home and reveals to her that he was, in fact, assigned as a bodyguard to Rukmini by MOFEH. This organisation believed that it was their prime duty to protect the DC's wife from other groups of terrorists or pseudo-terrorists. In this case, the surveillance happens from the other side - ironically, the most feared people turn into protectors and infiltrate into the highest ranks of civilians in the town. Panopticon in Parbatpuri works both ways. Anil

belongs to an indigenous tribe that believes that any woman about to become a mother is endowed with the Spirit and thus, she must know all truths. Of course, Anil goes underground after this incident, but it is heartening to see a camaraderie develop between Rukmini and Anil in such a terrifying ambience. On the other hand, power and security almost become farcical in terror-ridden Parbatpuri. When Rukmini tells Siddharth about Anil's identity, he is desperate, for he realises the very thin line between 'Us' and 'Them'. He comments on the shallowness of security, where a MOFEH member is able to creep in and out with ease, "If my own home is so easily accessed, what hope is there of my ever being able to catch up with them?" (323). It is therefore, chilling to think of the possibility of Anil being privy to private conversations within the car until a few weeks back, and the constant exposure to danger that they had been living through.

To Rukmini's immense surprise, the relationship between her and Siddharth improves slightly after the revelation of his affair. He also comes to know that Rukmini is carrying Manoj Mahanta's child. All the distance between the two seems to disappear and both of them begin to understand why they had eventually grown apart. Shockingly, Rukmini is told that Pronob Bishoya had been kidnapped once again and along with him Manoj Mahanta was taken hostage at gunpoint.

In the slowly developing friendship between Rukmini and Siddharth, both of them come closer than they were ever before. The novel in this context, also gives the readers an insight into the experience of a bureaucrat who sees the other end of the crisis. Siddharth confesses that it has been a tough ride for him too and precisely because of such experiences, he has come to respect life all the more. He says to Rukmini: "Long-drawn-out deaths, agonising ends, as life seeps out, drop after painful drop, through bullet holes in the body" (315). It makes Siddharth aware of the precarity of their own situation. Thus, the trauma of people in Parbatpuri and by extension, in the entirety of Assam during this period is inherently connected with the violence of the gun. This trauma is also all-pervasive.

While Rukmini spends each day trying to enquire about the well-being and whereabouts of Manoj Mahanta, Siddharth assists her in this matter too. However, all the while, Rukmini's trauma increases with each passing day. She doubts whether the captive had been able to identify with the captors' ideology, which prevents him from communicating with her. She also wonders what would happen to him if he is unable to pay the ransom. The rich who were targeted for the money would be able to pay it off, but for the others it would not be possible. Thus, victimhood in this case spreads across social strata and is not restricted to class boundaries.

Cathy Caruth mentions the effects of PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) on human minds as the overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event, which leads to an uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other disturbing phenomena (58). Rukmini is often found hallucinating and having nightmares about Manoj and with the baby being in her womb, she also is scared of dire consequences quite often. It almost feels like she is in hospital again with a bump on her head. The tension associated with imminent motherhood along with being alone make it more complicated for her. She craves for a woman's presence during this time, just as Nandini Deuri had during her husband's murder - "to a greater or a lesser degree, all women were essentially alone

during the forty weeks that they nurtured life within them. They were alone in a way that was inevitable, in a way that men never were" (325).

The novel soon takes a grave turn. Rukmini receives a call late one evening which tells her that Siddharth had been caught in an exchange between MOFEH and the administration which reportedly has him in a disadvantageous position. At first of course, she is unable to comprehend the gravity of the matter but then she comes to know that he had in fact, been shot. It takes her quite some time to believe what had transpired since she thinks that she must be hallucinating once again. But then the sound of fast approaching sirens and men clad in khaki uniforms clarifies the matter to her. It makes her realise that the worst had really happened. The trauma of her husband's death is compounded by the presence of all these men as she thinks "If only there were women - one woman - someone who would hold her, allow her fears to engulf her. But there weren't any women here. Only gun-carrying, heavy-booted, khaki-clothed men." (335). She is reminded of the pervasiveness and immutability of Hrishikesh Deuri's death that night as she finds herself in a similar situation: "All she knew was that the monster had suddenly entered her very home" (357). She realises that she had been foolish to assume that it would spare her. To make matters worse, she then comes to know that Siddharth had gone to negotiate with MOFEH to free the captive, Manoj Mahanta, when a round of firing had killed both men together.

Rukmini's first reaction to all this is stunned silence - she is unable to react or even cry. It is very common for trauma victims to retreat into silence when they are confronted with trauma. It is only after Siddharth's body is brought back from the site that she realises that her cheeks are wet. She sheds tears not only for Siddharth but for Manoj as well. Trauma in Rukmini's case manifests into a feeling of loss for the unborn child in her womb, who would not know a father. She also cries at the irrevocable loss of those young people who leave home for a cause and yet, see nothing but its eventual failure.

Therefore for Rukmini as also for many other women in Parbatpuri, the violence associated with nationalism comes with its price. She thinks of Nandini Deuri and several other women including herself, "all coalescing into a single figure of tear-shrouded grief, as they looked down at the slain bodies of their husbands, their brothers, their sons, wrapped in blood-blotched sheets." (349). Trauma transformed into a reality for people in Assam during this time, and for women particularly, it assumed even vaster proportions.

III

In the final analysis thus, it may be concluded that people in Assam chose peace over ideology, primarily because of the violence that unfolded in the region. The sub-nationalistic demand of 'Swadhin Asom' was ultimately reduced to only securing the comrades and retaliating against the Centre with little consideration of the impact it had on common people. As a result, there was a gradual fizzling out of the movement. Although ULFA insisted that their change in policies from violence to relatively peaceful ones was made in consideration of people's wishes, yet, the loss of the ideological strength was perhaps the most important reason for this decline. For women, the trauma and the crisis of violence has begun to be documented through works of fiction. Thus, a recognition

of the problem is now underway - particularly the impact on women who indirectly were one of the most ill-affected. The violence has undoubtedly reduced considerably, and people in Assam now often consider it a bad dream. One only hopes that there is no repetition of this crisis and peace prevails in India's Northeast.

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Abominable Corporeality: A Discourse on Reptilians and Hybrids in "Rakka" and "Firebase”

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Abstract: My paper aspires for an extensive understanding of the non-human Sauropsids and sinister forms of hybrids in the independently made miniseries *Oats Studios* (2017) that anticipate the predicament of humankind. Manifestations of aberrant births, infested anatomies, corrupted flesh, and deviant incarnations permeate the narrative fabric of Sci-Fi Horror, launching controversial challenges against mainstream ideas of the normative and the universal. The traditional body is strained by the machinic and medical dominations alienating the organism from its natural biology. The body becomes a performative site of endless scrutiny, revision and transmutation. Consequently, monstrous creations proliferate disentangled from the fetters of the human, the established and the ordinary. The episodes titled "Rakka" and "Firebase" evoke an apocalyptic vision of an oppressed earth, infested with menacing spectres of other-worldly presences, a symbol of cosmic horror. In the post-alien invasion world of "Rakka", horror emerges from the corporeal physiognomy of the predatory crocodiles and the half human half machines who have upended the very core of creation. The combat soldiers encounter a primitive river god- a vengeful anthropomorphic dragon - appearing from earth's interior in the "Firebase" of the Vietnam War. Combining raw bestiality with atavistic fear, it offers a profound utterance on the terrors of the flesh. In both the episodes, contemporary allusions to growing militancy, neocolonialism and ecological degradation are obvious. Furthermore, the paper shall attempt to grasp how the concept of body horror in mass culture exhibits the biological anxieties and socio-cultural corruptions of the contemporary world through repugnant exaggerations.

Keywords: human, technology, body horror, hybrid, cyborg

Body horror

As a sub-genre category of cinematic horror, "Body Horror" has been traditionally associated with the depraved and the deranged. Undermining the moral and the ethical, it has provoked the audience with audio-visuals on bodily differences that are jarring to human aesthetics and sensibilities, evoking revulsion and fear. Through a heavy reliance on crude physicality, body horror invades the normal and the biological with unnatural forms of desecrations, flourishing from "acceptable" forms of torture and psycho-sexual aggression to unspeakable and unbearable perversions. Yet perceiving body transformations as merely catering to commercial pleasures and sensory thrills is a naïve oversimplification. Acute paranoia over the body and species survival has been one of the major hallmarks of the genre. Despite being relegated to the fringes by film critics

and sophisticated cinematic circles, corporal terror fascinates the audience, liberating their warped appetites and twisted desires otherwise contained and suppressed by the iron bars of social regimentation. Strong depictions of mutilation, disintegration, decomposition, deformation, infection and disease, cannibalism, excretion, transplants and the macabre annihilate the venerated notion of the unified coded body and is substituted by damaged ones as well as revolting hybrids. Furthermore, the degeneration of the flesh encapsulates human refuse and waste- anxieties over human identity, integrity, and corporal perfectibility illustrates the vulnerability of humankind as well as the social and spiritual bankruptcy in a dying world.

Aliens

"We were once mankind. We were humanity. And now, we're no more than pests, vermin. They came here to exterminate us."

"Rakka", Neill Blomkamp

That life exists beyond the perimeters of the familiar earth complicates human belief systems. As a symbol of increased isolation of mankind, the figure of the alien has repeatedly piqued human imagination and gripped our creative processes. The extraterrestrial scholarship offers an intriguingly powerful alternative history where non-human intelligences permeate and problematise human civilization. Viewed within the culture of difference, remoteness and even hostility, alien representation in popular culture interrogates the lived reality with a strategic confrontation with the non-human other, generating dread, fright and terror. Evolving out of the earlier disproportionate, aesthetically unappealing comic stereotypes, also sometimes benevolent, the twentieth century humanoids and hybrids have not only undergone a distinctive shift in terms of visual morphology but have also acquired exotic threatening dimensions as a profound comment on the human predicament. The alien is born out of "19th century race theory and politics" and has become exceptionally crude and invasive following World War II (Seed 28). Political and cultural tensions around the Great Wars, rise of US as a global superpower, and rivalry between USSR-USA have fed into the modern alien figure that is more animalistic, barbaric, and largely characterised by a lust for seizure. Subverting the popular notion of humanist exploration of the other planets and the unknown spaces, the modern alien arrives on the earth demanding conformity. Their multifold agendas- to conquer, displace and subjugate the humans.

The extensive presence of colossal reptiles in cultural and theological texts, as corruptors and healers, has initiated cross-species interaction. The Biblical Serpent, the Sumerian snake brotherhood, the serpent worship cult of Africa and native America, the lizard deities of ancient Greece and the Nagas in Asian mythology enrich the reptilian ancestry.[1] From scientific theories and planetary explorations to David Icke's sensational Reptilian Conspiracy Theory extending up to the Coronavirus as a reptilian ploy to erase weaker humans, from the occult and esotericism of the nineteenth century to the Venusian humanoid lizards of Lovecraft and Sterling's Pulp Sciences to pop cultural fantasies in SF films, TV series and video games to 'rumours' around sightings of alien

crafts and human abductions in the United States, the reptilian icon was revived in the twentieth century. In a historic moment of big revelation in July 2023, former US combat officials David Gruscher, Ryan Graves and David Fraver confirmed before the Congress that the US government has been conducting a multi-decade long hidden UFO program, arousing grave security concerns.

Inspired by the recent surfacing of the classified CIA files including war crimes and UFO technology, Neil Blomkamp's "Rakka"and "Firebase" form political allegories on the US -led democratic and humanitarian transgressions of the world. Additionally, by adopting the military narrative template, Blomkamp threads together dystopian planetary speculations where humanity is at the crossroads of an unprecedented crisis. Repulsive forms of corporeality explore anguish over the self and our existence in its entirety. The reptilian cryptids in the indie- Science Fiction project possess a diverse range of threats through their mysterious pervasiveness and omniscience; they are determined to take humans down to the level of extinction, erase human history and transform the blueprint of the familiar earth. Demarcated from the "primitive" humans, the new hybrids are superior presences, technologically and psychologically evolved but grotesque products of racial profiling, violence, trauma and alienation.

"Rakka"

Cast in the image of the Egyptian crocodile Sobek (Roberts 147), the aggressive militant deity, the 'Klums' in the post-alien invasion world of "Rakka " have invaded the futuristic Texas in 2020, which has been reduced to the ideal state of suppression. They enter the city through the lakes of Hell analogous to the history of seafaring and White "philanthropy" ("From George Washington to Lafayette, 15 August 1786") beginning with the launch of the mighty US armada in the 1790s to the strategic integration of the US Navy and the US Marine Corps battleships in the twenty first century. The despotic alien colony corresponds with contemporary US global schemes for geopolitical domination over the world's resources. The neoimperialist hunt for gas and oil, war atrocities, rampant racism, anti-immigration, and refugee policies permeate through Blomkamp's invasion tale. Presented as advanced cognitive beings, they have burned down the megapolis and colonised mankind in an imaginative refashioning of native American slavery and the controversial CIA Black Sites in the Middle East and Asia.

Divided into three chapters, "Rakka" opens amidst the cataclysmic decline of humanity. Their arrival is marked by an extremely hostile atmosphere caused by rise in global temperature, floods and horrific wildfires, unconducive to human survival. They have destroyed the forests, injected toxic methane into the air, built their own megastructures and ravaged the terrestrial and the aquatic ecosystems. Indicative of the widespread geological disruption in the Anthropocene, the narrator mentions, "It's already hard to breathe" ("*Rakka*" 01:54-01:56). The 'Klum' militia have blown up the great cities, crumbled the inhabitants, manufactured their own atmosphere and transformed the habitable earth suited to their ideal survival. Obliterating the magnificence of human history, they have covered all landmarks in "dying humanity" ("*Rakka*" 00:59-1:00), brilliantly demonstrated by the gory image of the Eiffel Tower wrapped in rotten human flesh and ravenous birds hovering in

the sky. Afflicted with multiple waves of genocide and brutal incarceration, the city has metamorphosed into a veritable necropolis. Reduced to the levels of "rats" and "insects" the survivors are flogged to servile obedience and their brains dissected for medical experiments, while a few others are disgraced by their anonymous hiding. Imprisoned within the grotesque breeding tubes, the human victims are diminished to their reproductive irrelevance. As champions of biotechnology "they're building breeding facilities for those that survive…humans becoming some kind of surrogate incubators for the alien young" ("*Rakka*" 01:08-01:18), resonating with revolutionary breakthroughs in lab-forged life systems and genetically modified embryos and babies. The 'Klums' are telekinetic simulators that can hack into the human brain and dumb it down while the "brain barriers'' created by the Resistance group to block intrusion and mind-paralysis are of inadequate supply. The political intrigues and deceptions of the lawmakers and the public representatives are indicated when the narrator remarks, "We're sold a different story by our politicians- 'Come with us. Do not be afraid! They want what's best for us. They have built a conservatory for us. Paradise!'" ("*Rakka*" 04:14-04:30).

In the following chapters, the survivors, as ghettoised human forces, feebly attempt to resist the calamity fighting off indiscriminate butchery, dwindling food resources, incompatible technology and depleting arsenal. The Resistance is compelled to give away some of its sick and dying people to be baited by Nosh, a "pyromaniac", "bomb-maker" and matchless inventor of ammunition from heaps of scavenged junk, implying that the morally ethical scales are consciously disbanded during moments of extreme desperation. The audience is introduced to a deformed male refugee, Amir, with a series of metallic devices, electric cables and chips protruding from his ruptured scalp and extending up to his shoulder. A victim of the Klum experimentation on the human brain, Amir is a human discard whose head has been partially ripped open, evoking one of the most repugnant images in the series, a case of biological horror. Yet he must commit to the rebel forces to frustrate a successful alien ascension and preserve the human race.

Brigid Cherry informs that "Body horror, splatter and gore films (including postmodern zombies)" comprises "Films that explore abjection and disgust of the human body, often involving mutation, disease, or aberrant and fetishist behaviour (for example cannibalism or sado-masochism) (6). She illustrates how physical horror, in a fringe storytelling mode, magnifies the socio-cultural apprehensions generating intended emotional and psychological disturbances in the viewers. As a genre, it appears to be "more flexible and adaptable in its encompassing of the cultural moment, giving scope for filmmakers to encode changing socio-cultural concerns with ease… issues such as social upheaval, anxieties about natural and manmade disasters, conflicts and wars, crime and violence can all contribute to the genre's continuation" (Cherry 11).

The expression of the abject in body horror invokes mankind's own unease about biological and cognitive disintegration associated with illness and ageing. The 'Klums' as ideal creators and the hostages as flawless hybrids embody the abject, disrupt established notions of identity and propriety, and complicates the accepted definitions of ability and disability. A fusion of the organic with the machines, 'Klums' are post-language, post-gender cybernetic dictators, vivifying modern techno-based intoxication, ecstasy and a transhumanist enhancement of the body. Visually, the 'Klums' resemble gigantic bipedal crocodiles freed from the constraints of biological procreation; sharp fangs
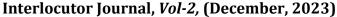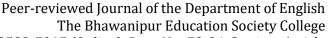
and forked tongues adorn their oral cavity. Fully sentient in nature, they form a robust legion of alpha species armed with heavy artillery. Nourished with an all-pervasive technology that ascribes to biogenetic modification and artificial intelligence, they have wrecked the fecund womb and cracked open the human brain. As expert geneticists and master vivisectors, the 'Klums' degrade human mind and body and alter their organic constitution through scientific accuracy. The rectification of the ordinary figures problematises ownership of one's own bodies, separating the real from the ideal, coercively melded with engineered antibodies. The failed human bodies are brought under medical scrutiny and preserved through correction as objects of regulation, control and painful experimentation.

Exposed to extraterrestrial inventiveness, the humans undergo explicit transformations to become the "perfect" body, an emblem of the Klums' glorious triumph. Toying notoriously with reproduction, they carry out terrifying acts of interbreeding and cloning, and continue to test on the human captives by forging mechanical wombs which could be an indication that the 'Klums' have lost their ability to naturally procreate. Obsessed with the idea of creation, they simulate the archaic monster-mother prototype devoted to the continuation of alien species; as super-creators they are also the annihilators of the human race. This idea is further heightened when they form new beings of unnatural unions, blessed and/or punished by total mind control (the politician) and extraordinary consciousness (Amir). Wary of the "irresistible force of technological determinism" N. Katherine Hayles anticipates how "coming conflicts will be decided not so much by overwhelming force as by 'neocortical warfare' waged through the techno-sciences of information" (277). Amir is a non-biological upgrade, a cyborg of violent creation who endures the agony of a hideous rebirth. As a cross-pollinated duplicate his body of flesh is replaced with endless cybernetic circuits. Subverting the Christian idea of resurrection and renewal, Amir is the specimen of gradual human disembodiment and paraplegia. Technologically augmented to the point of dehumanisation, he and the unnamed politician are robotic hybrids, crudely syncretic manifestations of machine-based intelligence's forceful intrusion into the natural body. Donna Haraway famously theorised the cyborg to propose a non-dualistic genderless society and observed, "In short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (289). Nonetheless, carefully embedded in her cyborg hypothesis are the shocks of techno-possibilities that have already begun to rearrange the world through "scary new networks" of simulation, global AI, machine learning, and inorganic enhancements, that she labels as the "Informatics of Domination" (303-304). All these reflect the dangerous controlling strategies of a corporatised super-economy and prediction of a dark future where humans will be enslaved by technology.

The 'Klums' can also be interpreted as pre-human predatory ancestors, aggressive towering divinities who have emerged from the deepest aquatic craters to reclaim earth, an echo of Len Kasten's speculations in his ambitious *Alien World Order: The Reptilian Plan to Divide and Conquer the Human Race*[2]. He points out, "As the first race to occupy the Earth, the Reptilians considered it their planet. There were no humans on Earth for hundreds of thousands of years" (n.p). Seemingly inspired from Plato's fictional naval empire of Atlantis, Bacon's "New Atlantis" utopia and Madame Blavatsky's pseudoscientific treatise on the sunken Lemuria and the heroic Atlanteans, Kansten notes how the reptilian colonisation of Lemuria on earth caused the human Atlans to bombard the

continent and push the beasts under the bottomless depths of the Pacific Ocean. The victorious humans obliterated the reptilian histories and replaced them with the glories of human accomplishments, though the vanquished have repeatedly bonded with humans through abductions, shape shifting and hybridization in an attempt to besiege the universe. "Rakka" begins exactly at this point of a sweeping Draconian assault and destruction of the human species. As a political symbol, the reptiles could be studied as disguised human elites who have dominated the history of civilization. In the October 31, 2013 issue of the American magazine 'The Atlantic', political columnist Philip Bump writes, "As 12 million Americans 'know' the United States government is run by lizard people (or, to be scientifically accurate, *reptilians)*. But they never said *which* members of the government are the reptilians" ("How to Spot the Reptilians Running the U.S. Government"). A casual web-search with the keywords "Reptilians and US government" yields a shocking number of "about 2,33,00,000 results". The cult of the Reptilian shape-shifters has become a cultural icon embodying government evils, growing gun violence, soaring privatisation, debates around socio-economic and environmental justice, state-funded ultranationalism, and techno-invasion of individual privacy and other forms of exploitation in America. SF authors like H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and Margaret Atwood among others have repeatedly associated the menacing future of a nightmarish world with the USA, headed towards a totalitarian regime with a systematic conservation of the privileged (Seed 79).

"Firebase"

The jungle thriller "Firebase" is a compelling parable of the 1969 Vietnam war crimes, a brutal ethno-political conflict that pervades American war-memory and literature. H. Bruce Franklin's pathbreaking essay titled 'The Vietnam War as American SF and Fantasy' remarks, "America's war in Indochina cannot be dissociated from American SF, which shaped and was reshaped by the nation's encounter with Vietnam… For American SF very explicitly defined the war, which unalterably redefined American SF" (341).As a fervent critic of the Vietnam War, Noam Chomsky has studied the American atrocities as a grave legal violation aimed at the carnage of the Communist forces and the dismantling of the North Vietnamese rural economy. For him the US involvement was "a murderous repression" that involved the "US forces in counterinsurgency, bombing, and "population control. By 1964 it was obvious that there was no political base for US intervention" (Chomsky 1-2). "Firebase" opens at the height of the war with the graphic exhibit of a mangled Viet-Cong rebel, executed and exposed to slow decomposition by the specialised capture-torture agency of the CIA's Phoenix Program. Within Firebase Tarheel the Vietnamese captives are stripped off and hot liquid is poured over their half-naked bodies. Surreptitiously operating to neutralise the North Vietnam forces, the covert missions of the belligerent MACV-SOG multi-force have led to outrageous massacre. The Vietnamese An Gian Province is a gritty metaphor for war-machinery conveying the psycho-somatic impact of war on the soldiers and the civilians. Major Brickerson confirms massive air-strikes being carried on to foil Vietnamese ambush: "We lit the jungle on fire and we burned everything" ("*Firebase*" 09:04-09:08). The raw footage of aerial shots of napalm explosions is a haunting reflection of war journalist Nick Ut's photograph of a "naked South Vietnamese child just sprayed by American napalm, running down a highway toward the camera, her arms open,

screaming in pain" (Butler92). The Vietnamese forests remain strewn with morphed human corpses from untellable attacks. Something inexplicable terrorises the American troops. The reinforcements arrive as "monsters in the shape of men. They wouldn't die, not by shooting them" ("*Firebase*" 08:36-08:44). The river god is a diabolical entity that torments its victims by paranormal levitation of the deceased and the military vehicles rendering humans and their technologies impotent. The "Omega Event" has claimed "15,212 FATALITIES. 2124 VEHICLES" ("*Firebase*" 02:15-02:18). As Tarheel mysteriously disappears, Sergeant Hines, in his quest to gun down the abominable beast, meets its sole survivor for his testimony, the only casualty who can still talk. In the field hospital bed, Corporal Bracken is a maimed and immobilised meat lump crushed by his gruesome experience with and memory of the fire-spitting alien; giant burns have wrecked his body. Amidst Hines's relentless pursuits, the mysterious brute rages on, eludes and disorients its enemy through teleportation and resurrection. The CIA, on the other hand, clandestinely eliminates all the dead bodies, covers up the statement and enlists Bracken as a person "missing in action". "Firebase Tarheel never existed" ("*Firebase*" 16:40-16:44).

Sensory and stylistic shockwaves permeate through the antibodies invoking strong sensations of body horror. "Firebase" elicits the aesthetics (or the lack thereof) of body mutation explored through hideous disfigurement, behavioural abomination and despicable enhancements. An element of scarification infiltrates through explicit close-ups opening up the limitations coded by the normal body- the slashed bodies, the nefarious undead, a mutilated Bracken, and an ungodly savage sully the narrative frame. The body graphically transmutes into a wasteful dumpyard as necrotic violence disregards the corporeal boundaries and eventually threatens selfhood and identity. Caught between the flesh and the spectral, the privileges of the coded human body are lost in the maze of bodiless corporeality.

Scary body modifications encoat the military base of Tarheel. The viewer is steeped into the horrors of war as s/he witnesses documentary clips of actual battlegrounds strewn with corpses. Visual gore emanates from outlandish cases of transmogrification- the putrid bodies of the fallen soldiers have been gutted out and ripped open at the jaws; their bodies are charred and the skin has metamorphosed into a hard crusty texture. The necromantic god inflicts an odd disease that transforms the corporeal. Anatomical disfigurement haunts the viewers as spider and cockroach-like features form underneath the skin of the corpses. Touched by an unnatural birth, the dead have risen as reanimated zombie figures, immune to bullets and grenades. The American Zombie is itself a solitary figure, a socio-political victim, and a walking personification of First World machinations, indigenous exploitation, accelerated consumerism and techno-capitalism. The god can assume control over human bodies and summon a Zombie apocalypse: "He is raising the dead up. Like ghosts. He's making their insides…like hard…like a cockroach. They look like spiders or something" ("*Firebase*" 15:40-16:00). Bracken's traumatic contact with the blazing deity leaves the young man distorted.: "And I just seen him there looking at me. The river god. He was looking right at me. And I never felt anything like that… Soldiers burning. Like Hell!" ("*Firebase*" 12:20-14:10). Here war and madness are entwined with one another. Bracken is a battered residue; his psychic and physical degradation is a commentary on the violent consequences of war. His skin has melted and scalded, peeled off at places and precariously hanging from the skull, his eye is ruined and pressed into the

socket exposing the bones underneath. Caught in a time warp and bombarded with multiple realities, he is unsure if his recollection is factual, a nightmare or a mere hallucination.

Within the ""Firebase"" of the Vietnam-Cambodia border, the river god is an unstoppable metahuman, a living dead filled with suppressed rage who plagues the Mekong: "Invisibility, telepathy. As a god walking the earth. His mind is set free" ("*Firebase*" 23:08-23:20). The alien god was an aggrieved innocent Vietnamese villager who lost his family to the American slaughter and is now rendered dehumanised by the war. As he holds his dead wife within his arms his skin begins to peel away, his mouth forms a gaping hole and is supernaturally transformed with powers of invincibility, super-cognition and telekinesis like the 'Klums'. Once a mortal man, he is now a natural and cosmic anomaly, a necromantic freak who rips apart his human victims indiscriminately. As violence breeds violence, the demigod represents the exploited, the invisible and the marginalised now turned on with unbelievable barbarity. An immortal anthropoid, it stands for prolonged human interference with nature. The decade-long bombings and spraying of Agent Orange and Agent Blue during the Vietnam War destroyed the forests and the farms, and polluted the air and water of Indochina, rendering the civilians disabled, homeless and hungry for several years. Adhering to the lost island hypothesis, the god is aqua-born like the 'Klums' and is revered by the North Vietnamese as a fierce guardian and custodian against the US filth. As an antithesis, the river god is both a preserver and destroyer.

The river god is a supernatural conglomerate of the half human half beasts such as Egyptian Hapi and Sobek gods of Nile, the Celtic Druids, Underwater Cthulhu, the Zambesi snake spirit, the mysterious Vietnamese god "Hà Bá, and the Cambodian Khmer Nagas. However, it mostly resembles the mythical hybrid cryptid, the Phaya Nagas of river Mekong, portrayed as the divine protectors of marine culture, the forests and the people who depend on nature for sustenance. The Naga takes the form of a fierce fire-breathing ginormous reptile with fangs and horns in the South-East Asian cultures[3]. Morphologically, the river god is closely associated with snake worshippers predominating in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. As a dark deity,it is death incarnate, an inevitable fiendish dragon-human hybrid who rampages through the fortified defence and punctures American invincibility. Its awakening is provoked by Western encroachments, a tangible example of bio-horror. The audience is an equal participant with Bracken in the affective torture that astonishes them, suspends their notions of reality and de-stabilizes their perception. The mutant tormentor advances with coordinated locomotion. It is an unearthly being, "a devil", who fills the onlooker with a deep sense of awe; it is wondrous and repulsive, arresting yet accursed, elusive, (in)organic and ephemeral all at once.

The initial appearance of the burning god is a startlingly riveting experience for the audience, both within the screen as well as for those outside of it. Major Brickerson asserts, "And there he was, just standing there…not running, no pain, invisible, except for the napalm just sticking to him. Something I'll never be able to explain. It just doesn't make sense" ("*Firebase*" 09:18-09:36). Torn apart by tremendous physical agony, the gothic spectre is perpetually on fire from the inflammable napalm dropped by the American warcrafts. Infused with supernatural animatronics the deity transmits its own pain onto the US fighters through brutal dismemberment and fearful incineration. Defiant of scientific taxonomy and everything that is natural and sacrosanct, it is perfectly capable of constant

reinvention and can clothe itself in a flesh armour. Tracing the horror-cinema heritage Robert Spadoni accurately points out that the unorthodox body is a site of othering and interrogation, associated with heightened unease and agitation "a countercurrent of sensations ran underneath the exclamations of realism. In particular, something seemed to be wrong with the status of the human figure on sound film. This figure could seem ghostly—or uncanny…" (6). The river deity can be interpreted as a cinematic uncanny[4] that violates the strictly compartmentalised categories of existence. As an anomaly it lives on as queer hybrid, an apparition stocked on firm bones, simultaneously corpsed and alive, its body defiled by countless trauma and militaristic wickedness.

The monster archetype in popular culture is a detriment that invades the human species. It embodies investigative challenges to the workings of the world systems and inspires awareness against audacious endeavours and human malevolence. In her chapter on 'Bio-Terror', Priscilla Wald observes how the aberrant body in new media becomes an agent of human annihilation: "Biohorror proliferated in the years following World War II, fuelled by the increasing circulation and popularity of both epidemiological detective stories… and horror fiction and films. Toward the end of the twentieth century, a noticeable shift in biohorror stories marked a heightening attention to terrorism, especially in the United States" (100). Biological warfare program and weaponsing of bio-agents had been officiated by US President Franklin Roosevelt, and secret research went on involving a new kind of horror. Anthropologist Jeanne Guillemin's medical oeuvre inspects the abuses of bioscience and makes astounding revelations about the political-patriotic motives of the global superpowers. Raising ethical questions surrounding dangerous US bioweapons programs and mass killing during the Vietnam War she informs:

> During these years, scores of biologists and physicians covertly used their skills for military purposes with virtually no oversight or high-level review, either within the military or other agencies or by Congress. The programme's experiments included nearly a decade of tularaemia research on volunteer Seventh Day Adventist servicemen, who were exposed to the disease via aerosols….
>
> > The widespread use of chemicals, riot-control agents and herbicides in Vietnam provoked international criticism and drew public attention to the less well-known US biological weapons programme. (S47-48)

The appalling deity, is also a byproduct of the war, created inadvertently from covert US operations, an analogy of their humiliating defeat against Communism and the US's endless military interventions through history. The American assault altered the weather with cloud-seeding technology, transformed the Vietnamese ecosystem and caused health hazards through body defects, diseases and death (Austin and Bruch 1-2). Viewed as a predatory demon of the impenetrable jungle, the phantasmic being is skinless and sinewy, an allusion to the horrors of state-sponsored medical organisations, the US military exploitation of DNA and scientific failings. Concerns have been raised over clinical experiments in US biotech laboratories in the twentieth century such as the inhuman 'Tuskegee Syphilis Study' on Negro male, Project MKUltra, NIH sponsored vaccine trials on unprotected infants, the chemical weapons experiments on American GIs, the gas chamber experiments and radiation tests on civilians, soldiers, and 'volunteers'.

The god can be read a "biocyborg" birthed out of the convergence of synthetic biology and genetic manipulation at the medical table (Pio-Lopez 600). Its second birth echoes our own bodily imperfections and vulnerability as fallible mortals that could be amended by giving in to the entices of technology. Plastic fillers, life enhancing drugs, Cryo-preservation, freezing of reproductory parts, skin, tissues and even the brain have suspended the natural process of ageing and mutability. Pio-Lopez lists Elizabeth Parrish, CEO of the anti-ageing biotech company BioViva, as a biocyborg and records, "The biocyborg is this new kind of cyborg emerging from this technoscience. By developing technologies at the genetic, molecular and/or cellular levels, synthetic biology is pushing the boundaries of the hybridity organic/technology and seem to abolish them" (605). As a biocyborg, the river god has developed new functions- it is deathless, immutable, autonomous and capable of self-replenishment. Biology and technology intersect to reprogram natural bodies, the river god being a simple rice farmer once, reminiscent of the biotech and the military merging in "Rakka". The modern world is a template of complicated coding "illustrated by molecular genetics, ecology, sociobiological evolutionary theory, and immunobiology…. Biotechnology, a writing technology, informs research broadly. In a sense, organisms have ceased to exist…." (Harraway 307). As a biocyborg or monstrous product of bio-experiment gone awry, the river god **e**xemplifies medical scientists' obsession with the human demonstrating increased bio-political domination and lust for machine-backed transcendence.

The political and the existential mingle in the urban rubble of "Rakka" and the rural Vietnam of "Firebase". The reptilians and the hybrids vivify the threats posing before mankind- global movement towards greater social stratification, political violence, totalitarian state mechanism, decay of democracy, unparalleled technological incursions and climate change- precarious risks that abound in the actual world and jeopardise our present and the future. The stringent compartments of life and death, animal and technology are blurred out as horrifying mutations and bizarre cross-breeds with grotesque prosthetics complicate the temporal body. The deviant and the infected proliferate breaching in the neat and bounded definitions of the normal and the anatomical. The fluid body is despicable and unredeemable, a decadent symbol of chaotic humanity and a cautionary tale on the dystopia we are heading to and already inhabiting.

Endnotes

1. Scott Alan Roberts's book on the history of serpents traces the reptilian origins of the human species, human-animal cross breeding and reptilian domination of the world.
2. Len Kasten offers a daunting account of the prehistoric Draco-reptiloids, their galactic history, defeat in human hands and future endeavours to re-dominate the earth as its original occupants.
3. The Naga is depicted as a human-snake demigod within the Hindu and the Buddhist cosmologies. It resides in the subterranean realm of the underworld.
4. The Freudian "uncanny" conceives the imminent "return" of the "repressed" old, through the ghostly and the ghastly. It arouses primal fears following a disclosure, accompanied by an acute and vivid psychotic disturbance.

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Cultural Calculus of Netflix Phenomenon: Investigating Relational Matrix of Serialised Narratives, Algorithmic Operations, and Late Capitalism

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Abstract: The emergence and popularity of streaming media is leaving a deep enough impact on the terrain of popular culture and entertainment. A considerable body of scholarship is steadily coming together addressing questions of technology, aesthetics, social and psychological behaviour, and legalities involved, to name a few. In my proposed article, I will argue that the specificity of streaming media as a cultural phenomenon entails two significant points; firstly, a new mode of narrative distribution which has resulted in a consumption habit commonly known as binge watching, wherein entire seasons of serialised narratives are being released and often consumed at once, and secondly, an intricate and advanced system of recommendation which has been employed by the streaming platforms to present a user with an already curated choice of relevant titles to watch. Taking off from these two points, this article will attempt a theoretical explanation of the streaming media phenomenon by taking into account the narrative mode and format, the centrality of an algorithmic recommendation system, and how these connections open up to broader questions about possible shifts within late capitalism.

Keywords: Streaming media, binge watching, seriality, algorithm, capitalism

Netflix and Chill: Introducing the discursive terrain for a new era in entertainment

The debate about the rapidly changing landscape of media and entertainment seemingly remains unsettled in the foreseeable future, especially in terms of locating the exact moment of shift. A dominant argument points to the emergence of digital technology and software-generated media content as a radical departure. More technologically driven proponents tend to steer the argument specifically toward the advent of portable devices which has left an indelible mark on both cognitive and cultural consequences of media consumption. Then there are more discursive attempts, taking

into account different shifts taking place on different fronts such as economy, technology, culture, and politics, bringing them together into a comprehensive theoretical explanation.[1]

Despite the multiplicity of these arguments, which are already forming the core of a richly endowed scholarship on production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture in the advent of new media technologies, everyone involved seems to agree upon the undeniable fact that the first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed a remarkable shift in media and cultural practices. For the purpose of this article, I would like to draw attention to another moment which is not entirely unrelated to what has been briefly mentioned above.

In February 2013, streaming media giant Netflix released the entire first season of their first original production *House of Cards* on their platform, a total of thirteen episodes at once. This event may seem less decisive as a paradigm shift, but within the specificities of circulation and consumption of audio-visual content in the span of the last decade, the consequence has been remarkable. With this series, Netflix completed its final stage of transformation from being a video-on-demand service or a content delivery service, into a producer of original content. Thereby, not only did Netflix become a media giant akin to Hollywood studios or television networks, but also opened the floodgates for the era of streaming platforms and streaming media. One can argue that Netflix producing and releasing an entire season of an original series can be considered a watershed moment, defining the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture ever since.

In this article, I intend to focus on the technological and cultural shifts with the advent of streaming media platforms and examine the new narrative consumption habits growing out of it. I seek to pursue these ideas in terms of rethinking certain existing questions about narrative modes and temporality. Furthermore, the article will argue that algorithms as statistical and cultural processes play a central role within the overall experience of narrative consumption in streaming platforms. I intend to conclude by bringing together these diverse strands, and argue for a correlation between such readings, and the possible mutations taking place within capitalism as a socio-economic matrix and cultural determinant.

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[1] *Internet Television* (2004) edited by Eli Noam, Jo Groebel and Darcy Gerbarg focuses on a host of issues concerning the arrival of the internet and its ramifications in the context of entertainment media. *Digital Media Revisited: Theoretical and Conceptual Innovations in Digital Domains* (2004) edited by Gunnar Liestol, Andrew Morrison and Terje Rasmussen, and *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2006) edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan are collections of essays which address the emergence and ramifications of digital media content and computer-generated images, especially in the domains of entertainment and gaming, from a multidisciplinary perspective. *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (2009) by Chuck Tyron casts a penetrating gaze into the question of new technologies and devices, exploring the questions of participatory culture, interactive and transmedia storytelling, and possible new distribution and consumption practices. For a more conceptual and discursive approach, the best entry point is perhaps Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001) wherein he provides a systematic, historical, and philosophical explanation of the entire phenomenon. For a more specific approach towards 21st century media culture which accounts for software innovations, technological changes, advent of mobile devices, and broader socio-economic shifts, please look up *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2008) by Henry Jenkins.

Netflix has emerged as the forerunner in this new media-entertainment ecology, and consequently much of the early scholarship is also devoted to it. [1] Thus, the majority of my observations, references, and arguments also revolve around this particular platform. Besides, the other streaming platforms are all following the formal, organisational, and aesthetic principles similar to that of Netflix. Hence, the observations and arguments presented here can be extended beyond Netflix without the possibility of any misconception or methodological pitfall.

Binge watching: New consumption model, reorganised time, and rethinking seriality

Director David Fincher was quoted as saying, "The world of 7:30 on Tuesday nights, that's dead. A stake has been driven through its heart, its head has been cut off, and its mouth has been stuffed with garlic. The captive audience is gone" (Abele). Despite the hyperbolic purple prose, Fincher's claim seems to be resolute as it suggests a clear break from all the previous practices of distributing and consuming serialised narratives. Such ideas and opinions are abundant in many of the works on streaming media mentioned earlier. There seems to be a consensus about streaming media completely transforming entertainment in the 21st century.

However, it needs to be pointed out that the idea of a clear break or complete transformation is a rather myopic way of evaluating such changes. Particularly talking about the so-called new aesthetics of the contemporary series format, the notion of 'Quality TV' serves as a direct antecedent as it played a determining role in shaping the taste and culture of consuming televised fiction, initially in the USA and then in other parts of the world. Owing to certain changes in broadcasting policies which liberated the networks from their dependence on sponsors and advertisers, they had greater creative freedom and flexibility to produce and distribute serialised fiction, a tendency which was first witnessed on HBO.[2] Therefore, claims of so-called complete transformation in the hands of Netflix and other streaming platforms need to be appropriately contextualised to isolate the definite points of interventions.

One of the definitive shifts that seems to have taken place is the dominant practice of releasing entire seasons of multiple episodes all at once which has effectively resulted in a new form of consumption habit, referred to as binge watching. Unlike the traditional practice where individual episodes are broadcasted on a weekly basis for as long as the season continues to run, the streaming platforms release entire seasons at once in most of the cases. Therefore, the entire narrative is immediately made

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[1] For further reading on the advent of Netflix and its impact, one can look at anthologies like *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century* (Eds. Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey) and *The Age of Netflix: Critical Essays on Streaming Media, Digital Delivery and Instant Access* (Eds. Cory Barker and Myc Wiatrowski). These works provide a comprehensive account of the early scholarship on the subject.

[2] HBO focused on producing content that catered to niche audiences and pursued artistic excellence. In the absence of advertising pressures, it invested more heavily in production values, attracting top talent, and taking creative risks. The result was a host of groundbreaking shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire,* and *Six Feet Under* among others bearing the hallmark of high production values, complexity of narratives, and high artistic merit. To read further on HBO and the era of Quality TV, one can read *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television* Era (Eds. Marc Leverette, Brian. L. Ott and Cara Louise Buckley)

available for uninterrupted viewing, resulting in a more rich, complex, and immersive experience. This particular practice of narrative consumption merits serious deliberation and questions.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of binge watching as a cultural practice is the fact that it allows a viewer to organise one's own schedule, resulting in unique individual temporalities as opposed to the traditional practice of viewing which had to be in accordance with the network schedule and fixed temporal coordinates. Contrary to the social ritual of viewing television where networks follow a common nationwide timetable, streaming platforms offer a personalised schedule for every individual. Coinciding with the practice of streaming directly on portable, individual devices, it has engendered a highly atomized experience of consuming audio-visual content.
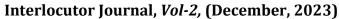
Besides the personalization of schedule and the atomization of viewing experience, the binge model of distribution and reception also poses interesting questions pertaining to narrative mode itself. It should be noted that serialised narrative or series has been the dominant narrative format in the era of streaming media. Theories of seriality as a mode of narrative organisation and as a cultural phenomenon are usually built around a correlation between industrial capitalism and consequent mechanisms of narrative delivery and reception.[1,2] Frank Kelleter, a noted scholar on seriality, provides a useful distinction between a series as opposed to a complete work or oeuvre. He observes, "...an important difference between such works and popular series is that the reception of serial forms, in its initial manifestation, does not distinctly "follow" the production and publication of a finished text. Rather, serial reception first happens in interaction with the ongoing story itself." (Kelleter 12).

Kelleter goes on to describe this quality of seriality as evolving narratives where production and consumption of narratives are closely entangled. In this entanglement, the readers/viewers essentially function as agents who drive the narrative forward in an invisible system of feedback loop. In other words, a serialised narrative can monitor its own impact and therefore mutate accordingly (13). This characteristic of seriality yields an interesting methodological advantage to extend this idea into the broader domain of popular culture itself in a movement from specific to universal.

However, in the binge model, reception inevitably tends to *follow* narrative production, which problematizes the entire idea of seriality as evolving narratives. Despite being structurally episodic, a Netflix (or any other streaming platform) series fundamentally delivers the experience of watching an 8–12 hours long film, thereby functioning like a complete work or oeuvre. It effectively reinstates the temporal gap between production and consumption of serialised narrative, breaking away from the simultaneity of the weekly episode paradigm. This raises significant questions about the relational network encompassing narrative circulation and consumption, narrative modes, and operations of

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[1] For a basic idea of the scholarship which exists on seriality and serialized narrative, one can go through the works of Shane Danson. All his works are either listed or curated on https://shanedenson.com/

[2] I am consciously using the word apparatus in this article, in the same vein as the Apparatus Theory which became a significant conceptual strand in Film Studies during the 1970s. Culled mainly from the writings of Jean-Louis Baudry, the idea of an apparatus not only includes the technology and infrastructure of narrative production and consumption, but also the ideological operations involved therein.

popular culture itself. On the one hand, we have the rhetoric of free choice and control as the viewer enjoys the freedom to organise a personal schedule. However, by creating a chasm between the time of production and time of reception, the agentive function of viewers is carefully removed. Culture seems to be produced by insulated machinery beyond popular participation, and finally distributed as a finished and finite commodity for personalised (as opposed to social/popular) consumption.

For further contemplation on this question, we need to investigate the veneer of personalization which is not simply a matter of temporality and scheduling of narrative consumption, but a defining quality of narrative producing apparatus[1] itself; or as they are known in this context, streaming platforms.

Recommended for you: Personalised service by impersonal algorithms

If the binge model of distribution and consumption can be considered as a defining facet of streaming platforms, the customised service of specifically curated entertainment for individual users is certainly the key procedure behind their operations. Every streaming platform seems to run on a system of user-oriented recommendations uniquely arranged for an individual. A user makes a choice from an already configured stack of recommendations based on that particular user's taste and preferences, rather than picking up something from a general assemblage of goods and commodities sold in the open market (such as a show on a television network, or a film in a theatre). Therefore, the idea of personalization is not only restricted to how one would organise the schedule of watching a show, but it seems to be the driving principle behind the business and the aesthetic model of the platform itself.

As Netflix emerged as a streaming platform, it adopted a newly designed statistical system for ratings and analysing data, to increase their business efficiency by specifically targeting the prospective customers. Put another way, the platform devised a way to retain the customer/viewer/user by gathering information about the user's likes, dislikes, preferences, reservations, etc. and create specifically designed entertainment experience based on that available data which would ensure that the user is locked in a permanent engagement with the platform. The system in question which enabled streaming platforms to accomplish this has now become more or less a part of popular discourse and online vernacular – the Netflix algorithm.

An algorithm can be essentially understood as an abstract system, developed from large quantities of actual data, capable of efficiently delivering reliable solutions to problems on a repeated basis. In other words, algorithms provide universal computational results to problems of particular and specific nature. Conceptually, the idea of algorithms can be traced back and theorised in terms of the shift from the deterministic world and the quest for universal knowledge of enlightenment, to the late 19th century epistemology marked by chance, chaos, and probability.[2] However in the context of

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[1] *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* by Ian Hacking is one of the definitive works on the subject. Besides tracing a genealogy of statistical theories and concepts, the book also provides important philosophical insights on the consequences of such thinking.

[2] Nirvana was an American rock band formed in the late 1980s which found mainstream success with their 1991 album *Nevermind*. With an aggressive musical style and intense and powerful lyrical themes dealing with the alienated mind

our present task, the idea of algorithm is predicated on tracking data about user behaviour to quantify complex cultural notions of choices, aversions, habits, etc. to assemble an abstract, digital user model, and then build a stream of media aimed at the user and present them as recommended selection of entertainment.

This idea of streaming platforms running on algorithmic calculus has manifold ramifications which need to be carefully unpacked one by one. Firstly, the rhetoric here is once again that of freedom and choice bringing back echoes of proclamations around the ideas of globalisation and a liberalised free market economy. Apparently, the viewer is free to choose his or her selection of entertainment; the platform is merely assisting by curating beforehand a customised list based on his or her preferences. In fact, the platform even allows the user a privileged glimpse of their backend mechanism and operational logic, as every recommendation is accompanied by explanatory phrases such as 'because you watched so and so' or 'X and five other friends liked this'. However, it should be noted that a platform employs the algorithm to precisely abstract away the actual complicated steps and details involved in the act of decision making, to present a streamlined aesthetic. In the process, the algorithms make a subtle move from assisting to effectively controlling the decision making. As Ed Finn observes, "The rhetoric of the recommendation system is so successful because it black boxes the task of judgement, asking us to trust the efficacy of personalization embedded in the algorithm." (Finn 96).

Finn's elaborate work about algorithmic culture provides a number of critical insights on the subject which brings us to the second ramification. For effective calculability and efficient response, algorithms are required to access data, and this relationship is directly proportional in both quantitative and qualitative senses. That is, the more the data or 'better' the data, the algorithm becomes more effective. The streaming platform as a cultural apparatus not only gives access to a large volume of data, but also significantly newer and more precise forms of data. As these platforms operate across a network of apps and devices, they are capable of tracking live behavioural patterns of users. It goes beyond a mere count of films or series watched and includes a host of digital footprints such as ratings, social media hashtags, timestamps on pauses, stops, or any operations, all of which are processed to approximate the user behaviour as accurately as possible. Clearly, the more time spent by the viewer-user on a platform, the more beneficial and profitable it is for the platform as it allows the algorithm to become more efficient. Seen in this light, neither the series format, nor the binge model of circulation and consumption, seems like arbitrary aesthetic choices. Rather they seem to be the most predictable outcome of an algorithmic engine looking to keep the user engaged for as long as possible. Pursuing this line of thought, one is then required to question the very cultural significance or function of narrative within this data matrix; is it any longer a cognitive, evolutionary, or affective tool to process information and make sense of the world, or is it an instrument which is programmed to access human information aimed at the improvement of an abstract apparatus? What

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and abject, Nirvana became the quintessential icon for the Gen-X angst and rebellion. The myth of Nirvana intensified following the suicide of their charismatic frontman Kurt Cobain at the age of 27. Their final album titled *Unplugged in New York*, featuring acoustic versions of their popular songs, was released after Cobain's death. It went on to become their highest selling album, winning their only Grammy Award.

is the collateral when instead of reader or viewer, the word 'user' gains more currency when discussing narrative experience or narrative operations? How are questions of control, agency, and subjectivity located within this process?

While all of this might begin to sound as if algorithm is an alien and cryptic element attempting to establish a tyrannical hold over culture, we need to clarify the relation between algorithm and culture, as we approach our final point stemming out of this discussion. Raymond Williams notes that culture has a mechanical character to it when it comes to the question of industrial modernity and modern societies (89). The industrial mode of production reproduces its structure in every social situation, characterising every social relation. Consequently, the modern way of life itself acquires a syntax of its own involving carefully determined steps to be routinely followed in accordance with one's position in the larger social hierarchy. Several scholars have pointed out how the schedules of factories, trains, public offices, etc. have directly determined the routine and rhythm of modern life. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno notably pointed towards this precise quality when they stated that "its element is repetition" in their distinguished work on culture industry (108). Looking at it this way, culture is an unforced routine, an invisible sequence of decisions and actions, carried out by a silent consenting majority to ensure a smooth and seamless functioning of modern society, without any ruptures or glitches. Or, if we recall the definition of algorithm as an abstract system which relies on large quantities of information to solve complex problems repeatedly, we can see that every aspect of culture be it religion, art, economy, or politics undoubtedly has an algorithmic character. As we understand and make sense of the world through a logical lens imposing a framework of causality, sequence, and rationale on reality, reality is thus constructed through algorithms of varying intents and purposes. Therefore, when we are talking of culture and algorithm, we must keep in mind that they have a complex, complementary relationship, and to an extent they constitute one another.

The relation between algorithm and culture is pushed to its extreme in Finn's work, resulting in claims which might be speculative and polemical but nonetheless thought-provoking in terms of exploring the possibilities. Finn provides a detailed textual reading of the Netflix series *House of Cards*, examining narrative tropes, plot points, character arcs, and mise-en-scene, arguing for an algorithmic authorship of a cultural text. In the process, he strips down the myth of personalization propagated by streaming platforms to reveal the underlying intentions. He makes a significantly valid point about the artifice of democracy and empowerment hiding deeper structures of profit generation, market expansion, and labour relations. As the platforms enthusiastically parade their algorithmic recommendation system as a cultural paradigm shift and a technological marvel which gives power back to the people (viewer/user), they also carefully conceal the human elements functioning unceasingly within this data matrix – the enormous volumes of written codes, the labour of detailed tagging process being carried out, or even the questions of data safety or privacy of the users (Finn 103-112). In order to have a comprehensive account of the overall cultural experience of streaming media, we need to address these questions in the broader context of operations and possible mutations within capitalism.

Subscribe to a new plan: Fragmented subjects, horizontality, and advance signals of data capitalism

It is clear from the discussion so far that streaming a series on a platform is quite different from watching a film or a television show. Perhaps the main factor of distinction is the fact that streaming platforms cannot be considered as an isolated narrative apparatus; the narrative is delivered and consumed through an interconnected network of technologies, applications, and devices which have multifaceted and mobile characteristics of communication and computability. This leads to two significant points; firstly, it clearly suggests that cultural production has been successfully integrated into commodity production. Secondly, it hints toward a fragmentation of the narrative experience.

Narrative consumption on a streaming platform is seldom a unified experience. Platforms supplement the main narrative text with behind-the-scenes features, interview clips with artistes, and teasers and trailers to boost the experience aimed at positing the ideal viewer/fan/consumer subject. Often the popular scenes or moments are circulated across the social media terrain in the form of Facebook videos, Instagram reels, or YouTube shorts which are navigated through carefully constructed hashtags. Then there are videos, both official and fan-made, which engage with the text in detail either by commenting on cliffhangers or pointing out easter eggs. Hence, it is not just the eight or ten hours spent on watching a series, but the overall engagement across the horizon of such multiple para texts which contribute to the meaning making process. There is a horizontal quality witnessed in this experience as opposed to the vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition of either films produced by studios or shows produced by networks.

The fragmentation of narrative experience brings to mind Fredric Jameson's thesis on postmodernism wherein he lays out an elaborate framework involving global expansion and flow of capital, dislocating the process of production from its physical parameters into a more fragmentary and ephemeral system. According to Jameson, late capitalist culture is marked by a fragmentation of social experience, spelling out decisive rifts among social hierarchies leading to a sense of perceptual and historical sense of disorientation, amid a frenzy of commodity culture.

Echoes of such ideas are also encountered in the works of Gilles Deleuze as he examines the shift from disciplinary societies to what he calls societies of control. He emphasises how traditional disciplinary societies, characterised by institutions such as prisons, factories, and schools, have given way to new forms of social control. In the former, individuals were subjected to rigid structures, hierarchies, and physical confinement whereas in the latter, power operates through more flexible and diffused mechanisms that are based on continuous surveillance and modulation of behaviour. The question of flexibility is further underlined as Deleuze highlights the deterritorialising effects of control societies. In disciplinary societies, individuals were assigned specific roles and confined to fixed spaces. However, control societies blur boundaries and encourage constant mobility, connectivity, and flexibility as individuals become detached from fixed identities and spatial constraints, creating a sense of fluidity and perpetual movement.

The streaming platforms are distinctly characterised by their horizontality as they pride themselves on the lateral diversification of their content in terms of period, genre, style, etc. resulting in an eclectic

combination devoid of any historical sense of unity. The arrangement of cultural texts (films or series) encountered on a platform does not necessarily seem to follow any historical or aesthetic logic, but instead often two dissimilar texts can find adjacent positions as long as they fulfil some abstract criteria of algorithmic profiling. For the user who regularly engages with this apparatus, it certainly raises interesting questions about the possibilities of what Jameson describes as conditions of historical disorientation, or as a schizophrenic subject. Streaming platform's reliance on data lead to incessant, temporary, and often absurd assemblage of virtual selves who are addressed in absolute specificities of the contexts. Perhaps, because of watching a film like *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo Brothers, 2019) multiple times, the same person can be a prospective customer of graphic novels because of apparent interest in Marvel Comics, or can be recommended to watch a season of popular sitcom *Friends* (NBC, 1994 - 2004) starring Paul Rudd who also appears as Ant Man in the Avengers film, or can even start receiving posts and messages on social media from particular political parties due to the apparent interest shown in the necessity of militarisation and weaponisation!

Understandably any notion of a fixed identity of an individual subject begins to sound absurd and counter intuitive under such circumstances. Every time we 'use' an algorithm, each time we satisfactorily make use of the solution provided by it, the algorithm includes that information as usable data to improve its efficiency. Therefore, as we are using algorithms for our convenience, the algorithm is also using our data (this is a rhetoric, and by no means a suggestion that an algorithm is a sentient being *a la* AI) for its own purposes. Consequently, the recommendations, suggestions, prompts made by the algorithm keep on getting more and more accurate, and every time we accept any of those, we as users are constructed as a subject. For that instant in time, for the duration of the search result or a click on a recommendation, the algorithm leads and we as users comply; the user is indeed a subject position which is fluid, virtual, and ephemeral.

Furthermore, streaming platforms are clearly a dislocated and deterritorialised system of cultural production as they are also designed as elaborate and sophisticated tools of surveillance operating on mobile and smart devices. With streaming platforms, one is simultaneously liberated from the spatial moorings of the equipment machinery, or the geographical/temporal boundaries of a region/nation. In the apparent ubiquity of this cultural machine, it is the fluid movement of data/information in the form of pulses of light that has gained a centrality in this entire experience.

Ian Hacking has drawn attention to the correlation between systematic gathering of information and construction of subjectivity, tracing it back to the end of the Napoleonic era. The newfound technology of printing as well as novel ideas of bureaucracy enabled and facilitated a torrential output of numbers resulting in vigorous attempts to count, classify, and tabulate the population, wealth, and resources to ensure a smooth running of administration. As information gathering becomes a significant bureaucratic initiative, Hacking observes that "Categories had to be invented into which people could conveniently fall in order to be counted. The systematic collection of data about people has affected not only the ways in which we conceive of a society, but also the ways in which we describe our neighbour" (3). Possible subject positions were formed because of data collection, analysis, and optimization which were pure abstractions insofar that no flesh and blood individual actually fit the category. In other words, these demographic categories precede and anticipate the actual occupant.

This idea of anticipation seems to be wired into the DNA of algorithms. As it provides a solution to the immediate problem at hand, it also uses the information of the search or query to better anticipate our future requirements with relevance and accuracy. When it comes to a streaming platform, the algorithms aim to tailor as much of the content as possible into a user's recommendation list. Doing so involves cross referencing and optimising a huge volume of data regarding the user behaviour. Consequently, the resulting categorizations are far from what we understand as generic, periodic, or stylistic classification of texts such as romance, gothic, western, musical, sci-fi, Victorian, modern, etc. Rather, the algorithm creates categories out of a user's history which might sound like 'monster film in a dystopian setting with a female lead' or 'mind bending steampunk involving time travel'. That is, in the process of gathering, tabulating, and analysing the user information, algorithms are creating 'genres' without texts, and thus without subjects. It is a preemptive attempt to structure and mould our desire.

Such a practice of anticipation of possible actions, decision, and desire beforehand and providing an immediate plan to mitigate them is considered by Mark Fisher as a cultural condition which he describes as capitalist realism. According to Fisher, it is a politically and culturally sterile condition as capitalism has established itself not only as dominant or popular, but as the only possible socioeconomic system or alternative to anything else. While the trajectory of capitalism has always involved attempts to incorporate anything with resistant or subversive possibilities, capitalist realism is marked by a practice of successful anticipation, or which he describes as "the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture" (Fisher 9). Anything that might reside beyond the reach of giant corporate machinery, such as debates over alternative or independent spaces of culture, are being conveniently settled, all within the mainstream, with their political sting taken out and being reduced merely into a style. Hence, the angsty rebellion of Nirvana[1] in the wake of aggressive liberalisation of global markets, now seems to be securely anticipated as the space was provided on MTV, sponsored by sports goods giant FILA, later distributed as an album by Universal Music Group. By successfully preempting our desire, capitalism succeeds in performing anti-capitalism on our behalf.

Therefore, when the algorithm is curating a pre-configured set of entertainment for us in the form of recommendations, it is doing more than merely helping us with our viewing choice. Rather it is presenting to us an arrangement which is already chosen for us and thereby shaping us as ideal

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[1] *Internet Television* (2004) edited by Eli Noam, Jo Groebel and Darcy Gerbarg focuses on a host of issues concerning the arrival of the internet and its ramifications in the context of entertainment media. *Digital Media Revisited: Theoretical and Conceptual Innovations in Digital Domains* (2004) edited by Gunnar Liestol, Andrew Morrison and Terje Rasmussen, and *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2006) edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan are collections of essays which address the emergence and ramifications of digital media content and computer-generated images, especially in the domains of entertainment and gaming, from a multidisciplinary perspective. *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (2009) by Chuck Tyron casts a penetrating gaze into the question of new technologies and devices, exploring the questions of participatory culture, interactive and transmedia storytelling, and possible new distribution and consumption practices. For a more conceptual and discursive approach, the best entry point is perhaps Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001) wherein he provides a systematic, historical, and philosophical explanation of the entire phenomenon. For a more specific approach towards 21st century media culture which accounts for software innovations, technological changes, advent of mobile devices, and broader socio-economic shifts, please look up *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2008) by Henry Jenkins.

consumers. Thus, going back to our earlier question, subjectivity is bound to be split, fragmented, and temporary as they are being constantly assembled and dismantled on an ad-hoc basis of culture/commodity production.

It becomes evident that the cultural experience/practice of streaming media with the technological and cultural shifts in distribution, consumption habits, their lateral arrangement driven by algorithmic system of recommendation, and construction of fragmented subjectivities, is clearly suggestive of mutations within capitalism. We again turn back to Deleuze as he already foresaw that capitalism "no longer buys raw materials and no longer sells the finished products: it buys the finished products or assembled parts. What it wants to sell is services and what it wants to buy is stocks." (6). Although published more than three decades ago, there is a definite indication here about diffusion of the concrete nature of capital into something incorporeal and intangible, something that curiously resonates with observations by Marx and Engels about the bourgeois epoch wherein social relations gradually undergo remarkable transformations with ideas becoming ossified, sacred being profaned, and "all that is solid melts into the air" (12).

Not to suggest any pre-given telos, but capitalism's basic philosophy of market expansion seems to entail a steady decentralisation, fragmentation, and dissipation of capital and the production process; landed property changed into cash, and then further into equities, stocks, and digital currency. Thus, the question we need to raise at this juncture is whether we are in a position to identify and confirm a decisive shift within the trajectory of capitalism. More significantly, can we recognize data as the fundamental organising principle of contemporary capitalism? Have we already emerged into what can be called data capitalism?

Data capitalism refers to a system where data functions as a valuable resource and a key driver of economic growth and profit making; a mode of production in which the generation, collection, analysis, and monetization of data play a central role. One of earliest accounts can be found in the work of Sarah Myers West where she defines data capitalism as "a system in which the commoditization of our data enables a redistribution of power in the information age" (23). West clarifies the newer paradigm by highlighting the change witnessed from the earlier e-commerce of online commodity sales to the selling of social-behaviour profiles constructed from user data.

The two ideas which tend to form the very foundation of data capitalism are platform and of course, algorithm. A platform in the context of today's digital economy refers to a digital infrastructure that enables two or more individuals or groups to interact, thereby positioning themselves as intermediaries among service providers and users. As a corporate entity, it basically runs a business without owning any tangible assets. One can think of several examples such as Amazon, Uber, Swiggy, Urban Company, etc. who, owing to their positioning, gain a privileged access to a vast amount of data which is analysed and optimised, and in the process accumulates value and performs the function of a commodity.

We are now living through a rapidly changing economic and socio-cultural climate which is certainly exciting in terms of the horizon of possibilities, but at the same time it is also too early to commit to any idea with a degree of certainty. Nonetheless, it is evident that the advent and proliferation of

streaming media have spelled a major change in production, distribution, and reception of audio-visual content. On one hand, it has triggered a specificity question – how truly and exactly is streaming media different, or what are the precise changes caused by the entire phenomenon? In this article, I have attempted to engage with this question by isolating certain tendencies such as binge watching or the binge model of distribution, and the practice of distributing personalised entertainment. discussing them in their historical and cultural contexts. On the other hand, and perhaps more interestingly, it is possible to consider this apparent shift as a symptom of a larger change. The prolonged and engaged narrative consumption, the domination of algorithmic culture, and the discreet expansion of the framework of platform with the centrality of data, allow us to reorient ourselves and rethink the trajectory and stages of cultural/commodity production. With each passing day, the space of technological possibility is getting significantly transformed affecting social and political configurations. We need to keep an eye out for all such changes. But at the same time, we must keep in mind that as we are looking at the screen, the screen is also looking back at us.

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Postmodern Features of Contemporary Culture: Representation and Sporting Celebrity

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Abstract: The following paper examines the phenomenon of sporting celebrity by studying the media representation of the English footballer David Beckham at the turn of the century. It analyses the dynamic process of stardom and argues that such major stars draw in major media vortexes. The paper goes on to show that in the cultural context of the time - a time preoccupied with style, fashion, and decor, such celebrities ultimately represent our fantasies of lifestyle, luxury, consumption, and display. The paper also argues that Beckham belongs to a decidedly postmodern celebrity culture where his representations in the media are markedly self-referential, outlandishly ostentatious, and obviously not 'real'.

Keywords: celebrity, consumption, media, postmodern, representation.

"We've got matching dogs (Rottweiler), matching watches (gold Rolexes), similar wardrobes, matching Jags. I like all that. I mean, I know it's tacky, but it makes me laugh."

Victoria Adams aka Posh Spice married to David Beckham.

(*Gentleman*).

Introduction

At the start of the twenty-first century (similar to the preceding centuries) the image of a sports star was a site where discourses of youth, morality, and masculinities would converge and were inextricably intertwined. What was distinct about the media representation of sports stars at the turn of the century was the intensity of media coverage of sports and the concomitant sporting star system's centrality in the media sport industry. Another interesting development was the way in which the image of the sports star became the point of convergence of social anxieties over morality and masculinities. Therefore, a study of media representations of sports stars is essentially a way to examine the processes of social contestation regarding ideas of morality and concepts of how men should behave. Such explorations reveal how popular culture constitutes a key interface between everyday commonsense and more organised political discourse.

As far as discourses of morality and masculinities are concerned, the image of the sports star provided a site for expressing the lack or crisis of both the ideas. The theme of a generalised decline manifesting itself in a supposed crisis in morality has been front and centre in discussions about sports since the 1990s. While the Right explains this by pointing towards the disintegration of the family, single-parent families, surging crime rates, and a failing education system, the Left looked for explanations in the failure of the welfare state.

One of the reasons posited as a reason for this crisis in morality was the issue of relativism; which had not only undermined cultural values but the whole notion of cultural value. A once stable system of cultural hierarchy was argued to have been disrupted. As Gary Whannel argues "The rise of modern popular culture, the assault on traditional aesthetic judgements, the development of modes of theorising that question the high culture–popular culture distinction, the supposed process of 'dumbing-down', and the 'postmodern turn' have all combined to dislodge the dominance of a secure set of cultural judgements. The concept of cultural value itself is lost. In such a relativised world, it is no surprise that traditional moral values no longer command respect. From this perspective, then, moral decline is closely linked to the rise of cultural relativism." (Whannel 5).

In the process of contributing to the growth of popularity of sport, the media have also produced a sporting star system, as a result of which sporting stars increasingly started finding themselves under public scrutiny. This was exacerbated with the sports organization's concern for their public image; an image expressed in moral terms. A recurrent theme in such stories is that because such stars are in the public eye and are a potential influence on the young, they are expected to have higher moral standards than other people in everyday life. Related to this moral issue is also that of masculinities. Images of sports stars have played a key role in the construction of masculine identities.

The following discussion is based on the proposition that "in a time when discourses regarding crises of masculinity and of morality have been prominent, forms of popular culture are revealing sites in which to examine the unstable attempts to deal with crisis. Sports stars, in particular, being significantly structured by notions of both masculinity and morality, provide a potentially productive field of study." (Whannel 8). The discussion explores representation of media images of sports stars in that they are also political, ideological, and about power relations. It will be informed by the theoretical work on decentred and multiple subjectivities, and the growing power of an increasingly consumption-centred society where the symbolic power of goods has both lost their material conditions of production and superseded their use value. It will deal with the restless vortex of celebrity and examine the emergence of celebrity at the core of popular culture. The intensity of focus on sports stars (individuals) has meant that their images have become a melting pot for discourses on morality and masculinities, of identity and consumption. The circuit of production-consumption-production in which productive consumption and consumptive production fuel each other is taken into account.

Sports Stars and the Postmodern

The question of the symbolic value of sports stars is a tricky one in a postmodern culture. Since the grand-narratives of modernity are argued to have lost their value, it leaves us with the

conundrum of figuring out the position of the ethics of fair play or the project of character development that framed nineteenth-century athleticism. Equally puzzling is the problem of the concept of role models if identities are irredeemably fractured and ambiguous. Now that consumption and commodification have triumphed, what about the transcendent *jouissance* of a sporting performance experienced before commodification? Gary Whannel's answer to this is that "our persistent desire for the authentic, the intense, the real, and even the original, even though we understand, in however an inchoate way, that culture cannot readily provide these things suggests, that while we inhabit a cultural world that has many postmodern elements, we have not witnessed the triumph of post-modernity or the eclipse of modernity." (Whannel 201). Indeed the world we inhabit is complex marked by uneven development where different modes of being coexist with uncomfortable tension. Sports fans, music lovers and other enthusiasts now seem to live out an intense and passionate experience related to the object of their passion and at the same time realize it to be commodified and transformed beyond their reach. Such a sports fan is, as it were, both the producer and the consumer of his own pleasure and is all the while still not in control- a unique paradox of consumptive production and productive consumption. But this culture of consumption is indeed significant for us. This is what King highlights as the foremost feature of postmodernism- as a shift in values from thrift to profligacy. He argues that the third stage of capitalism is:

> characterised by huge multi-national corporations, whose existence depends on the emergence and expansion of the consumer market. The emergence of this consumer market has necessitated in a shift from production to consumption, which in turn has required a complete overhauling of the value system. The values of thrift, discipline, and reason...have become unsuitable for this third stage of capitalism. For this economic system to survive, individuals must not repress their desires...but must satisfy those desires by indulgence in the consumer market. (King 122-23).

The curious case of the Beckhams

An indulgence in the consumer market, as opposed to thrift (dominant in representations of someone like Stanley Matthews) is what typifies the representations of David Beckham. His image which became a dominant representation of British sports media at the turn of the century always remained a kind of strangely elusive and anchorless image – a floating signifier with the potential of becoming attached to a range of discursive elements with equal plausibility. His highly publicised romance with Victoria Adams (another media star) combined with his good looks, football talent, and his playing for Manchester United (a club that drew massive support and loathing because they became a symbol of football being dominated by only the richest clubs) all made him the proverbial 'golden boy'.

His highly-publicized relationship with Victoria Adams (Posh Spice of the Spice Girls) resulted in the couple featuring in the centre stage of the celebrity space of the popular media – with Beckham featuring prominently in sports media consumed largely by men, and Victoria featuring in the tabloid coverage of pop music. The couple also featured in magazines like *OK,* predominantly read by women. The image of Beckham posed a challenge to the heterosexual conformity of the sporting arena's convention of male self-presentation because of the narcissistic self-absorption associated

with it and also due to its deviance from the traditional masculinised footballer's manners. In a way, Beckham's image seemed to speak louder than his words. He did not give many interviews and his voice was not often heard. Then there was his perceived lack of self-assertion. This contrasted with his assertive partner who stood sharply in contrast with the traditional, largely invisible housewife of a footballer. This posed a challenge to the hegemonic masculinity with its concomitant assumption of the man as a dominant partner. All this taken together seemed to have played a part in the feeling of anxiety of the male football subculture which is very sensitive to unconventional masculine behaviour and which often degenerates into homophobia.

This was evident in a widely publicised photograph of Beckham on a holiday with Victoria in the summer of 1998 wearing a sarong. The photograph was circulated in the tabloid with the intention of showing his supposed 'emasculisation' by highlighting his deviance from the traditional standards of masculinity. Press articles and cartoons questioning Beckham's masculinity soon followed. One such 'joke' picture was headlined 'FROCK SKINNER' featuring comedians Frank Skinner and David Baddiel. Skinner is in the sarong a la Beckham and Baddiel poses and pouts like Posh Spice. (Whannel 202).

Then came Beckham's sending-off in a crucial match in the 1998 world cup. This provided a point of condensation for discourses reflecting unease which had been brewing for some time. However, the story in the popular press soon turned into a narrative of redemption and triumph after him winning several trophies in the course of the following year, marrying Victoria, and then fathering a child with all this featuring in the following edition of *OK*. It was a celebration of traditional family values. This was just another example of the commodification and glamorisation of the private sphere of the lives of a media star.

Humour and abuse

This tabloid revolution which was built upon the erosion of a sharp distinction between the public and the private exemplified the new genre of celebrity-based magazines such as *OK* and *Hello*. Primarily dealing with stories about easily recognized stars, such magazines fuelled the trend of celebrity gossip. The areas of life which were private not too long back were now in public. Just like the coverage of other sports stars, the tone of the initial phase of coverage about Beckham was celebratory- one of his early biographies by Bobby Blake being just the perfect example. Beckham's rise is described as "phenomenal" and he is "a heart throb to millions of teenage girls, a hero to as many football-mad boys." (Blake 10). The book points to his fun-loving nature but constructs him in terms of discipline and responsibility: "he likes a few beers with the lads occasionally or a glass of wine with a meal, but never more than once a week" because "You have to take care of yourself at this level." (Blake 44).

The tide started changing from the 1998 world cup when he was sent off (due to kicking an opponent). in a crucial match against Argentina - a match which England eventually lost. After a rough tackle, Beckham had a moment to reflect and still rather lazily kicked his opponent in full view of the referee. The languid nature of the kick fitted the construction of Beckham as slightly foppish. The episode drew a lot of hostile press comment and made Beckham the butt of many jokes, many of which ridiculed his supposed dull-wittedness.

The September 1999 edition of *Vanity Fair* reported on this heady mix of tabloid castigation and fan anger: "the pretty boy scapegoat was lynched in effigy…when the 98-99 season began, any football fan who had ever loathed Manchester United pilloried their preening, blonde-streaked right-winger with chants invective and profane." (Daly). *GQ* even went to the extent of reporting that "when George Best played he was offered booze after every game; Beckham gets boos before, during and after every game whether he wants it or not." (Andrews and Jackson 140). But, all this castigation was not only due to him being sent off in a crucial football match. If the furore over his photograph with a sarong was anything to go by, he was punished for not conforming to the expected conventions of masculinity – for deviating too far away from the defensive conservatism of a football subculture with its built-in and perennial fears of any hint of 'effeminacy'. This fear of emasculation triggered by a public figure that deviates by a huge margin from the unalterable standards of masculinity so favoured in English football culture explains a lot of the hostility directed at him.

The innuendoes suggested that Victoria dominated him, chose his clothes for him, and that all this was unmasculine. The sarong picture still continued to be a part of many narrativisations of his story. The May 1999 *GQ* edition commented that the sarong picture made him "look like a twerp" while captioning the picture with "Becks and Posh with their hers and hers wardrobe." (Whannel 205). His attending at unmasculine events like fashion shows and his sartorial adventurousness transgressed the laddish code. This resulted in the popular press constructing Beckham as feminised and emasculated. One such instance is evident in the *Sun* where Beckham was shown dressed in a Spice Girl Union Jack mini-dress and platform shoes, with a musical agent asking him, "So David… what other tips on being a pop-star did Posh give you?" (Andrews and Jackson 141). The popular press had constructed Beckham as feminised and emasculated.

Some of the hostile and offensive comments hurled at footballers are suggestive of male working-class humour which revolves around sexual infidelity and sexual humiliation. The same was the case here with Beckham; Posh to be more precise. (The offensive chants which relate to sexual humiliation are reported obliquely by newspapers). The issue of the function of aggressiveness in humour and feelings of shame in sexual references has been discussed by Freud in cases like this where sports stars or celebrities in general are subjected to abuse with offensive sexual innuendoes and are humiliated by making public the private domain of sexuality. Freud argues that the "utterance of obscene words compels the person who is assailed to imagine the part of the body or the procedure in question and shows him/her that the assailant is himself imagining it." (Freud 198). Bergson's views on laughter are also worth noting in this context of the weaponisation of humour. He argues that laughter is "incompatible with emotion or with sympathy with its object, and that it always implies a certain callousness, even a touch of malice." (Mathewson 6). Such humour, interestingly enough, is often a distinctive feature of male camaraderie. He goes on to explain that laughter has to make a painful impact on the person it is directed at because it belongs to men in groups and is intended to humiliate. To use his own words, "By laughter society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness." (Mathewson 7). In fact, jokes and abuse typically deal with the repressed, awkward, and disturbing psychological fears. The obsession with offensive sexual jokes in crude abuses can signify both

submission and humiliation. It is indicative of a working-class masculine class which is fraught with fears- of both the feminine and the homoerotic. In our context, the allegedly emasculated Beckham offered a convenient symbol onto which such fears could be condensed.

Beckham, however, went on to have a successful season. The narrative then became that he had gained maturity and so deserved to be rehabilitated; that "Beckham took strength from adversity" and "demonstrated impressive resilience" and that "fatherhood and his pending marriage to Spice Girl Victoria Adams, suggest that at 24 he is already capable of controlling his own destiny." (Hart). So, this maturation was attributed to his becoming a family man unlike someone like George Best. In fact, the Easter Week edition of *Time Out* (1999) developed this theme of redemption through love in a dramatic fashion when it featured Beckham in their front cover with white trousers and a see-through shirt and with a pose evocative of Christ and the Crucifixion. The caption read: "Easter Exclusive: The Resurrection of David Beckham." (Andrews and Jackson 142). The caption for *TV Times* who, later that year, used a similar photo was "David Beckham from sinner to saint: Red Hot and Spicy" (Andrews and Jackson 143). According to Garry Whannel, this was the "perfect Jesus for the nineties- good-looking, stylish, talented, and engaged to a successful female pop singer - a Christ of Consumption." (Whannel 206).

The 'royal' wedding and media vortex

A sudden explosion in media outlets and a dizzying speed of information circulation creates a vortex effect where various media constantly feed off each other and columnists and commentators are drawn in, like a vortex (more so in an age of electronic and digital information exchange) towards certain major events - the wedding of Beck and Posh being such an example. With certain such events dominating the headlines, it becomes difficult for columnists and reporters to talk about anything else. They are drawn in as if by a vortex. The death of Princess Diana was one such example. Such a vortextual movement produces a short-term compression of the media agenda in which other topics disappear or are somehow connected to the said event- from comedians to television presenters, from politicians to radio phone-ins, from cartoons to news magazines, from news columnists to cultural events.

Their photos featured extensively in the front covers of various magazines throughout 1999. The self-referential nature of the focus on them gradually became self-generating. *OK* magazine bought the rights of the marriage itself, devoting several issues solely on the 'The Wedding of the Decade', declaring the marriage to be "the wedding the whole world had been waiting to see." (Andrews and Jackson, 143). *Evening Standard* featured a cartoon showing God in an armchair saying, "I've postponed the end of the world until I've seen the Beckham wedding pictures." (Exclusive Wedding Pictures).

While many sports stars before Beckham have been publicly cherished and honoured and their fame spread well beyond the world of sports, it is difficult to find anyone whose image had so thoroughly seep into the largely sports-free world of publishing aimed at women. This is obviously to a great extent due to his relationship with Spice Girl Victoria Adams, the wedding and the baby. But this also transformed the image of Beckham into a site where many discourses intersect - discourses about:

the conventional footballer's concept of high fashion (Hugo Boss and Armani)., and the gender-bending glamour of pop-music, the discipline of elite football, and the hedonism of celebrity partying, working-class masculinity and pop-glamourised sexuality, concepts of family life and changing gender roles, and his own reticence and celebrity flamboyance. All this is lived out in the crucible of the public gaze, in which 'Beckham' becomes the vocal point of a wide range of intersecting discourses- the central point of a vortextual process. (Whannel 207).

The wedding was presented as a Royal Wedding. The media mobilisation of public attention was reminiscent of royal weddings. Regal splendour and royal connections were front and centre in the media representations of the wedding. Comparisons were made with the marriage between Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys-Jones with the *Daily Mail* even declaring that "After Edward and Sophie's low-key affair, the spice girl and the soccer star show them how to stage a proper royal wedding" (Andrews and Jackson, 144). *The Guardian* described Victoria as "the queen of the castle" and that "the supreme glitziness of their marriage makes the Prince Edward's marriage to Sophie Rhys-Jones look a comparatively frumpy occasion." (*Gentleman*). *Daily Mail* with its featured headline "I QUEEN POSH TAKE THEE, KING BECKS" reaffirmed the superiority of the event compared to the recent royal wedding as far as splendour and pageantry is concerned:

> From the regal 'thrones' at the reception to the imperial purple carpets and rows of liveried attendants, the sheer spectacle of yesterday's event could not have been more of a constant to the real Royal Wedding last month…Prince Edward and his bride Sophie Rhys-Jones wanted their wedding to be a low-key family day with as little fuss as possible. David and Victoria didn't. They wanted pomp and splendour and they made sure they got it. (Andrews and Jackson 145).

Hayden in her anthropological discussion on British royalty argued that "The Queen's majesty needs other individuals to radiate and enhance it." (Hayden 35). In this case, the combined presence of designers, celebrity guests, guards, and the media produced such an effect. The *Sun* wrote on the "regal thrones at their fairy-tale wedding banquet" and on how "Victoria looked like a queen" while the text elaborates upon a covertly taken photo from the ceremony by adding that 'Queen' Posh Spice sits "with love for her "king" David Beckham glowing in her eyes. (Whannel 208). The *Sun* extended the royal metaphor into the political domain with its headline the following day:

THE SUN ASKS THE BIG QUESTION, WHO RULES

WHICH COUPLE IS MORE POPULAR IN BRITAIN TODAY? CALL AND

VOTE NOW. (Whannel 208).

The paper featured two wedding photos - one of Edward and Sophie and the other of David and Victoria with phone numbers for readers to vote. The royal associations were reinforced by the fact that the company in charge for arranging the wedding ceremony was the one responsible for Queen Anne's 40th birthday celebrations and that of her son's 21st. The flowers were reportedly provided by "two of the most respected florists in the business" (*Andrews and Jackson, 145*). It was

reported that Slim Barrett, the jeweller who had made pieces for the late Princess of Wales designed a beautiful gold and diamond coronet for Victoria. Even the mad rush of the press to cover the event was interpreted as proof of the wedding being more interesting than that of the royals because there were "no paparazzi risking their lives for pictures of Edward Windsor and Sophie Rhys-Jones." *(Andrews and Jackson, Sport Stars, 145).*

Conspicuous consumption and display

Beckham and Posh found themselves at the centre of a tableau of consumption and display because the lifestyle of celebrities become the focal point of media attention in a culture fawning over questions of style, interior decor, and the like. The sumptuous nature of their wedding is best exemplified by Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption- where "wealthy elites advertise their riches through highly visible forms of display." (Veblen 51). However, the couple are also part of an ordinary lifestyle in that they represent the aspiration to accrue material wealth, commodities, and display. And most of the coverage of the wedding indeed centred around monetary value with almost a fixation on designer labels- from the selling of the wedding rights to *OK* for a million to spending 120,000 pounds on rings alone, from the usher receiving a golden Rolex watch to the newly-weds spending their "first night of married life in the castle's 3900 dollars a night Royal Suite" (Whannel 210). such examples could be multiplied almost endlessly. Here are a few more samples to highlight the theme of conspicuous consumption. The bridesmaids were dressed as 'woodland flower fairies' in outfits specially designed by renowned theatrical costumers. The best man got a specially designed Cartier watch. As for the menu the couple "personally conducted a taste test of dozens of different dishes to decide what they wanted to include on their wedding menu." Music was from a "eighteen-piece string orchestra" and the cake was a "lavish three-tier creation by Rachel Mount." (Andrews and Jackson 146). Over 400 people were reportedly engaged for the ceremony and three lorries full of flowers were needed.. The descriptive language in many such detailed reporting almost evokes a sense of decadent luxury:

> Carpeted in sumptuous deep red, with the walls lined with a pleated ivory taffeta lining, the marquee was more than fitting for the most famous celebrity couple in the world. The spectacular flower arrangements were in three colours: burgundy, green and purple, which created a suitably regal effect. (*Whannel, 210*).

> The 2236 marquee guests had sat in gold-coloured chairs at 12 round tables. They would have marvelled at the ornately designed 7ft naked gold figurines- and the two huge Egyptian black cats with piercing gold eyes. (*Andrews and Jackson, 147*).

Victoria's views on this flamboyant display reveal a decidedly postmodern ironic sensibility. Upon being called out by an expert for the design of an inverted coat of arms for the wedding as being "tacky and amateurish", she snapped, saying:

> "Does anybody really give a shit - d'you know what I mean? Having your own crest- it's one of them innit? 'We're just thinking, this is the biggest day of our lives- we're just going to go over the top and make it entertaining for everybody. Much as we want it, it's still one of those." (Daly).

Being constructed in inter-textual terms, the entire event was indeed markedly hyper-real. The various representations of the wedding also revealed a wistful nostalgia for earlier periods of excesses which the real Royal Family could now no longer stage. As Garry Whannel says "It is as if the Beckham wedding had been staged by the Prince Regent in the Brighton Pavillion." (Whannel 211). The reactions to the spectacle of the wedding on the part of the press revealed the links between class and taste. While *The Observer* deemed it to be pleasant but not particularly bright, The *Sun* called it a fairy-tale. *The Daily Express* commented that the couple had elevated vulgarity into an art form (Whannel 211). *The Guardian* felt that it was "confirmation of a country's coarsening, a dissonant hymn in praise of mammon." (Andrews and Jackson 147). Sue Carroll of the *Daily Mirror* both acknowledges and defends the 'tackiness' of the event:

> Well, I admit it was breathtakingly tacky. Barbie-dom meets Brookside, Versace-cum-Spanish brothel…There was something splendid about their fascinating show business excess. Something so utterly over the top it made your heart soar to witness the noble tradition of the truly tacky wedding in all its flamboyant glory. (Whannel 211).

She goes on to describe them as a "couple so totally besotted and wrapped up in one another even their hardened footie mates respect their displays of soppy sentimentality. (Andrews and Jackson 147). It almost seemed as if their love for each other was repeatedly invoked to legitimize the obvious excess. The presiding bishop was convinced that "the couple were in touch with their innermost feelings." (Andrews and Jackson 147). Then there was the effort to focus on their modesty. Posh was quoted as saying "If I'd had a more low-key wedding I would have been called a tight cow. As it is, people say we were flush and over the top. Well that's fine. But we had the most amazing day and that's all that counts." (Whannel 211). "They honestly regard it as a family event. They don't go to many celebrity parties" (*Gentleman*). said a spokesperson of Victoria Adams. Beckham, when asked about his football achievements said "They're all important but having a child means more than anything." (Whannel 211). Lavish display here is excused and legitimized as "ritualistic excesses and abundance that precedes the responsibilities of family and parenthood." (Whannel 211). Thus the representations of the Beckhams after their wedding managed to balance the potential tension between conspicuous consumption and family responsibility. All this contributes to a 'glamourous, but just like us' effect. Rarely have two celebrities commodified their private lives to such lucrative effect.

Beckham' and the postmodern celebrity

A comparison with Liverpool's Robbie Fowler will reveal the fact that Beckham is a postmodern celebrity. Fowler is moulded in the northern working-class masculinity with a worker-ist and socialist sensibility; someone known to show his support for striking Dockers and homeless people. His baiting of Chelsea's Grahame le Saux also revealed his homophobia (Le Saux was actually a heterosexual, but from the perspective of working-class subculture masculinity his reading of *Guardian* and being an art lover clearly made him a 'suspect'). Fowler did avoid the trappings of flamboyant styles in spite of considerable wealth. As far as representation is concerned, Fowler was found to be and represented as a working class boy made good and in consonance with a grounded northern working-class masculinity.

Beckham, the post-'new lad' man on the other hand has flourished in an environment where "men's interest in fashion, style, narcissism, and the possibility of being objectified have all been nurtured by a decade of the style press (*Arena, GQ, FHM*)." (Whannel 212). It was indeed an era where sports, fashion, and glamour became more interlinked than ever. It was a world where fame is commodified and Beckham the person is almost subsumed by Beckham the image to the point where "His star persona has become the substance, the marketable object." (Whannel 212). While Fowler seemed to be grounded, Beckham seemed rootless: "he can be dressed in anything because surface appearance is all." (Whannel 212).

Conclusion

This is one of the reasons that he seems to be a postmodern figure in the realm of representation. The fact that no real chaos ensued after the potentially blasphemous cover of *Time Out* suggests this reading because even if he is dressed as Christ, it does not matter because he is not 'real'. In this world of media vortex (characterised by sudden and intense media coverage of a certain celebrity, in this case a sporting star), consumption is the new democracy and style is indeed the new cultural capital. The performative skills of David Beckham and Victoria Adams were crucial in their commodification and this, after endless repetitions led to a state where they ended up 'well known for being well-known'. All this together has led to a decentering of the footballer and the singer respectively. Thus, the curious case of the celebrity status of the Beckhams provides a rich area to study the processes of 'celebritydom' and its dynamic relation with the media vortextuality. The image of the sporting star assumes utmost importance as it can be studied to reveal the supposedly postmodern features of the contemporary culture - surface appearance, depthlessness, outlandishly ostentatious, and self-referential in nature. If the cultural context (a fascination with style, fashion, and décor) of the times is taken into consideration it can be safely said that celebrities like the Beckhams in the end represent our fantasies of lifestyle, luxury, conspicuous consumption, and display.

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Exploring Memory and Motherhood in Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton*: A Detailed Book Review
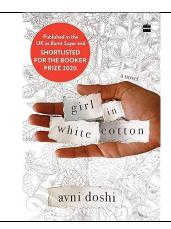
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Girl in White Cotton (Burnt Sugar)
By **Avni Doshi**
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Abstract: This review attempts to explore *Girl in White Cotton* (or *Burnt Sugar* in the US) through the philosophies of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Motherhood transcends mere childbirth, it includes upbringing and emotional connection to the child, which is often overlooked by the society while describing it. Antara's displacement from her father's home to an unfamiliar setting serves as a metaphor, symbolising the unsettling and bewildering influence exerted by her mother. I have chosen three important themes from the book which have resonated personally from *Girl in White Cotton* i.e. Memory Game, Complexity of Motherhood and Carrying the Lineage (of memory, trauma, and the resilience of resistance).

Keywords: Motherhood, Memory, Lineage, Generational Trauma.

I don't remember the last time I encountered a book whose first line completely whirled my sanity, and inspired me to gather a heart full of courage to proceed to reading it. Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton,* also published as *Burnt Sugar* in the USA, played with my ability to deal with intricate human psychology like a ping pong ball. The opening words "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi 8) shattered all the perpetual glorification of motherhood in a second.

Doshi challenges the narrow perception of motherhood upheld by the patriarchal society as the sole truth. Antara, the narrator of the book, travels back in time to the memories of herself as a child. The

memories are of unimaginable emotional turmoil that she had to suffer through. The writer follows a non-linear narrative in the book to switch between the incidents of past and present.

In the realm of my exploration, memory takes on the role of a knowledge repository, echoing the insights articulated in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish,* where he explains that power and knowledge are aligned to each other. The power to punish relies on the knowledge and understanding of people, and this knowledge is considered valid because it comes from those in power. Therefore, power and knowledge are like two sides of the same coin – one can't exist without the other.

Upon knowing that her mother suffers from dementia, Antara takes extra care of her mother, Tara. Her desperate and persistent efforts to evoke memories from the past stem from a desire to use memory as knowledge, and a source of power. On the other hand, Tara does not want to acknowledge that she is forgetting the past. She believes the current state of her mind is the reality, and no amount of convincing from Antara could help it. Tara's deliberate disregard for the past memories also signifies her intentionally running away from it, which signifies her not surrendering to Antara.

This knowledge of memory gives Antara, the narrator, the power to hold over Tara because she knows the treatment of her mother is utterly inhumane. She wants to ensure that Tara has the knowledge of the memory of the choices that she has made in her life.

"I suffered at her hands as a child, and any pain she subsequently endured appeared to me to be a kind of redemption - a rebalancing of the universe..." (Doshi 8). The pain from her childhood overtook her entire existence. Now when the tables have turned and she has taken up the role of a caregiver, there is no way she could have let Tara (the pain giver) forget what she has done to her.

However, Tara's resistance to acknowledging her memory loss highlights a tension between memory as a source of knowledge and the individual's perception of reality. The resistance that Tara shows to recall her past by asserting her own agency and control over the narrative of the power dynamics playing between herself and her daughter.

The writer mentions many important aspects of psychology, depression, social evils, and patriarchy in her writing. I would like to focus on two themes that intrigued me the most.

Memory Game

"...memory is a work in progress. It's always being reconstructed" (Doshi 118).

The entire novel is written in the form of fragments of memories by the writer. These memories are not just about personal experiences but also a "timeline of trauma."

Tara never accepts that she is presenting the symptoms of Dementia. "The doctor says my mother has become unreliable'' (Doshi 151). Antara does everything in her ability to ensure that her mother does not completely forget the past because if she does, there wouldn't be any way to baffle her with the guilt of it. The more Antara tries to preserve the memories in her mother's mind, the more Tara

dismantles them. "It seems to me now that this forgetting is convenient, that she doesn't want to remember the things she has said and done" (Doshi 47).

In the book, Doshi brings up the memory game establishing what power the generational trauma that flows through memory holds and its importance over the constitution of the self of an individual.

"She continues talking about how difficult things were. These tales have been passed down from mothers to daughters since women had mouths and stories could be told. They contain some moral message, some rites of passage. But they also transfer that feeling all mothers know before their time is done. Guilt" (Doshi 173).

The Complexity of Motherhood

The book ventures motherhood in a unique light. Motherhood according to social standards is the highest achievement of a woman and whose essence is often confined to the physical act of giving birth. We very frequently come across how people emphasise the 10 months of physical body development in the womb as the most important reason to love and respect "mothers". Ironically, the years that follow the birth of a child are very less talked about. Those are the damaging years.

Antara was only a child when her mother left her father's house with her to Osho, a place the little child absolutely had no idea of. The place weirded out Antara. "My earliest memory is of a giant in a pyramid". She says that she was the smallest in the room and had no idea how she would manage to be any bigger. She describes the disciples as pyramids, who were terrifying, having hair, pimples, and large pores on their noses, jumping, stomping, dancing, and holding each other. They did nothing other than scare her.

On the other hand, Tara makes the most of the time at hand. She is entirely immersed in the activities involved to impress the Baba at Osho. She too laughs and coughs, her face beaming with red colour. Antara tries to "hold her [Tara's] hand, but she pulls it away and begins to stand" (Doshi 57). On this disastrous night, she becomes engulfed by the crowd. Antara flaps her wings and screams, "Ma! Ma! Ma!" (Doshi 58), but Tara doesn't notice.

There she meets Kali Mata, who takes her to the washroom and gives her water to drink. She behaves in the most gentle way with her, asking her important questions like, "What's the matter, pretty girl?", "Is there anything I can do?", "Tummy ache?", "Pretty girl, will you wait outside for me?" (Doshi 59).

Kali Mata is not an Indian, she looks different with her blue eyes and skin tone. Antara spends most of her time with her, who looks after her when she is scared, wipes her face, untangles her hands when she wakes up from sleep, and keeps her close to herself, in contrast to her biological mother who remains busy in enticing the Baba in the ashram for sexual pleasure. She occasionally comes to her, sometimes to hug her, and sometimes to beat her up for not having food.

Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (351) argues that womanhood is not an inherent trait but rather a socially constructed identity imposed upon individuals based on their birth sex.

Similarly, motherhood is often seen as an essential aspect of being a woman. The expectation of becoming a mother is deeply ingrained in societal norms and the expectations that society puts on them vehemently disdain their human existence. The irony is that to "appreciate" and justify these impositions (under the name of expectations), they are further elevated to the position of a deity of worship.

Through the representation of Tara, Doshi shatters the idea of the perfect universal motherhood. She humanises mothers and shows the flip side of any imposed social and gender role. Motherhood is as much a roleplay as being someone's sibling, friend, teacher, or student, and any roleplay depends on what the core of an individual holds. There can not always be a magical transformation of a human being in the arrival of a child to a selfless caregiver.

Creation involves a huge power claim. As Michel Foucault points out that power is the control of the body and its energies, the imposition of a docile body on an individual, (Foucault 146) more often than not, the mothers treat their children as if they are inanimate beings devoid of their own emotions. They are trivialised, disregarded and even ridiculed in several circumstances. Antara has similar memories of Tara because she hardly considered her existence relevant or significant during her days in the ashram.

> "I had been taught for most of my life that the moment for living was yet to come, that the phase I was living in, a perpetual state of childhood, was a time for waiting" (Doshi 137).

Carrying the Lineage:

Generational Trauma is one of the prominent themes of the novel. The first time it stuck with me was when she wrote why she was named "Antara". It is 'Un-tara'. "Antara would be unlike her mother. But in the process of separating us, we were pitted against each other".

> "He [Antara's husband] says my mother and I have always shared some version of our objective reality" (Doshi 118).

Through the course of the book, we see that Antara leads her life by resisting her mother. The memories of this power play are so traumatic in her mind, that even when she has a house and a family of her own and is far from her mother, she still resists her in her head through the smallest of things, as if the presence of her mother is oddly lingering with every action of hers. Through all of these, she never backs out from her responsibility of taking care of her mother, Tara.

De Beauvoir's concept of "The Other" (Beavoir, 26) elucidates the unequal power dynamics between men and women, where women have historically been relegated to the position of the Other, the object, or the deviation from the male-defined norm. Similarly, in Antara's narrative, there's a power struggle between herself and her mother, where Antara feels pitted against her mother in an oppositional relationship. This struggle symbolises the imbalanced power dynamics where Antara, like many women, feels like the 'Other' in relation to her mother's expectations and societal norms.

Later, she gives up her wish of naming her daughter to protect her from becoming a part of intergenerational trauma. Resistance is the only way to break the shackles of age-old social

oppressions, particularly those less discussed, which have persisted for centuries. This surrender of power shows the first streak of a positive lineage that she carries forward for her daughter. Doshi knots three women in a wounded thread that keeps them entangled.

The events recounted in the book left a deeply unsettling impact on me. By the end of the narration, I could feel the exhaustion of the narrator in her words. They don't seem as free-flowing as at the beginning of the book. Antara abruptly ends the narration, when at a family gathering she feels like an alien, standing in front of the mirror and losing the sense of herself. The novel's ending gives us an understanding that not only did Antara derive pleasure from her mother's misery but her mother too obtained equal pleasure from her daughter's misfortune.

While Antara gradually fades into invisibility for the people around, and for the readers, I cannot help but wonder at the absolute brilliance in the Doshi's plot-narration, which unapologetically brings down the image of an ideal motherhood and acquaints us with the selfish side of a woman who happens to be a mother.

"We are all unreliable. The past seems to have a vigour that the present does not" (Doshi 151).

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Nagarkirtan: Politics of the Body, Spaces and Religion

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Abstract: This film review explores queer studies, an important academic field from the early 1990s. It uses Kaushik Ganguly's 2017 film *Nagarkirtan* to understand the struggles of the trans community. Drawing on ideas from Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire, it looks at contemporary queer identities and how the queer community interacts with society. Specifically, it examines how religion and architecture influence the experiences of the queer community.
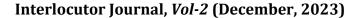
Keywords: Queer community, Trans woman, social structures, religion, Indian society.

Introduction

India represents a dynamic and ever changing cultural melting pot, where attitudes and perceptions towards queerness have undergone multifaceted transformations across epochs. Acknowledging the undeniable presence of diverse sexual orientations, India's historical tapestry unravels intriguing instances that paint a picture of a nuanced past. A case in point is the Chandela Dynasty, particularly during the era of the Khajuraho temples. In this historical context, the temples' intricate carvings remarkably showcased depictions of what could be interpreted as homosexuality – women bonding and fondling each other and themselves – the imagery of *Svasthana Sparsha* (to touch) or *Vasanabhrmasa* (exposure of the body).

Fig 1: Erotic sculptures at the Khajuraho (Image via WelcomeNRI.com)

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For the purpose of this research, our focus shifts a millennium forward, transitioning from the Chandelas to modern-day Indian media, with a particular emphasis on the 2017 Bengali-queer film *Nagarkirtan*, directed and scripted by Kaushik Ganguly. The choice of *Nagarkirtan* for this analysis is deliberate and strategic. Despite acknowledged technical imperfections (it is not as sublime as Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* or the gripping storytelling of Shyam Benegal), the film holds pivotal relevance due to its release coinciding with a significant political and social turning point in India. Approximately a year after its debut, the Supreme Court amended Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, marking a noteworthy step towards upholding fundamental rights.
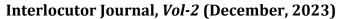
Before proceeding, an overview of the film is warranted. It centres on two main characters: Madhu (Ritwick Chakraborty), a working-class flautist, and Puti or Parimal (Riddhi Sen), an adolescent trans woman. Their affection for each other is profound, though expressed differently - Madhu is candid, and Puti is timid. Apart from one intimate scene, their connection thrives through simple acts like sharing meals or sailing through the Ganges lost in their worlds.

The film predominantly follows the duo's journey, gathering information for Puti's gender-affirming surgery and raising funds. It intriguingly contrasts queerness and queer characters with religious institutions. Initially, Puti resides in a Kolkata eunuch community/ghetto, split between an elderly musician's devotional singing group on the upper floor and the eunuchs' living quarters below.

The spatial arrangement in *Nagarkirtan* is an implicit representation of how social structures operate. The eunuchs or the 'Other,' are placed below the religious men, who are seen as more powerful and legitimate. The stratified arrangement of the living quarters serves as a microcosm of the socio-economic stratification that is endemic to many major Indian cities and city planning. For example, in Mumbai, the Dharavi slum area is situated close to a large plot of land that is home to tall buildings and malls. This juxtaposition of poverty and affluence is a stark reminder of the disparity that exists in Indian society.

Fig 2: Drone image of Mumbai slums pitted against tall corporate houses (Image via Johnny Miller/Business Insider)

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Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, expounded on the strategic role of architecture in his discourses. In his 1975 work titled *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he delves into the idea that architecture wields significant power in society. Foucault contends that the design of buildings holds the potential to influence human behaviour, serving as a means to control and regulate people's actions. The use of height, for instance, creates a sense of dominance. Government buildings are often tall and imposing, which can make people feel small and insignificant.

In line with Foucault's view, individuals under surveillance are significantly influenced by control mechanisms. Government monitoring, according to Foucault, produces "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1) that can be observed and psychologically shaped. This dynamic is evident in the film as Puti and Madhu, perceived as outsiders, contend with constant efforts to categorise and confine them.

This spatial motif extends in another subplot. Much of the film follows Madhu's quest for a new rental home as his current residence faces demolition for a corporate building. Similarly, Puti seeks refuge in a ghetto after leaving her original village. Both characters symbolically search for a home, reflecting their shared pursuit of belonging in an unwelcoming world.

Fig 3: A still from Nagarkirtan as the lead couple contemplate their journey ahead (Image via Nagarkirtan/Acropoliis Entertainment)

Another aspect of the film is the compartmentalisation of religion and the "Other." It is prominently manifested in the dialogues of the film as well. A notable instance occurs at the outset, wherein Madhu is acquainted with a congregation of eunuchs who encourage him to play the flute. In response, Madhu candidly enquiries:

> *Ki shunbe? Kirtan?* (What would you like to hear? Devotional songs?)
> The eunuchs' reply:
> *Hijre ke abar kirtan shonabe Keshtho Thakur* (Krishna's avatar)*?* (How can the Hijras be expected to be entertained by devotional songs?)
> (00:13:13-00:13:16)

This subtle interjection is a significant indication of segregation. The eunuchs openly admit their disinterest in devotional songs, implying that they may not be the ideal audience. The eunuchs' candid expression of disinterest suggests the conditioning they endure, which implies their perceived exclusion from sacred and divine realms. This indoctrination systematically reinforces the belief that the hijra community exists outside the purview of religious sanctity, perpetuating an irreconcilable divide between them and conventional religious spaces.

Paradoxically, eunuchs experience fleeting moments of respite (albeit amidst disdainful gazes) lasting briefly. Within these intervals, they navigate their routines cautiously, avoiding potential clashes with authorities. This passive acceptance of marginalisation, however, encounters opposition through another character – Manabi Bandyopadhyay, a professor, activist, author, and openly trans individual. Paulo Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) offers a profound insight into the dynamics between the oppressed and oppressor:

> The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. (Freire, 47)

Manabi's character possesses a more profound understanding of the politics of the body and identity. Unlike others in the hijra community who may shy away from religion and divinity due to their marginalised position, Manabi willingly engages with these aspects. She has a collection of clay dolls, one of which depicts Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (considered the combined avatar of Radha and Krishna). She picks up one of the dolls and states:

Erokom nikhut kaaj hote hobe. Erom Thakurer moto til til kore gorey tulte hobe narir deho (The woman's body should be flawless. She must mould herself steadily like the clay dolls of the Gods)

(00:38:28-00:38:26)

Fig 4: Manabi showcases her miniature clay dolls from Krishnanagar (Image via Nagarkirtan/Acropoliis Entertainment)

The symbolic act of presenting Puti with the clay doll of Chaitanya reflects Manabi's vote of confidence in Puti to assert the reclamation of her divinity. Thus, Manabi's spirituality emanates from her internal struggles, triumphs, and self-discovery, free from external manipulation or control by those in power. A continuation of Paulo Freire's work further explains this point:

> To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity...Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanising and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity. (Freire, 45)

Manabi is inherently knowledgeable, aligning with Freire's perspective on education as a pivotal instrument in breaking free from societal oppression. Freire criticizes traditional education, asserting its entrenchment within oppressive structures. In the film, Manabi similarly charts her transformative journey, dismantling pre-existing societal frameworks to forge her own identity.

The film also exhibits the portrayal of the politics of language. Language emerges as a potent vehicle of societal norms and values. As an illustrative instance, a scene unfolds wherein the protagonist, Madhu, is seen travelling in an auto-rickshaw, where he encounters a trans woman soliciting monetary aid (a scenario common in the streets of Kolkata). Herein, the auto driver sneeringly remarks:
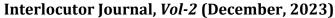
> *Du bocchor age ato chilona.* (They [the hijras] were less in number two years ago)

> (00:12:38-00:12:39)

The rickshaw driver's remark illustrates how language can function as a form of social control. By reducing the trans-community to mere numerical digits, he diminishes their individuality, consciousness, and autonomy. Subsequently, the trans woman's lack of response is not an inherent trait but a reaction to societal constraints. Conforming to expected roles, like money collection, becomes a survival tactic for the hijra community in an unwelcoming environment.

The hijra community does create its ethos, cultural structure, and social ecosystem as a way to assert agency. This is seen when Puti instinctively chooses to showcase her dancing skills to Rabindra Sangeet (songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore). However, the rejection of Puti's choice by a senior member of the ghetto, who orders her to dance to more rustic love songs, highlights the complexities within the hijra community itself. It provides a nuanced portrayal of how marginalized communities forge their own cultural identity while navigating the influence of the dominant culture and intra-community dynamics.

The film delves into the intricate theme of body representation, notably through Puti's character. Her wig symbolizes her identity struggle, externally concealing her short hair. This symbolic mask allows her to conform, evade scrutiny, and navigate societal norms tied to her gender.

Madhu's persistent reminder to Puti (to wear her wig) highlights societal pressure and Puti's internal conflict in reconciling her identity with external expectations.

Despite the internal struggle, she does take strides. The gradual progress she makes in embracing her identity, symbolised by her taking minor steps like fleeing the ghetto with Madhu and visiting his hometown, depicts her journey toward self-acceptance. The progress is, however, shut down rather quickly when, at the end of the film, she is stripped naked and assaulted by a group of local hijras. Unable to bear the weight of humiliation, she hangs herself.

What follows, in my humble perception, is the most striking scene of *Nagarkirtan*. Following Puti's passing, Madhu, ostracised by his family due to his romantic involvement with a trans individual, deliberately seeks solace within the same enclave once inhabited by eunuchs - a place where Puti had once found refuge. The previously carefree Madhu now wears a vacant expression, draped in a saree as he enters the ghetto, holding a clay-sculpted figurine of Chaitanya, a gift previously given to Puti.

The question of his motivation remains open. Madhu seems to have rejected a society that rejected his love, possibly viewing it as an oppressive influence stifling his authentic feelings. This act could signify his readiness to explore his own queer identity, despite no prior indication.

Fig 5: The film's closing shots depict a bereaved Madhu walking into the ghetto. (Image via Nagarkirtan/Acropoliis Entertainment)

I conclude this essay with the closing lines from Allen Ginsberg's 1956 free-verse masterpiece, "Howl." These lines fervently denounce modern society's oppressive and exploitative aspects:

Dreams! Adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive   bullshit!

Breakthroughs! Over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone down the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs! Ten years' animal screams and suicides! Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time!

Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! The holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street! (Ginsberg, lines 91-93)

By invoking these lines, this essay aspires to fulfil its intended purpose as a potent reminder that queer and trans communities are not isolated in their struggles.

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